The Community Foundation of Pulaski County commissioned Project Matters, LLC to engage in a series of community conversations with the residents of Pulaski County in order to ascertain the aspirations, concerns, and actions the citizens feel are important to the future well-being and growth of Pulaski County, and who they would trust to take action on those items. These conversations took shape from the Harwood Public Innovation and Turning Outward Model of involving community stakeholders in processes and making this a community knowledge project to be shared.

The Goal for this Report is to share the top aspirations that arose during those community conversations, the concerns or barriers connected with achieving those, where the Foundation should focus its efforts and actions, and who the community trusts to carry those processes out. It is important to note all comments within the participant aspiration pages are in their words and any needed clarity of context was provided within parenthetical reference.

Why is all of this Important? The Community Foundation has as its mission to encourage the growth of endowed funds to serve and enrich our community today and tomorrow, while the vision is centered on cultivating growing communities. The Foundation is committed to improving the quality of life in areas of community development, education and environment. The information gathered from the conversations will allow the Foundation to be intentional and focused on its strategies to invest for the future goals of Pulaski County and know where it may need to support those targeted endeavors through its grant processes. It is also hoped this report will become an important tool for use by all of the community partners and residents, to become engaged in community growth and humanitarian efforts.

What’s Inside? On the next few pages you will see a list of the conversation groups to whom we listened, the top four emergent themes with key information related to those identified community aspirations. We have also included demographic information from the post-conversation survey and concluding comments.

It is our Sincere Hope that all our residents and leaders of Pulaski County consider this their go-to tool in becoming engaged with intentional positive actions and the development of leaders and resources to achieve the collective goals for the good of this community.
THE 17 COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS LISTED BELOW were comprised of a representative composite of individuals from each demographic group.

• Agriculture
• Community Foundation Board & Donors
• Educators
• Elected Officials
• Food Pantry Star City-United Methodist Church
• Healthcare Professionals
• High School Youth
• Pulaski County Industrial Forum
• Jail Inmates
• Law Enforcement
• Last Call for Input Group
• Non-Profit Organizations
• Pastors and Lay Church Leaders
• Senior Citizens
• Small Business Owners
• Uptown Project, Inc. (Francesville)
• Young Adults

Excerpted from The Art of Gathering by Priya Parker

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THE FOLLOWING STATISTICS SHOW the demographic diversity within the conversations we held with **146** different members of the community.

**Ethnicity**
- **98.6%** White, Caucasian or of European Descent
- **1.4%** Latino or Hispanic

**Primary Language**
- **100%** English

**Participant Age Range**
- **54-74**: 42%
- **35-54**: 30%
- **16-34**: 20%
- **75+**: 8%

**Gender**
- **80** Women
- **66** Men

**Income**
- $0 - $20,000
- $20,001 - $40,000
- $40,001 - $60,000
- $60,001 - $80,000
- $80,001 - $100,000
- $100,001 +
FROM THESE CONVERSATIONS, THE FOLLOWING ARE THE LEADING ASPIRATIONS WHICH EMERGED FOR PULASKI COUNTY

WE WANT A COMMUNITY THAT IS

- Thriving & Growing
- Safe & Drug-Free
- Welcoming & Open-Minded
- Forward-Thinking Leadership
While people want a THRIVING AND GROWING community, they are CONCERNED that:

- People are not working together
- The population is declining
- We are not prosperous or forward-thinking
- There is a lack of diversity in economic growth
- We have a lack of leadership
- The current tax structure causes people to move out of Pulaski County

As people talk about those CONCERNS, they talk more specifically about:

- Frustration with elected officials
- Lack of involvement by citizens
- Lack of amenities (such as recreational and retail opportunities)
- New ideas getting shut down
- We have one of the highest income tax rates in the state and one of the lowest property tax rates
- We lack work ethic and a workforce (Brain Drain)

They say we need to focus on the following ACTIONS:

- Creating a shared community vision
- The use of incentives in attracting professionals and businesses
- Improving technology and infrastructure (such as reliable internet/broadband options for 21st Century jobs)
- Housing development
- Building on, preserving and promoting natural assets
- Providing diverse amenities and promoting them, so people have things to do and places to go (pool, retail shops, bowling alley, etc.)

