City of Elgin
Department of Cultural Arts and Special Events

Focus Groups & Community Conversations Summary Report

June 2023
overview and process

The Focus Groups and Community Conversations concluded the Learning Phase of the Market Study and Strategic Plan. These conversations were an opportunity to further contextualize key areas of inquiry that had come up during the planning process but also go deeper and test specific programming ideas and activities. These conversations focused on several key research questions:

1. What should be the City’s future priorities for arts, culture, and entertainment programs and events?
2. How can Elgin create more inclusive, accessible events that welcome and engage the diverse local communities?

The Create Today team, with guidance from the Task Force, developed a focus group discussion guide to help drive the conversations and ensure consistency across each of the different focus groups and community conversations.

A total of six focus groups/community conversations were held:
- Three virtually over Zoom, and
- Three in-person community conversations in Elgin – two at the Hemmens, one of which was bilingual and included Spanish translation, and one at The Centre of Elgin.

Participants were recruited through a variety of channels. For the focus groups conducted in English, participants were recruited from a pool of respondents who completed the Community Survey and expressed interest in participating in a focus group. Participants for the in-person, bilingual conversation at the Hemmens were recruited through community partners and local organizations, including: the Gail Borden Library, Ecker Center for Behavioral Health, and the Centro de Información.

A total of 68 individuals participated across all the conversations: 15 virtually and 53 in person.
preferences for different types of programs

A key area of inquiry during these conversations was to test specific arts, culture, and entertainment events and programs. Several of the programmatic concepts were activities the City was already producing and presenting and a few others were opportunities that Elgin may look to further explore.

Participants in the conversations were asked to rank each of the six different programming ideas and activities. The participants at the in-person conversations (“in-person”) were given five green dots and then asked to distribute their dots across the six programming ideas which were displayed on large poster boards. They could put all their dots on one board or distribute them evenly depending on how they wanted to prioritize them. The participants on Zoom (“virtual”) rated the ideas using a poll and Likert scale, from Very Excited to Not at All Excited.

Concert or performance of touring companies, bands, or artists.

57 green dots (in-person); 67% Excited (virtual)

**Likes:** Residents don’t have to travel to see performances that would normally take place outside of Elgin; keeps entertainment spending inside Elgin; would like to see a range of different events, including cover bands/tribute bands, family programming, culturally based programming (Ballet Folklorico), as well as the events already taking place at Hemmens (e.g., ESO).

**Challenges:** Would further centralize programming by providing opportunities that are too downtown focused (i.e., should programming take place at Hemmens); programming should take place at different venues, both indoors and outdoors, to ensure residents feel welcome and comfortable in their preferred setting.

- This is exciting! I’ve gone to Naperville and Chicago for things like this. (Hemmens) is way underutilized – the Mayor and City Council need to look at this and commit to programming it. The Hemmens is a wonderful facility and the City doesn’t seem to realize we would like to see more there.
- I went to the Hemmens for the first-time last year, outside of my children’s performances. Not a space I usually go to.
- It’s important to know the City brings in big names, but I prefer more subtle spaces than the ECC and Hemmens and don’t like crowds – prefer the smaller venues and experiences but know these big-name artists are important for the City.
• Wing Park and the bandshell – similar to Ravinia, maybe not that big but something like it would be cool to see in Elgin.

Visual art in public places.
51 green dots (in-person); 77% Excited (virtual)

Likes: A simple and easy way to engage residents and draw people in through art; the surprise of public art and happening upon it unexpectedly; physical environment beautification; a perceived increase in public safety by creating an inviting environment and community pride.

Challenges: The need for better funding for public art (e.g., percent for art); a more streamlined and accessible permitting process; more money for artists to create public art and a less onerous process for artists to submit work; unclear about what constitutes public art and the City’s role in supporting it.

• Public art is like a visual tattoo of the community
• What the City has been doing, even with the parking garages as mural spaces, brightens it up so much. Parking garages are awful, an evil necessity, but the public art brightens them up and livens up the space. It’s amazing to watch people walking through and smile.
• Great to go for a walk and be surprised by a piece of art that is new or intriguing – not just visual art, also design and architecture. Even in terms of visual art – when designing a sidewalk or walkway to take into account visual art.
• I feel visual art in public places is a great way to attract more people. Many people will get to know about this art and enjoy the art.

