

Recently released survey examines Central NJ civic engagement

By Fred Tuccillo
The Packet Group

Bernadine Aubert takes photography classes at the Princeton Senior Resource Center and participates in the Lawrence Township Community Garden.

Jinny Van Wynen is a leader in the planning of Plainsboro's new public library.

The 70-piece Blawenburg Band in Montgomery performs in some 60 community concerts, parades and other events throughout the year.

Jessica Durrie, founder of Small World Coffee, works to make sure her Princeton establishment provides a strong sense of community for customers and staff.

All are featured as models of civic engagement and community involvement in a report — just released by the Princeton Area Community Foundation — which suggests that Central Jersey residents are as engaged as their national counterparts in

such activities but are also in a position to do more.

“Our numbers were strong, but they could be stronger,” said Nancy Kieling, president of the Princeton Area Community Foundation, which partnered with the Princeton Regional Chamber of Commerce Foundation to commission the survey. “We believe that in an area that scores so high in so many areas, our levels of social capital should be similarly high.”

The two foundations have announced a five-year initiative that will challenge community leaders to increase social capital in the region, in part through the awarding of \$2.5 million in grants “to organizations encouraging greater social interaction and building bridges among people and towns.”

Their “Social Capital Benchmark Survey” was based on interviews with 870 people and in 19 communities, including Lawrence, Princeton, West Windsor, Hopewell, Pennington, Hamilton, East Windsor, Hightstown, Ewing and Robbinsville in Mer-

cer County; Montgomery, Rocky Hill, and Kingston in Somerset County and Plainsboro, South Brunswick and Cranbury in Middlesex County.

The findings compare Central Jersey with the rest of the U.S., reporting, for example, that respondents here spend 47.2 hours per week commuting and working, compared to 49.3 hours for their national counterparts:

Other key findings:

- 56 percent of Central Jersey respondents said they were “well connected with immediate neighbors”, compared to 48 percent in the national sample;

- 38 percent said they are involved in charity or social welfare, compared to 34 percent nationally;

- 23 percent said they were involved literary, art, discussion and strategy groups, compared to 19 percent nationally;

- 51 percent of Central Jersey residents hold bachelor's degrees, compared to 28 percent nationally;

- 36 percent of Central Jersey households report incomes over \$100,000, compared to 15 percent nationally.

The results raise “challenging questions,” according to Dr. Marc Weiner of the Bloustein Center for Survey Research at Rutgers, who served as the project’s “principal investigator.”

“If we have fewer constraints because our education, income, and trust levels exceed the national average, and we are no busier than others, how is it that we score only average in our rates of civic engagement and volunteerism? Are we living up to our potential?” Dr. Weiner asked.

The initiative will kick off with an informational campaign — called “Better Together” — through spring and summer, capped by a region-wide fall forum, the organizations said.

CEOs of local businesses and leaders of academic, religious and nonprofit organizations will be called upon to en-



Photo courtesy "Better Together"

Bernadine Aubert stays engaged through classes at the Princeton Senior Resource Center and her work in Lawrence Township's community garden.

courage workers, members and clients to consider undertaking such outreach activities as service on local non-profit and community boards, exploring opportunities to get to know their communities and neighbors better, or simply reaching out by

stronger communities throughout central New Jersey," said Karen Colimore, president of the Princeton Regional Chamber of Commerce Foundation. The benefits include "improved educational achievement, better performing governments, stronger

Center. "Each day, it gets me up and out, reading and learning things in classes," she said. "It's stimulating."

Ms. Durrie, who opened Small World Coffee at 14 Witherspoon Street in Princeton in 1993, has a mantra about community connections. "Community does not just happen," she said. "You have to work on it every day."

In their joint information campaign, the community foundation will focus on the region's municipalities, including elected representatives and municipal officials, and nonprofit organizations. The chamber foundation will focus on businesses.

"We hypothesize that our social capital baseline scores would look far less positive if they were compared with other regions of the country enjoying greater economic growth than we have vs. a national average," Ms. Colimore said. "We believe improving social capital is the key to improving regional economic growth."

The benchmark survey was modeled on similar ones conducted in 29 other regions across the country. The questionnaire was adapted from a seminar titled "Civic Engagement in America", an on-going program at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government. Questions cover such areas as social and interracial trust, involvement in associations, diversity of friendships, faith-based involvement, informal socializing, civic leadership and volunteering.

Complete survey results can be found on both the Princeton Area Community Foundation and the Princeton Regional Chamber of Commerce Founda-

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