And they TRUST the following people or organizations to play a part in those actions:

- Churches
- Community Foundation of Pulaski County
- A "core group" of individuals with investment in the community who are like-minded and moving forward
- Don Good, Darlene and Chuck Mellon (Francesville)
- Human Resources representatives at Braun

"There's nothing here to attract people to live here if they don't have family here. We are not an attractive community. The appearance of a community matters. If someplace looks nice, people want to be there."

"Out migration is a concern; it goes to vibrancy."

"We are in a population decline; we need change. We have to think ahead concerning tax income. The current tax structure needs changed. We have a lot of absentee ownership. Our local income tax is not as meaningful or relevant as 20 years ago."

"Our community is in a time-warp. 'Already have done this and it's always been done this way.' We are in maintenance mode, so we are not growing."

"We need more diversity of industries and services, but there is no workforce here. We need to bring our infrastructure up to date. Our wages are so low, it keeps people in poverty and is less incentive for people to stay."

"There is nothing to do here other than go to the Isis Theater. They closed the bowling alley, the pool; the older leaders shut everything down."

-Youth perspective

"In 10 years if nothing changes, we will see very few businesses and population decline. It won't be any more positive here."
Aspiration

While people want a SAFE AND DRUG-FREE community, they are CONCERNED that:

- Demographics are changing (more poverty causing negative income growth)
- There are more drug arrests, overdoses and deaths and less prevention efforts
- There is more use of the following drugs: vaping, marijuana, methamphetamines, heroin, opioids, pills, and synthetics
- Drug use is starting at a younger age

As people talk about those CONCERNS, they talk more specifically about:

- Mental health and its stigma
- Generational poverty
- The effects the drug problem is having on schools, within families and in the workplace
- Having a recidivism rate much higher than the state average
- Lack of resources (facilities and financial) to deal with the issues

They say we need to focus on the following ACTIONS:

- Treatment centers and the transition process from jail back into society
- Looking at Starke County and their successful model for reducing recidivism
- Programs like Celebrate Recovery
- Support for parents/families
- Initiating a family/drug court
- Expanding Four County Counseling Services

And they TRUST the following people or organizations to play a part in those actions:

- Churches
- The Court System
  (Sandy Lucas, Natalie Federer, and Crystal Kocher)
- The Community Foundation of Pulaski County
- Schools
- Kiwanis

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“Drugs are worse than 5 years ago. There are a lot of overdoses and many more deaths. At least 70% of arrests are drug related.”

“My grandson talks about how easy it is to get drugs in the school and he’s 12 years old.”

“[Drugs] are an issue for whole families, not just kids. We need to have an open mind in recognizing they are here and deal with the issue in a non-judgmental way. No family is exempt from the drug issue here.”

“We have a 68% recidivism rate. The court system has brought up solutions and good ideas that the county just shuts down.”

“We have no transition process for people who do get out of jail and no facilities here to help them. Even with Four County you have to drive elsewhere, and transportation can be a problem. Also, the stigma can cause people to leave town for help.”
While people talk about wanting a WELCOMING AND OPEN-MINDED community, they are CONCERNED that:

- It is hard to fit in socially (when you are not from Pulaski County)
- There are long-term biases
- It’s hard to be connected to each other as well as to the community
- It’s hard to make friends
- People can’t disagree without being disagreeable

As people talk about those CONCERNS, they talk more specifically about:

- The East/West divide
- Being territorial or cliquish
- People being quick to judge and/or label others
- New ideas get shut down
- New people aren’t respected or welcomed
- Our community doesn’t trust

They say we need to focus on the following ACTIONS:

- Being encouraging and supportive
- Creating and promoting a shared vision
- Showing town pride
- Shifting attitudes from negative to positive
- Personally inviting people to be involved and listening to them and their ideas
- Having activities to unite and bring people together

And they TRUST the following people or organizations to play a part in those actions:

- Community Foundation of Pulaski County
- The Pulaski County Public Library
- Churches
- Schools
- Pulaski Memorial Hospital

“I believe that people are friendly in that they wave and would help you out, if needed; but making friends here is hard. If you are not a member of a deep-seated family, then you are not a part of the community.”

“When I was young and a stay-at-home mom, I had a friend who was a transplant here. She said it was hard to be a transplant here as everyone always made you feel like you were just a transplant. She eventually moved away.”

“People aren’t allowed to move forward; their ideas get shot down. Mentality of ‘that’s not the way we do things here’.”

