



SUDBURY LISTENING PROJECT

Spring 2015 Report

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We also extend our sincere gratitude to Rachel Viscomi, our clinical supervisor, for her wisdom, insight, time and encouragement; members of the Sudbury Clergy Association, for their moral support, thoughtful guidance, logistical support, and love for the town; Dr. Carolyn Helsel, our client supervisor, for her dedication, insight and support; the Sudbury Foundation, for kindly hosting us at Grange Hall for our Community Focus Groups and Final Presentation; Tracy Blanchard, HNMCP's administrator, for her encouragement and administrative and logistical support; and Arevik Avedian and Suqin Hou for their assistance with the survey.

Seanan Fong and Jiayun Ho

Harvard Negotiation and Mediation Clinical Program (HNMCP)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The goal of the Sudbury Listening Project is to explore and understand the state of public discourse on town matters in Sudbury. In this report, we seek to share the voices and perspectives that we have heard, and to use negotiation tools to disentangle sources of conflict and tension. Our focus is on processes and communication in Sudbury, rather than on substantive disputes. Our hope is to facilitate mutual understanding among stakeholders in the town and to provide suggestions on ways that Sudbury can move forward. . We encourage you to read this report with curiosity, and to make use of the negotiation tools that we explain in Section 4 both to make sense of what you read in this report and in your daily interactions with members of the town.

Over the course of the project, we have sought to engage as many residents as possible, through a combination of interviews, focus groups and a survey. We have found that many residents experience town discourse as strained, and also less productive than they would like. We have learned of both institutional as well as informal, interpersonal tensions in Sudbury, and observe that strained interactions tend to share some dominant characteristics. While many have described the town as divided into two camps, our assessment is that there is more complexity in the actual views and affiliations of residents than that analysis would suggest. In addition to finding that the views of residents represent more than two distinct perspectives, we also note that there is frequently inconsistency between an individual's self-perception, others' perception of their view, and the actual inclination of that individual's viewpoint; labels are neither always factually descriptive nor an aid to respectful listening. (Section 5)

For people in the thick of the conflict, the costs have been tremendous. Recent tensions have had a damaging impact on relationships and participation in the community. Many have experienced deep frustration, hurt and agony. For the town as a whole, the tensions seem to have adversely affected civic participation, the effectiveness of town government's operations, and residents' readiness to air their views. (Section 5)

We have identified four narratives that broadly represented the perspectives of many residents – narratives that might have formed over time as people observed a pattern in their experiences, and which increasingly became lenses through which they approached events and interactions in Sudbury:

- Narrative A: “We’re concerned. How did the town get to this point?”

People who hold this narrative may not be personally involved but are saddened and confused by the recent tensions in Sudbury. They value living in a peaceful, comfortable and harmonious community, having an effective government, and maintaining Sudbury's reputation.

- Narrative B: “We’re frustrated. We want to be heard, included and informed.”

People who hold this narrative tended to have been spurred by a personal trigger event to become more active in town politics. They are frustrated by the way they have seen issues/incidents handled, and feel unwelcomed and silenced when they attempt to voice their concerns. They value being treated fairly and equally, being

listened to and kept informed, having decisions sharpened by new and diverse opinions, being accepted and respected as part of the town, and having an effective government.

- Narrative C: “We feel hurt and bewildered. We wish the town could collaborate reasonably like we used to do.”

People who hold this narrative feel personally maligned and are frustrated by how their words and actions have been misunderstood by others. They feel unappreciated for their efforts for the town and feel they have done their best to serve honestly and engage with differing views. They value feeling safe to speak and serve, living in a peaceful and harmonious community, being respected and appreciated, and having an effective government.

- Narrative D: “We care and we want to build understanding in town.”

People who hold this narrative feel dismayed at what all stakeholders in recent tensions have experienced. They find merit in many perspectives, but find that people have unproductive ways of raising their concerns. They value seeing people communicate more effectively, better collaboration, being listened to as individuals, and having an effective government.

For each narrative, we explain in greater detail our understanding of the background, experiences, inferences and core interests of the people who adhere to that narrative, as well as indicate which communication platforms they tend to prefer using. (Section 6)

We believe these narratives shape the way residents view salient events in the town’s recent history, and that these divergent perspectives have coalesced over time, contributing to today’s tensions. (Section 7) Divergent perspectives on town engagements have also extended to residents’ reviews of existing avenues of communication. (Section 8)

While we are aware that the current situation feels disheartening for many residents, we believe that the existing tensions can be improved by deepening our understanding of the dynamics in town. Overall, our analysis suggests that:

1. People are focusing on different data to interpret events.
2. There is no shared informational basis for engagement because people are relying on different sources.
3. People tend to assume the views and intentions of others.
4. People are not aware of how they come across.
5. People are not communicating their interests and reasoning.
6. Conflict escalates in a self-reinforcing cycle due to unvoiced interests/reasoning and mismatch in impact/intent.
7. It has become difficult for residents to empathize with diverging perspectives.
8. Sudbury is grappling with broader patterns in politics and technology.
9. It is more constructive to focus on residents’ legitimate core interests than on “difficult personalities”.
10. Collaboration is necessary – and possible. (Section 9)

We believe that individual residents in their personal capacity can make a big difference in the dynamics of the town. We recommend that residents:

1. Use “best practices” for listening, including paraphrasing and inquiring.
2. Help others hear you by sharing your interests and options, and by becoming aware of how well the impact of your expression/action matches your intent.
3. Build relationships across perceived divides.
4. Keep referencing the “Selected Toolkit” in Section 4. (Section 10)

While individual residents can play an important role in improving the climate in the town, we believe that larger structural or systemic changes are also necessary.

