

200 leaders talk of investing in 'social capital'

Forum urges stronger relationships to build healthier community

BY RYAN TRACY
STAFF WRITER

WEST WINDSOR — What if there were an inexpensive way to raise student performance, reduce crime, boost voter turnout, improve government service and enlighten life spans across central New Jersey?

Does that sound like something you might be interested in?

More than 200 community leaders, from the heads of local nonprofit organizations to elected officials and business owners, gathered yesterday for the area's first dialogue on "social capital" to explore those possibilities.

The Better Together Forum, sponsored

by the Princeton Area Community Foundation and the Princeton Regional Chamber of Commerce, attempted to drive home an idea that has gained currency among area leaders:

When a community is built on strong, trusting social relationships, when people feel invested in their neighbors and surroundings, other traits of a strong, healthy community also appear.

"This is worth paying attention to," Lew Feldstein, the forum's keynote speaker, told the crowd at the Conference Center on the campus of Mercer County Community College here yesterday morning.

Sture Charitable Foundation, referred to data on "social capital," a quantifiable measure of attitudes and behaviors in a community.

Research on social capital, conducted on a national basis but localized in a 2007 survey of central New Jersey, shows that where human relationships are stronger, the performance of economies, governments, students and even human health is similarly high, Feldstein said.

Much of the half-day forum's content focused on ways to improve social capital in and around Mercer County, from creating community organizations and engaging older residents in civic life to reaching out to younger people through "virtual communities" online.

Feldstein led a session on diversity, which he said was a central issue because "if there's one thing we know in our country, it's that we're becoming more diverse."

He noted that as diversity in a community rises, residents at first tend to vote less, attend church less, and show less trust in their neighbors.

"People are scared. I like a turtle, they're hunkering down," Feldstein said.

In another session, area architect J. Robert Hiller led a dialogue on "place" as it relates to social capital.

Hiller argued that more dense development, complete with an active street life and the sights and sounds of a thriving social scene, can help to create a community full of strong relationships.

Hiller "noted how difficult it can be to

push dense housing through the local approval process.

"There's just this lock-on that we don't want more density. . . . We're rightfully so saving all this greenspace, but we're not building the density where we should," Hiller said. "It takes that kind of density to build a community. You can't do it on two-acre lots."

The research on social capital however, is short on proven strategies to increase good attitudes and behaviors, Feldstein said.

Yet if charities, governments, and businesses only provide services and do not work to build trust and new relationships, you are "doing work with at least one arm tied behind your back," Feldstein said.

Contact Ryan Tracy at (609) 989-5723 or rttracy@njtimes.com.