“We are slow to embrace new shops that do start up. People don’t always support them. Also, feedback for entrepreneurs...need to know what’s relevant in a business for our community. Plus, people may have a bias against a person (from however many years ago.)”

“We often take the easy way out and don’t start real conversation with those we don’t already know. Our mentality is ‘Why should we? We already have our people.’ I think we need taught how to introduce ourselves and engage with others.”

“We don’t get involved until we are made to feel a part of the community. Not to just take care of someone else’s agenda, but to have our ideas listened to and validated.”

-Young Professional Perspective
While people talk about wanting a community with FORWARD-THINKING LEADERSHIP, they are CONCERNED that:

- We need to have a positive outlook on growth and change
- We lack qualified leadership in elected offices
- There is no shared vision for the community
- There is a lot of in-fighting in our organizations and government
- We don’t have new leaders stepping up
- We need fresh ideas and a new way of doing things

As people talk about those CONCERNS, they talk more specifically about:

- How unprofessional our actions and news make us look to outsiders
- There is a lot of back-room politics and a good-ole-boys network here
- We miss the big picture because our leaders stay dealing with the same old issues
- We need to be looking at our future and investing in it
- The community has a lot of potential but doesn’t capitalize on it

They say we need to focus on the following ACTIONS:

- Establishing a leadership academy here
- Training of new and existing leaders
- Teaching leadership in schools, through service and volunteering
- Take positive action on ideas presented to county officials and other organization leaders
- Become more united through a shared vision and collaboration
- Involve young people
- Hire a county executive
- Have a Chamber of Commerce which functions under a paid director

And they TRUST the following people or organizations to play a part in those actions:

- Community Foundation of Pulaski County
- Pulaski County Community Development Commission
- Our invested business and community persons
- Churches and Schools
- Pulaski Memorial Hospital

“There’s quite a lot of apathy that needs dealt with. People want things, but they are not willing to be engaged. They talk a lot about an issue, but when it gets to the “action” part, people disappear.”

“There’s a lot of room for improvement here/lot of opportunity for growth. There’s not as much happening that could be. We have good organizations, but they are not working together.”

“We don’t present ourselves professionally, I was embarrassed recently ... we were surrounded by land choices here, and in White and Jasper Counties. The other counties were very competitive, credible and professional in trying to get me to locate it in their counties. I was embarrassed by the unprofessional attitude and lack of knowledge or welcome of those in Pulaski County.”

“The politics here stun me. You have to figure out how to weave your way through that mire to get anything done. It’s truly not what you know, but who you know here. If you rub the right lamp, you get your issues dealt with.”

“People don’t always know what they need to do. They know how to help, but not how to lead.”

“Elected officials need to be better equipped and have a positive outlook on growth and change.”
In this process of turning outward to listen to our communities within Pulaski County, we recognize there is an inherent responsibility to respect honest feedback entrusted to the Foundation. People expect that we sincerely heard them and will be able to translate their aspirations, concerns, and ideas for action into a process that will allow the Pulaski County community to come together and take actions that foster goodwill and prosperity for all its citizens. Each and every individual in every community from Medaryville to Star City matters in this process. They want to know that their participation was of value and will be respected as such.

We believe that this report reveals that under strong leadership, people desire a shared vision that will accomplish the above. The community must now step up, in unity, and answer that call to be a part of a full process of growth and vitality. We must demonstrate both individual and collective value through respect of one another’s ideas as we work together for the ultimate benefit of the whole county.

We urge you to use this document as a starting point in the above process. We hope you will consider it a welcome and valuable tool throughout Pulaski County, when making that initial step toward your economic and community aspirations.

Finally, it is important to note that overall, people were gratified to have been given a chance to express their aspirations for Pulaski County and the individual communities in which they live. From their surveys we know that as a result of these community conversations, 82 of the 146 respondents were “more likely” to get involved in other conversations and activities about important community issues. Below are just a few of the comments they added to their-post conversation surveys:

- “Thank you for having this conversation.”
- “We need to have more conversations like this. I really enjoy it!”
- “Hope this leads to solutions.”
- “I enjoyed talking about important issues in the community with my peers. I never thought about some of the things we discussed before.”
- “Thank you.”

We at Project Matters, LLC were honored to be entrusted with this important endeavor for the Community Foundation of Pulaski County. May you and the community reap many benefits from this process.