1. We believe it is important that the town cultivates its capacity for conflict management and process design, which it might do through the formation of a Civic Conversations Group and by offering dispute resolution training for its citizens.
2. To function effectively, it is critical that the Board of Selectmen build relationships and build consensus about their processes of engagement, which might be achieved through a Board of Selectmen retreat, one-on-one meetings among Selectmen, and social events.
3. We believe that the interests of residents and town officials/staff in engaging about town affairs can be better met when the town government makes its communications and forums more user-centric. This might take the form of making improvements to the town website, using social media to distribute or circulate updates, and hiring a media and information coordinator. We also recommend that the town government continue issue-specific forums and consider re-structuring and improving the processes at the annual Town Meeting.
4. As there seems to be keen interest in having more residents contribute to the town, we suggest that the community consider providing opportunities for low-threshold involvement of more residents in town initiatives.
5. As new media is increasingly an important part of a community’s engagement, it is crucial that social media platforms are trusted and leveraged for community-building, which might mean developing a Facebook forum that is commonly trusted by a wider range of stakeholders and adopting other platforms designed for community connection.
6. Finally, for Boards and Committees more generally, it is important that they acknowledge the viewpoints they receive and communicate their reasoning when making decisions. (Section 11)

We hope that these suggestions, described in full in Section 11, support you in finding new ways to move forward productively and collaboratively.

INTRODUCTION

About the Sudbury Listening Project

The Sudbury Listening Project is an initiative by two graduate students participating in the Harvard Negotiation and Mediation Clinical Program (HNMCP) at Harvard Law School. The Sudbury Clergy Association engaged HNMCP to undertake this project. Its aim is to explore and understand the challenges that Sudbury residents face in communicating with one another about town matters.

Scope of the Project

The goal of the project is to conduct an assessment of recent conflicts in Sudbury, in order to facilitate mutual understanding among Sudbury's residents. Our inquiry seeks to understand the sources of tension in Sudbury, with a **focus on processes and communications** rather than particular substantive disputes. We do not seek to "fix" or "solve" Sudbury's challenges. Our purpose is solely to offer Sudbury's residents a broader view of the situation and to help equip them to move forward more effectively.

About the Harvard Negotiation and Mediation Clinical Program

The Harvard Negotiation and Mediation Clinical Program (HNMCP) is one of many clinics at Harvard Law School that provide students with hands-on legal experience under the supervision of attorneys.¹ HNMCP focuses on conflict management and dispute systems design. It offers an opportunity for students to practice negotiation, mediation, facilitated dialogue, stakeholder assessment, conflict analysis, dispute systems evaluation and design, and curriculum development.²

The students who undertook this project are Seanan Fong and Jiayun Ho, both of whom are trained in negotiation through the Harvard Law School and in mediation through the Harvard Mediation Program. They were supervised by Rachel Viscomi, Assistant Director of HNMCP.

About the Sudbury Clergy Association (SCA)

The Sudbury Clergy Association (SCA) is a longstanding interfaith and ecumenical group of lay and ordained religious professionals serving many houses of worship in Sudbury. Their mission is to address the spiritual well-being of the town by designing and offering the Interfaith Thanksgiving Service, supporting the school superintendents and principals, staying abreast of issues of concern to the town government, police and fire departments, seniors, empty-nesters, and families with school age children, helping to facilitate dialogue in the midst of disagreement, and serving as on-call chaplains in the event of local, regional, state or national emergencies.

Observing that the town of Sudbury has experienced increasingly hostile exchanges between and among stakeholders in a variety of settings, the Sudbury Clergy Association enlisted HNMCP to engage in a listening project with the town to understand the conflict and propose ways to move toward more civil and productive discourse.

¹www.law.harvard.edu/academics/clinical/clinics/index.html

² www.blogs.law.harvard.edu/hnmcp

USING THIS REPORT

Purpose of this Report

In this report, we seek to **share the voices and perspectives** that we have heard in the course of this project, and to use negotiation tools to **disentangle sources of conflict and tension**. Our purpose is not to lay blame or take sides or vindicate any particular perspective. Rather, we aim to capture the experiences, perceptions and reactions of those who have engaged with us in as neutral and faithful a manner as possible. We do this in the hope that this can help **facilitate mutual understanding** among stakeholders in the town.

Our aim is also to provide **suggestions on ways to move forward** at both the structural and personal levels, based on the needs we have identified and building on ideas we have received from stakeholders.

