

Strengthening Community One Neighbor at a Time

First "Front Line Citizen's Round Table" Brings People Together

by Sue Smith-Heavenrich

Broader View Weekly, March 6, 2009

Walk down Main Street in any of our small towns and you'll find flyers promoting benefit dinners taped up next to announcements of a dance at the Grange or a community concert at the school. Nearly any resident will tell you that they feel fortunate to live in a supportive community surrounded by the beauty of forested hills and a working agricultural landscape.

But listen to conversations around the kitchen tables and you realize there are fractures that have been developing over recent months. "I have some concerns about gas development and I would like to talk to my neighbors, but they won't even listen to me," one person said recently.

"I've shared a boundary with my neighbor for over 20 years," said another. "But since this gas thing, he won't even talk to me."

Somehow the rush to fracture Marcellus Shale and release natural gas has also fractured the communities situated atop the ancient Devonian rock. Last fall a handful of Van Etten residents, concerned about the lack of civic conversation on gas exploration and other issues important to the community, began knocking on doors in their neighborhoods. Their goal: to see if it is possible to revive a strong community identity through the simple practice of getting neighbors to listen to each other.

Calling themselves the Van Etten Listening Project, they went from home to home offering to listen to what their neighbors had to say. While the project grew from a concern about the ways the natural gas industry might impact the local community, it is not limited to gas issues.

"We want to know what people like about living here and some of the challenges they face," said one of the volunteers. The people involved in the Listening Project want to understand their neighbors and explore issues in ways that offer new ideas and solutions.

On Saturday, February 28 the Van Etten Listening Project hosted their first "Front Line Citizen's Round Table". The breakfast meeting, featuring hot coffee, bagels and fresh fruit, was held at the Spencer Municipal Building. Because gas activities are one of the issues facing the local communities, this first meeting focused on that topic.

About 50 people from neighboring communities showed up; a few traveled from as far away as Trumansburg, Apalachin, and Towanda, PA to share in the discussion. Two members of the Listening Project, Dirk and Meghan, facilitated the meeting. Their role, they explained, was not to talk about issues but to make sure that each person sitting around the tables had an opportunity to share their ideas.

People were also charged with the responsibility to listen to what their neighbors were saying. Dirk and Meghan encouraged folks to write their comments on the paper covering

the tables. After 20 minutes everyone moved to a different table, with different people, and addressed a new question. Later, the entire group reconvened to address the diversity of concerns expressed throughout the morning.

Round Table participants focused on three questions that related to gas exploration and drilling in the area: what are the larger issues behind our personal concerns; what steps can we take to protect our water, land and health; and what do we personally and together need to do to bring the solutions to life?

One of the overarching concerns brought up during Saturday's discussion was the feeling of alienation from neighbors. Many people said that the gas issue was dividing their communities.

"Look around and you don't see too many landowners here today who have leased to the gas companies," one person observed. She has a lease and commented that the landowners that used to attend community meetings are no longer showing up because they are not made to feel welcome.

"We can't have people shouting at each other," she said. "We have to be mindful of how we talk to people with another point of view – and how we listen to them."

Another person pointed out that people concerned about environmental risks, such as drinking water or soil contamination, have been asked to leave some meetings that focus on landowner issues.

"They come to frack the shale and frack the community," quipped another referring to the gas companies.

A related concern is that few people show up to public meetings. It doesn't matter if it is about gas issues or a town board meeting, said one person, people just don't show up.

"Civic engagement isn't big in our society," Dirk said. "But," he added, "that doesn't mean that your neighbors aren't concerned."

People also wanted to know more about how towns could help oversee the gas activities and what local municipalities could do to protect roads and other infrastructure. One person explained how, in eastern Ohio, neighbors whose drinking wells had been polluted by gas drilling were the landowners upon whose land the natural gas well was situated.

People agreed that they do not want to see their communities divided that way. "It's true that what my neighbor does effects me," one person said, "but what I do effects him as well."

"What we need to do is bring more people together to talk like this," another landowner said. The volunteers from the Van Etten Listening Project agreed to set up more round-table discussions in the future. In the meantime, they are still walking through their neighborhoods on Sunday afternoons, knocking on doors and asking their neighbors what things they like best about living in town, and what things they're concerned about.