

TOWN FORUM

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EDITORIAL

Better together a worthwhile endeavor

Some civic minded folks in Princeton would like us to become better acquainted and involved with one another and they're prepared to spend \$2.5 million to help make it happen.

The Princeton Area Community Foundation and the Princeton Chamber of Commerce Foundation have surveyed more than 800 adults in 19 communities, including Princeton, West Windsor, Montgomery and Plainsboro, to gauge their degree of community engagement and interaction.

The resulting study, headlined "The first-ever Social Capital Benchmark Survey" is the curtain-raiser for an ambitious public information campaign — "Better Together" — which will reach out to individuals, organizations and businesses. Activities that enhance community involvement will be eligible for some of the \$2.5 million in grants that the foundations plan to award.

The loss of community connection, especially in suburbia, is no trivial matter to journalists. For one thing, it has been shown to track closely with declining newspaper readership. And few working reporters escape writing at least one story about a crime victim — or perpetrator — in which a neighbor says, "He kept mostly to himself."

In the social capital survey, 56 percent of the Central Jersey respondents said they spoke or visited with immediate neighbors at least several times a week. That is frequent enough to suggest that the exchanges rise above the "keep-your-dog-off-my-lawn" level.

"Welcoming a new neighbor, offering to pick something up at the store, greeting your fellow commuter on the train — small gestures that build connections go a long way," said Nancy Kieling of the community foundation.

At the other end of the engagement spectrum are more organized activities such as volunteering, belonging to civic, fraternal or religious organizations or participating in team sports. The Central Jersey sample registered levels of 15 to 33 percent for these.

The biggest obstacle to becoming more involved is no surprise: 29 percent cited family obligations and work. The latter factor underlines the determination of the Princeton Chamber of Commerce Foundation to include area employers in its outreach.

"Higher levels of social capital are good for residents, for businesses and will help build stronger communities," said Karen Colimore, president of the chamber foundation. "We believe improving social capital is the key to improving regional economic growth."

Noting the relatively high levels of education and income in Central Jersey, both the chamber foundation and the Princeton Area Community Foundation believe we are doing well but could be doing better.

We agree and we wish them well as their "Better Together" campaign unfolds.

LETTERS

EMTs are also 'social capital'

To the editor:

In the April 22 issue of The Packet, the Guest Opinion "41 ways to increase your social capital" mentions firefighters twice but EMTs are omitted. We join you in your support of firefighters but we think saving people is as important as saving homes.

At times of medical emergencies, EMTs provide an essential service to the public, all day every day. All the squads in The Packet coverage area could benefit from a few more volunteers.

Tony Glockler, volunteer
Whippoorwill Way
Montgomery