Read with Curiosity

Many in the town may have very strong feelings about the state of dialogue and governance in Sudbury in recent years. Others may be learning about the issues and events detailed here for the first time.

As you read this report, it is very likely that you will encounter a perspective that you do not share. In such moments, we invite you to **adopt a stance of curiosity**:

- Assume that you do not yet have all the information you need to draw a solid conclusion.
- Resist the temptation to dismiss a claim or conclusion that differs strongly from your own.
- Revisit claims that might sound tired or familiar to you. We invite you to adjust how you understand them as you read.
- Consider the experiences, feelings and perceptions of the real humans behind the narrative.
- Ask yourself questions such as:
 - What might someone with this perspective be seeing that I am not seeing?
 - What am I learning about the reasons why someone might think/react this way?

In Section 4, we detail more tools that may be helpful to you as you seek to understand the perspectives of others in the town.

Your Response and Next Steps

During the course of our engagement with town residents, we heard concerns that our report may be used to provide support for certain positions or people, at the expense of other voices. As explained above, we have done our best to listen and learn with care and curiosity and, with this report, we seek to share what we have learned about the perspectives that exist in Sudbury as neutrally and faithfully as possible. Any errors or omissions are inadvertent.

As stakeholders in the town, it is in your hands to decide how you will respond to this report, how you will relate to fellow residents in the light of what you have read, and what recommendations you wish to take up.

PART I: GROUNDWORK

METHODOLOGY

Timeline of engagement

October 2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - At the Sudbury Clergy Association's (SCA) invitation, HNMCP Professor Robert Bordone and Assistant Director Rachel Viscomi attended an SCA meeting to learn about their concerns with the state of public discourse in Sudbury.
November 2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - SCA submitted an application to HNMCP, proposing that HNMCP engage in a town listening project to learn more about dialogue in Sudbury. - HNMCP accepted SCA's application on November 20, and agreed to undertake a clinical project in the Spring Semester. - Official press release³ by SCA on December 15
February 2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Start of Spring Semester at Harvard Law School: official start of project by students Seanan Fong and Jiayun Ho - Preliminary interviews conducted - Publicity launch for Focus Group Signups and Survey on February 26 - Survey launched on February 26
March 2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Interviews continued as availability permitted; concluded - Focus groups conducted on March 6-7 and March 13-14 - Survey closed on March 23
April 2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Consolidation of findings and ideas
May 2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Presentation of study at Grange Hall on May 3 - Conclusion of project

Interviews

Purpose

Interviews provided us with an opportunity to develop our understanding of the dynamics of dialogue and communication in Sudbury, the causes of such dynamics, and the concerns and challenges felt by active and engaged residents in town.

Level of Engagement and Representation of Stakeholder Groups

We interviewed thirty-three (33) people, including the following: residents actively engaged in town matters; past and present elected volunteers on town committees/boards/positions; past and present town employees; and school employees. Among these were relative newcomers to town; longtime residents; full-time workers; parents with young children; retirees; and seniors.

Approach

We began our interviews by approaching a preliminary list of stakeholders identified by the SCA. From there, our interviewees referred us to more contacts in the town, whom we then invited to participate in an interview or a Community Focus Group.

³ SCA Press release at www.st-elizabeths.org/archives/2014-12-15-SudburyClergyAssociation-PressRelease.pdf.

Some residents took the initiative to reach out to us upon hearing about the project. As we approached the capacity of our interview slots, we interviewed them as our availability permitted; where this was not possible, we invited them to a Community Focus Group and to fill out the survey.

Challenges faced

Time constraints: As mentioned, we had limited time and capacity to interview everyone who reached out to us. We strove to include their voices by inviting those we could not interview to attend a Community Focus Group and fill out the survey.

Email lapses: For client confidentiality, HNMCP requires our team to use particular email system, which presented technical problems over the course of the semester. On two occasions, our emails failed to reach stakeholders whom we were trying to contact for an interview. We were ultimately able to connect with them and have the benefit of their perspective in developing our understanding.

Concerns about adequate representation and perceived neutrality: As word about the project circulated around town, we received reminders from various quarters that it was important to ensure that our project had balanced coverage of the different perspectives in town, and would not be dominated by a singular narrative. When presented with these comments, we inquired about the source of any concern; reiterated our aims to be neutral; explained the measures we were taking to engage a representative group of stakeholders; and encouraged our correspondent to urge others to participate in the project, in order to help us achieve our shared interest of yielding a balanced study. Whenever we were alerted to such concerns and had the opportunity to listen to and address them directly, stakeholders seemed to report that they were satisfied with our neutrality and our efforts to ensure balanced representation.

Community Focus Groups

Purpose

The Community Focus Groups provided a collaborative setting for residents from a variety of perspectives to explore together the processes of dialogue and communication in Sudbury – what is working, what is not, and what might be productive ways forward. Through a purposeful, facilitated process with clear ground rules, participants had opportunities to share their experiences, assessments, and ideas, and also learn about others’.