Arts and cultural events that celebrate and showcase the different cultures of Elgin, such as the Juneteenth Celebration or Fiesta Salsa.
49 green dots (in-person); 90% Excited (virtual)

Likes: Celebrates Elgin’s diversity and provides opportunities for community building; residents can learn about different cultures and create connections (e.g., social bridging); creates meaningful interactions within cultures and connects generational gaps (e.g., social bonding); distinguishes Elgin as a place that celebrates diversity/humanity through the arts.

Challenges: Consistency and continuity of programming from year to year; programs should be
grounded in community voice and guided by the respective communities/cultures being celebrated, Latinx/Hispanic communities would like to see more opportunities to celebrate the breadth and diversity of their cultures (e.g., a Latin American Independence Day Celebration during Hispanic Heritage Month); more multi-faceted types of programs that include food, clothing, music, dance, and interactive activities for kids.

- I’ve been to one of the Juneteenth celebrations and thought it was great. Was curious if other cultures felt welcome in that space – and I think about that a lot since then. A lot of us celebrate events that are specific to our culture and Elgin could rally around to make them available to everyone and learn. We could get together and build a better city!
- Would be interesting if there was some calendar campaign to “get to know our neighbors” to be intentional around [making sure] everyone is welcome and invited to come to these events even though we are centering a group or event. All are welcome to learn and be a part of it.
- The art and culture of Elgin is very diverse and culturally rich. Every year different art and culture events take place. I am really excited to see more events like this in future as well.
- There are 100 languages spoken in Elgin – it’s so diverse, it’s amazing! Something was said about gangs and the research shows that cultural programs with diversity reaching teens, prevents kids from joining gangs because they engage with their spirit. These types of programs could be a gamechanger for kids to figure out who they are and find an identity.
- Festivals or something else that includes a food truck – not just downtown, take them into the neighborhoods. The parks are all over – food trucks and a little bit of entertainment to get people involved. Need government to put them together and get people to come out. It takes time to build audience and awareness.
- They did a food truck festival a couple of years ago and then it never happened again – that’s what happens. We get excited and it never happens again.

Large outdoor concerts or performances that take place in an open space, such as Festival Park.

46 green dots (in-person); 70% Excited (virtual)

**Likes:** open-air, casual environment where residents can bring their dogs, children, and friends and have a picnic; opportunities for more family-friendly programming; opportunities for free events.

**Challenges:** lack of parking and accessibility at Festival Park; need for more culturally diverse artists and performers that represent the diversity of Elgin’s communities; bilingual performances/events and/or presentations solely in Spanish or another language besides English; desire to see bigger name artists/acts (both at the parks and at the casino), similar to what Elgin used to do pre-Covid.
• It’s wonderful to have the big open crowd where everyone feels welcome – there’s so much to offer.
• Excited because I go to four to five small outdoor venue concerts in the summer and do like to be outside and would love if Elgin were bigger it could get better quality entertainment than what I see here.
• Growing up in Elgin there was a lot that took place outdoors – fireworks, Easter egg hunt, fox trot, there were some events that got cancelled due to rain, and then everything started going away. We have such great real estate – the river, riverwalk, the casino. Bring back something – the Nightmare on Chicago St brings out a huge amount of residents and beyond that is exciting and unique that no other town had pulled off.
• Most everything we do is downtown – the West side of Elgin is too ignored, and they don’t want to go into Elgin because it’s ugly. Maybe use the parks or libraries there too and make them feel part of town too. The people on the other side of the river.

Immersive entertainment experiences that are hands-on and provide a more interactive experience.
39 green dots (in-person); 60% Excited (virtual)

Likes: Attracts people to Elgin to see something that is unique; opportunities for participatory and healthy types of classes such as Zumba, yoga, dance; family friendly programming; active participation that everyone can do and enjoy.

Challenges: A desire for more interactive programming without alcohol; perception that Nightmare is too scary (e.g., doesn’t align with values); some of the immersive experiences are not easy to participate due to accessibility issues (e.g., requires a lot of walking)

• Immersive arts exhibitions would bring a younger/hipper crowd into downtown.
• I don’t know what hands-on is – like a Zumba or yoga class outside with a focus on fitness tagging along with what they do at the Centre.
• To me it would be physically doing something and having somebody show me what they are doing and explaining the process instead of just looking at it – learning about the thought process and actions of making it.
Programming that takes place in different neighborhoods throughout Elgin block parties or smaller arts and cultural events or performances.