Level of Engagement and Representation of Stakeholder Groups

Forty-six (46) people participated in the six (6) Community Focus Groups that we conducted over the span of two weekends in March. The groups ranged in size, from 6-10 people. We gathered that the participants included newcomers to town; longtime residents; full-time workers; parents with young children; retirees; and seniors. Participants had varying levels of experience and knowledge about town government and dialogue: most had for some time been interested and engaged residents, a significant number were past and present committee or board members, and a few were newly interested and saw the focus groups as a way to learn more about the town.

Approach

Registration for Community Focus Groups was publicized through: direct email invitations to people to whom we had been referred but were unable to interview due to time constraints; emails forwarded on by our interviewees to their contacts; a notice printed in the local newspaper; the SCA Clergy’s congregational bulletins; our Sudbury Listening Project Facebook page; and the One

Sudbury Facebook group. Registrants were allocated to a focus group based on their availability, so as to build an optimal group size of 8-12 people per group, where possible.

Challenges faced

Email lapses: Unfortunately, due to the previously discussed limitations on our email system, our confirmation emails (notifying registrants of the session they had been assigned) often landed in registrants' spam folders. When we were alerted that this was happening, we shifted to calling and texting confirmations for as many participants as we could reach. However, a small number of registrants who did not receive our initial confirmation email and missed their assigned session were unable to reschedule for another session, so we did not have the benefit of their participation.

Survey

Purpose

The survey offered a chance for as many voices as possible to be heard, whether or not they joined a Community Focus Group or were interviewed. Through the survey, we hoped to understand the salience of the conflict in the town as well as the expectations that residents had for dialogue, government communication and civil discourse.

Representation and Level of Engagement

A total of 191 surveys were completed. Another 130 were partially completed. In this report, we draw on data from the completed surveys only. We adjusted the data for age, gender and political affiliation, so that it was representative of Sudbury's demography.

Approach

The survey was publicized through direct email invitations to people to whom we had been referred; emails forwarded on by our interviewees to their contacts; a notice printed in the local newspaper; the SCA Clergy's congregational bulletins; our Sudbury Listening Project Facebook page; and the One Sudbury Facebook group.

Limitations

Drop-out rate: The survey had a high drop-out rate, with 130 surveys only partially completed. Between the completed and partial surveys, there was no discernible demographic difference except their level of involvement in town government. The proportion of residents who had no or little active engagement in town matters was 50% higher among respondents in the partial sample than the completed sample. This suggests that those who are already involved in town issues and town government were more likely to be interested in contributing to the Sudbury Listening Project, perhaps because they are more directly involved in existing tensions.

Representativeness: We accept that the survey might have been more representative of those Sudbury residents who are more actively involved in town government issues: close to 80% of respondents described themselves as such – significantly higher than Sudbury's typical voter turnout of 23-28% for local government elections. We do not consider this to be a significant limitation insofar as we are aiming to explore the dimensions and sources of tension in Sudbury, which is more likely to implicate those who are already (or have been) actively engaged.

A SELECTED TOOLKIT

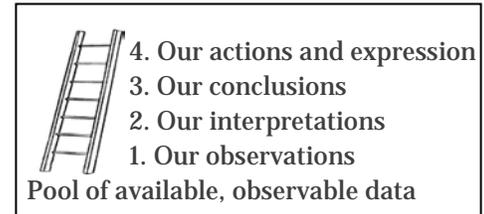
For Navigating Through Conflicts and Difficult Conversations

As you read about the various perspectives on Sudbury’s recent tensions, you are likely to encounter a perspective that you do not share or with which you find it challenging to empathize. This is normal and to be expected – complex and emotionally-charged situations are part of everyday life, and it is natural that it is difficult to look outside our own story and put ourselves in someone else’s shoes.

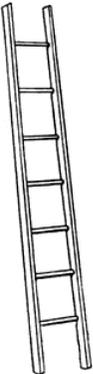
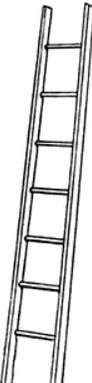
In this section, we provide a brief introduction to a selection of tools that can equip you to make sense of the conflicts that you have personally experienced, as well as those that you will read about in the following pages. We encourage you to use them as you read the rest of the report, as well as in your daily interactions with residents, volunteers and employees in town.

1. Ladder of Inference⁴

An important first step is to understand that we each see the world differently, and that we can arrive at different stories and conclusions even though we live in the same town. The ladder of inference is a helpful tool for understanding why this may be so. First, among all the **observable information and sensory details** in our experience, we take in or focus on only a subset of this data. Next, we **interpret** what we have observed, informed by our past experiences, personal convictions and assumptions. From there, we arrive at **conclusions** – about the event, the issue, the people. These conclusions go on to influence our **reactions and behavior**. At each rung of the ladder, there is the possibility that our stories may diverge.



In conflicts, it is crucial to “**walk down the ladder**” and evaluate how we arrived at our own conclusions, and how others arrived at theirs. When we are confronted with a claim or reaction that initially makes no sense to us, that presents us with an opportunity to learn and seek understanding. In this example, imagine that X tells Y, “When my children graduate, I’m going to leave Sudbury.” Consider how Y could get curious about X’s unvoiced experiences and walk down X’s ladder:

	<u>What X tells Y</u> : “When my children graduate, I’m going to leave Sudbury.”	<u>Y’s instinctive response</u> : “X must be a selfish person for thinking like that!”	
	<u>X’s conclusion</u> : “This town doesn’t feel welcoming enough for me to want to commit to it.”	<u>Y’s conclusion</u> : “Residents who ‘educate and evacuate’ are selfish and don’t care about contributing to Sudbury.”	
	<u>X’s interpretation</u> : “My feelings are hurt. I feel slighted. It’s as though my opinion doesn’t matter. I <i>have</i> given this thought.”	<u>Y’s interpretation</u> : “This trend of ‘educate and evacuate’ shows that people are in Sudbury for the schools but are not committed to the town.”	
	<u>X’s observation</u> : “My neighbor, Z, called me “ignorant” when I voiced my opinion on an issue I care about.”	<u>Y’s observation</u> : “A striking number of families leave Sudbury right after their children graduate.”	

⁴ Originally by Chris Argyris and Donald Schoen, explained in CHRIS ARGYRIS ET AL., ACTION SCIENCE 57-58 (1985).

While Y might be tempted to interpret X’s statement in line with *his own* experiences and standards of evaluation, a response that facilitates mutual understanding is one that focuses on inquiring into how X has arrived at his conclusion. To walk down X’s ladder, Y could ask:

- Why does X think that?
- What led X to that conclusion?
- What standards is X implicitly applying?
- What interests are influencing X?

By walking down X’s ladder, Y might uncover what unpleasant experiences X has had, how Y has interpreted those experiences, and what motivations and standards shape those interpretations.

2. “Don’t Assume They Meant it: Disentangle Impact from Intent”⁵

In conflicts, we often assume we know what others’ intentions are. These assumptions and theories are often **based on the impact** that their words and actions have had on us. This can be damaging on several levels: we may assume the worst of intent in others and be more generous to ourselves; we may equate those bad intentions to bad character; and alleging bad intentions tends to produce a posture of defensiveness on the other side.

Instead, we should distinguish three questions:⁶

Actions: What did the other person actually say or do?

Impact: What was the impact of this on me?

Assumption: Based on this impact, what assumption am I making about what the other person intended?

Our assumptions are merely hypotheses: we do not actually have access to what their intentions were. Having this clear in our minds, we can then **share the impact** the action/speech had on us, and **inquire about their intentions**. For example, let’s return to X in the scenario above:

<u>Interaction between Z and X</u>	<u>The impact it had on X</u>	<u>Assumptions X might be led to</u>
Z called X “ignorant” when X voiced his opinion about an issue he cares about.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I feel slighted. It’s as though my opinion doesn’t matter. I <i>have</i> given this thought.” • “Maybe I shouldn’t comment except when I already know what the other person thinks.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Z is overbearing.” • “Z thinks she knows it all and nobody else’s opinion matters.” • “Z is not open to having a discussion.”

Here’s one way the conversation could go if X shares the impact he felt and inquires about intent:

X: When you called me “ignorant”, it made me feel slighted. I felt as though my opinion didn’t matter, when actually I have given this issue some thought.

Z: I didn’t realize it came across that way. I wasn’t meaning that your opinion didn’t matter. I just thought things were more complicated than you made it sound.

X: So what complications do you think I’m missing?

Z: Well, there are a lot more stakeholders and costs that I think need to be factored in.....

⁵ DOUGLAS STONE ET AL., “DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS: HOW TO TALK ABOUT WHAT MATTERS MOST”, Chapter 3 (1999).

⁶ *Ibid.*

3. Closing the Gap: Espoused Theories-of-Action vs. Theories-in-Use⁷

We all espouse theories of how to act or respond in a given situation. One might say, “I try to look for common ground,” while another might say, “I can accept that you disagree with me as long as you’ve listened to what I have to say,” or still another, “I’m willing to admit and apologize when I’ve made a mistake, and learn from it.”

Insofar as our espoused theories-of-action are often rational, reasonable and noble, fewer conflicts might arise if we practiced such theories faithfully. However, most of us do not always act consistently with our espoused theories-of-action. We may even be unaware of our inconsistency. It is crucial that we become conscious of the gaps between how we describe our behavior and how we *actually* act. Our actual actions and responses are likely to follow a consistent pattern of their own – what negotiators call “theories-in-use”⁸ – implicit patterns or rules that govern how we behave, especially in stressful or conflict-ridden situations.