28 green dots (in-person); 76% Excited (virtual)

**Likes:** These types of programs bring people together and unite the different neighborhoods of Elgin; allows residents to get to know their neighbors; easy to access and don’t require travel; opportunities for artists to sell their art throughout the neighborhoods.

**Challenges:** Obtaining a permit can be a slow and frustrating process; lack of information about where/how to start the process to get a permit; lack of general advertising about these various neighborhood events; concern about more “party-like” atmosphere and less of a focus on arts and local cultures; neighbors should be incorporated into the planning process about additional/increased neighborhood programming; neighborhood programs need to feel welcoming to both local neighbors and those who live elsewhere.

- **East side / West side** – could promote these types of events to both sides, doing events that would bring the people to other sides of Elgin and even into downtown.
- **Having these little pop-ups so the word can be spread, smaller groups interacting and getting to the people and know it is happening out there.**
- **Excited to get out and do something I wouldn’t typically do – experience things outside my Black culture sitting in bars and being out – the more we can get out and experience cultures that aren’t my own.**
- **Block parties are left on their own it is very hard to mix – I am Filipino and it is hard to mix with some other culture. I can mix with Caucasians and with Blacks, if someone welcomes me there in the first place. Not knowing what to do, if someone would welcome you – even one person, City staff.**
creating welcoming and accessible programs

The participants at the in-person conversations (“in-person”) were asked to answer two questions in writing as they departed from the focus groups. Answers were collected anonymously and reviewed for themes across the responses.

On-site participants were asked to think of a time – or specific experience – when they entered a community space, arts center, museum, park, or really any type of space, and immediately felt welcomed and comfortable. They were then asked to compare that experience with how it felt entering the Hemmens Center and the Centre.

What makes you feel welcome in a space?
The people who greeted them and the general atmosphere in a place were the two things most often cited about their experience that made them immediately feel welcomed and comfortable.

People (18)
- It’s always the people who make the experience a welcome, comfortable one. The décor could be grey cinderblocks but feel great with the right people.
- Usually it’s the people who work the event that make me feel welcome and comfortable there.
- Smiling greeters who can give directions, answer questions.

General Atmosphere (10)
- I feel welcome when entering a space with character.
- The entry hall had seating and art on the wall. It had a coffee bar, wine, and beer was sold, staff was friendly, lots of natural light.
- Music and laughter was the first thing we heard.

Artwork (6)
- Artwork included some representation of my background as a person of color, and others too etc. LGBTQIA, 1st nation, Mexican.
- The outside leading up to the center is filled with light, sculptures, and interactive art.

Accessibility (2)
- [a local venue] is accessible with elevators

Diversity (1)
- I feel safe/welcomed when I see/hear/feel diversity. I listen for different layers/look for diversity to feel safe.
Hemmens Center: How did you feel coming here today?
The Hemmens Center was a special experience for the majority of participants and they felt welcome. However, there was some anxiety about feeling lost and a sense that it was dark.

Welcome, special (7)
- Welcomed, valued, respected, and that my opinion matters.
- I felt special when I arrived – ‘ooh we’re on stage!’
- Welcoming, friendly, nice … made me happy.

A little lost (3)
- Didn’t know whether I was in the right place.
- I initially felt apprehensive because I was the only one here and didn’t know what to expect. As the event went on, I felt more comfortable.

Dark, bland (3)
- The Hemmens feels dark, cold, and not welcoming. It could definitely use some color or art in the general areas to feel more welcoming.
- I feel like I enter the 70s when I walk into the Hemmens.

Centre of Elgin: How did you feel coming here today?
There were still a majority of respondents who felt welcome and safe at the Centre, however a few more reported feeling lost.

Comfortable, welcome, safe (6)
- I felt welcomed.
- Everyone was queued into helping you find where you were going. The room seemed a bit big for what was going on but everyone was already comfortably chatting, so it felt quite cozy.

A bit lost (4)
- Entered through parking garage – walkway was crazy hot, humid. No signage for our meeting. Feels disjointed. Outside landscaping was overgrown – not bright, clean, or welcome.
- There is a need for better coordination, advertising, information flow that should be evident.