To close the gap, it is important that we observe ourselves over time, describe the situation and interaction specifically and concretely, and honestly examine the assumptions and beliefs underlying our responses. We can use the Ladder of Inference to do this. We should also recognize that, in a bid to protect our legitimate identity and reputational interests, we may be tempted to take steps that shield ourselves from an honest assessment of our responses.⁹

4. Moving from Positions to Interests

It is often helpful to distinguish:

Positions: A stated desire or outcome

Interests: A concern, value or purpose, often underlying any given position

Options: Various ways to meet an interest or set of interests

In conversations and deliberations, it is helpful to move from positions to interests. *Positions* tend to be all-or-nothing: either a particular outcome is met or not. For example, if I am checking out apartments to rent, I might tell my landlord that I want a top-floor apartment. To the landlord, it sounds like either I get a top-floor apartment or I’m not interested. However, there might be an underlying *interest* behind my position. For example, I might want to have lots of sunlight in my room. If I express my underlying interest rather than my position, that allows my landlord to work with me to find other *options* to meet my interests, even if my initial position cannot be met. Maybe a room with huge windows on the first floor is even better for me.

A useful way to uncover interests is to keep asking “Why?” questions, such as:

- *Why is it that this is important to me/the other party?*
- *Why not that instead? What would be wrong if we did that instead?*

In deliberations, it is important that we both represent our own interests well *and* gain a deeper understanding of the other person’s interests. Keep in mind that everyone has multiple interests at

⁷ CHRIS ARGYRIS, KNOWLEDGE FOR ACTION 50-52, 89 (1993); Scott R. Peppet & Michael L. Moffitt, *Learning How to Negotiate* in SCHNEIDER & HONEYMAN (ed.s), THE NEGOTIATOR’S FIELDBOOK (2006).

⁸ Argyris, KNOWLEDGE FOR ACTION, *supra* note 7.

⁹ For example, we may omit potentially embarrassing facts when describing the situation to someone else, take steps that discourage others from inquiring further about our response, and make unexplained attributions/evaluations: Argyris, *supra* note 7. This also protects us from confronting the gap between what we preach and how we act.

any given time, and that even people who seem united under a particular *position* might have different reasons for supporting it.

5. Common Core Interests

With regards to communication and process in particular, people tend to share **common core interests** that underlie the positions they take about the best way to do things. These include:

- Feeling heard
- Feeling valued as a member of the community
- Feeling appreciated or respected for what we do
- Having a sense of say in things that affect our lives

As you read this report, it might be helpful to keep some of these in mind, and to consider whether you can work together to meet these shared, underlying interests.

6. Identity Triggers¹⁰

Identity triggers are one reason we might find it difficult to listen to someone else and respond constructively. These are points in the conversation that make us question who we fundamentally are and what we value. Consider three identity questions that concern us most:

- Am I competent?
- Am I a good person?
- Am I valued?

If we interpret someone's comment or feedback as calling our competence, value and goodness into question, it can make it difficult for us to remain engaged effectively for the rest of the conversation. These "identity quakes" can often take us by surprise in a conversation, and we find ourselves needing to defend or hold on to some notion of who we are. In moving forward, it is important to be aware of when "identity quakes" are triggered. Awareness of these dynamics can help us evaluate how they are affecting our response, and whether that response best meets our interests.

7. Blame vs. Contribution¹¹

When things go wrong, it is tempting to assign blame. Underlying blame is an assumption that someone should be judged responsible according to some standard. But blame comes at a cost: it enhances mistrust, throws people into a defensive mode, and limits the ability of parties to look forward and work together to solve the problem.

Instead, it is often more helpful to adopt a "contribution" mindset. "Contribution" assumes that when things go wrong, it is the result of the interactions of many factors and many parties. To move forward, it is vital to map out the "contribution system" that led to things going wrong, and then take steps to change it. This encourages all parties to be open to learning and change.

As we have mentioned, the purpose of this report is not to look for blame, but rather to help begin mapping out the system of how tensions arise. We hope Sudbury residents keep this in mind while reading the report and moving forward to address communication and process issues in the town.

¹⁰STONE ET AL, DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS, *supra* note 5, Chapter 6.

¹¹ STONE ET AL, DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS, *supra* note 5, Chapter 4.

PART II: WHAT'S GOING ON?

A Big Picture

An Introduction to Multiple Perspectives on Recent Conflicts in Sudbury

Types of Conflicts in Sudbury

From the outset, we should state that residents have different perceptions of the nature and severity of conflict in Sudbury, depending on where they stand. Here we endeavor to provide a bird’s eye description of characteristics of the conflict based on what we have learned from town residents.

Strained interactions among town residents have played out in many different **settings**, including email exchanges, board and committee meetings, public comment at such meetings, online commentaries and forums, and in-person interactions. From what we heard, we would distinguish two types of strained interactions:

<i>Institutional Conflicts</i>	- Between residents and town government/staff - Tends to be on official, formal platforms and communications
<i>Informal, Interpersonal Conflicts</i>	- Between/among individuals and groups - Tends to be on unofficial, informal platforms and communications

Each of these conflicts has **multiple dimensions** to them, which tend to become entangled. Some unfortunate consequences of this entangling are that criticisms on the substance may seem like personal attacks, strong emotions inhibit productive discussion on the substance, and dissatisfaction with processes prompts resistance to substantive outcomes. Hence, we find it helpful to distinguish:

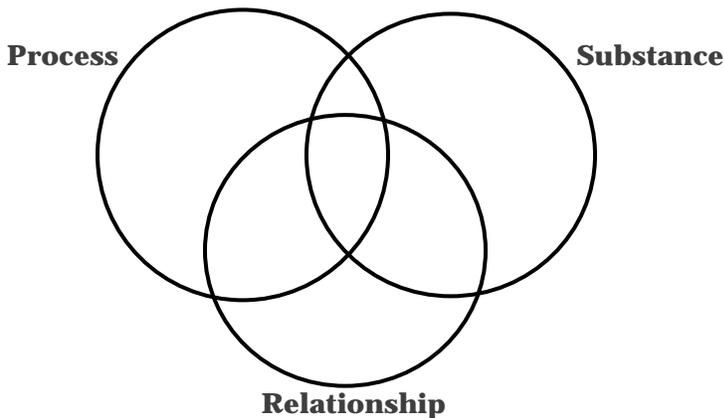


Figure 1: Dimensions of conflicts in Sudbury

Process: *How* the interaction happens, including features such as time, sequence, agenda, and participation.

Relationship: The human aspects of the interaction, including features such as emotions, deeply held values, backgrounds, viewpoints, perceptions and form of expression.

Substance: The substantive problem or issue being discussed on its merits.

In our report, we focus on process and relationship matters, but not the substance of policy debates.

Dominant features of strained interactions in Sudbury, as described by town residents, include: making things personal and issuing personal attacks; being unable and unwilling to work together and inclusively; profiling people and making assumptions about their views instead of actually listening to them; making assertions based on mistaken facts; being closed to alternative viewpoints/explanations; dismissive behavior, alleging bad intentions, and confrontational styles. In the following sections, we will unpack some of the experiences underlying these assertions.

Divisions in Sudbury

Many of those personally involved described the town as being divided into two camps. This division was described to us in a number of ways: “old guard vs. new guard”, “old Sudbury vs. new Sudbury”, “incumbents vs. newcomers”, “insiders vs. outsiders”. Some did not use such terms but singled out a group of people with whom they did not personally identify.

Our assessment is that there is more complexity in the actual views and affiliations of residents:

There are more than two distinct perspectives.

While, broadly speaking, we recognize the existence of two broad sides to the conflict, we found that the camps are not monolithic, but comprise people with a range of sympathies. As such, it is unhelpful to paint all of them with the same brush. Second, there are people whose views are balanced between both sides as well as people whose views do not align with a particular side. Finally, the division is porous, rather than a firm line.

Perceived affiliations frequently contradicted that individual's self-image and actual views.

Sometimes, people who were placed in one camp by the other side saw themselves as being in the middle, and actually held relatively neutral views. Sometimes, people saw themselves as fairly neutral, but actually had views that sounded characteristic of one side. Thus, we would distinguish:

- ***Self-image:*** How the individual perceives him/herself
- ***Perception:*** How that individual is perceived by others (on one side or the other)
- ***Actual positioning:*** The extent that that individual's viewpoint actually coincides with the characteristics of either side

It is possible for *all* three of these to be inconsistent at once.

Labels are not always factually descriptive of persons associated with either camp.

This was particularly so for political affiliation. While some thought that political affiliation was a salient characteristic for them personally, others reported that they had been characterized as “crazy liberals” when they were in fact moderate, or as strident conservatives when they were in fact liberal. Another example is that a few who were described as long-time “incumbents” were relatively new entrants to town government. Finally, the dynamic of inclusion and exclusion in the “insiders vs. outsiders” label is relative; people on both sides saw the other side as “insiders” of a group in which they were unwelcome.

One side is more diffuse in organization than the other.

We observed that due to social media, interactions at recreational events/activities, and friendship networks, one group seemed more internally well-connected than the other. People who found themselves on the outside of that group seemed more diffuse in their internal communication and organization and tended to identify themselves merely by distinguishing themselves from that group.

Many reported that profiling people into camps is a hindrance to respectful listening.

Several people shared with us that others tended to make assumptions about their viewpoints or intentions based on those with whom they tended to associate or the side to which they were perceived to belong. This made them feel like they were misunderstood and not given a chance to be heard on the merits of their views, which they found to be disrespectful of their individual personality and viewpoints.

Costs of the Conflict

It bears mentioning at the outset that the tensions that have arisen in Sudbury in recent years have neither involved nor deeply concerned the majority of Sudbury residents. Many interviewees estimated this disinterested group to be about 70-80% of the town, who are described as those occupied with work and/or family, and not personally and regularly invested in town issues.

There is, nonetheless, a significant group of town residents who are very concerned about the way that town government and residents treat and communicate with one another. Our completed surveys tended to come from people who described themselves as residents actively engaged in town matters or as past and present members of boards and committees – people personally in the thick of the tensions. We also encountered a number of residents who are not personally involved but express worry about the things they have observed.

For people in the thick of the conflict, the costs have been tremendous. Recent tensions have had a damaging impact on most persons involved. A common theme we heard was how strained the relationships in Sudbury are. Approximately 72% of survey respondents echoed this theme. Many shared stories of ruined friendships and of deliberately retreating from the Sudbury community socially. Both in the survey and in our interviews, many expressed deep frustration and agony at not being listened to, or at seeing things done in a way with which they intensely disagree. Many shared that they have been deeply hurt by words spoken of, and actions taken against, them and their families. Some expressed thinking about leaving the town because of the emotional scars and disappointments they feel. Nevertheless, minority of survey respondents also reported that they personally did not perceive any attendant costs to the town's tensions.

The town as a whole seems to have suffered an impact on citizen participation. We heard from residents who had been personally deterred from getting involved in town government, or whose friends had been so deterred. 84% of survey respondents observed this cost. In the words of one survey respondent, "I believe more citizens would be involved in local government if not for the threat of being verbally attacked online and in the media – why devote hours of volunteer time just to have your personal life made miserable?" Some also foresee that the antagonistic atmosphere of town governance would make it more difficult to recruit and retain town employees of good quality – consistent with 45% of residents surveyed. Some shared that it has adversely affected town government's operations, by making those involved feel overly cautious about their communications, fearing that they might be misunderstood or might inadvertently trigger certain people. Residents themselves have also been dissuaded from voicing their views, with 50% of respondents reporting that the recent tensions have made them reluctant to use certain platforms to air their opinions, and 41% acknowledging that it has made them self-censor, for fear of angering people.

Many also believe that it has made town government less effective. 82% of residents expressed that dialogue in Sudbury can be heated; 57% think this wastes time and 65% feel it is currently hindering the town from reaching the best outcomes. 62% of respondents felt that relationships are not strengthened by the way difficult town issues are handled.

In short, tensions in Sudbury appear to have had significant human costs, as well as repercussions for town participation and effectiveness.

REPRESENTATIVE NARRATIVES

As we heard Sudbury residents describe what was going on in town, we observed that many seemed to hold perspectives that cohered into a few consistent, repeated narratives. These narratives had formed over time as people observed a pattern in events or experiences, and thereby became more inclined to interpret other events as falling within that pattern.

Broadly speaking, we found that many residents approached the conflicts in Sudbury through the lenses of one of the four narratives we present below, although many also held perspectives that interwove more than one narrative:

Narrative A: “We’re concerned. How did the town get to this point?”

Narrative B: “We’re frustrated. We want to be heard, included and informed.”

Narrative C: “We feel hurt and bewildered. We wish the town could collaborate reasonably like we used to do.”

Narrative D: “We care, and we want to build understanding in town.”

Survey responses also reflected the coherence of these narratives. Our survey data shows that how residents responded to questions about each of the following topics reliably predicted their responses with respect to the other topics in this list: the sense that residents had an input or voice; perceptions of town transparency, inclusiveness, and fairness; beliefs about the intentions of people in town government; beliefs about the value of longtime service; and attitudes toward the town’s communication channels.

This confirms our qualitative data showing that residents’ views on these discrete topics were weaved into distinct narratives, which we will describe in more depth in this section, highlighting these components of each narrative:

Background: Who tends to hold this narrative; their view of how things used to be, and how things got started.

Experiences: How they have seen and felt events and dynamics.

Communication Platforms: How people who hold to this narrative view communication platforms in town.

Inferences: Conclusions that people who hold to this narrative have drawn about themselves, others, and the dynamics in Sudbury.

Core Interests: Values, hopes, and concerns underlying this narrative.

Narrative A: “We’re concerned. How did the town get to this point?”

Background:

We heard this narrative from residents who have been observers of town matters and recent tensions in Sudbury, but not necessarily personally involved in recent politics. In this narrative, the town has always had vigorous disagreement, but those involved “always liked each other” and their disagreements were “for the good of the town”. They also took pride in the progress that the town had made to streamline and improve the efficiency of many aspects of town government over the course of many years.

Experiences:

- **“We feel both saddened and embarrassed for our town.”** Those who held this narrative expressed being “heartbroken” by the hostility and anger they have seen in town. As they feel a deep connection to the Sudbury community, they find it disconcerting to witness what they have seen. They also expressed shame and embarrassment for what they saw as a failure to live up to the historical standards of the Sudbury community.
- **“We feel worried about our town’s future.”** They are concerned about some of the costs of recent conflict, including the departure of town employees. These residents voiced uncertainty about how things would turn out for the town.
- **“We feel confused by what’s going on.”** This narrative expressed surprise and bafflement about “angry people” in town. We often heard the question, “Why are they so angry?”

Communication Platforms:

- **“If we encounter an issue, we call the relevant official.”** They expressed comfort with accessing and communicating with relevant town leadership directly.
- **“There are structures and ways to make your issues heard.”** They found that, within existing structures, they have been successful in drawing attention to issues important to them and the town.

Inferences:

- **“They just must be a bunch of troublemakers.”** Drawing from what they could see in town media, adherents to this narrative attributed the recent conflicts in Sudbury to a handful of distinct personalities in town, who “caused trouble” as a way of getting what they wanted. Those who share this narrative do not feel they understand the reasons motivating these personalities.
- **“Maybe if we give in to the troublemakers, there will be peace.”** They hope that the worst may be over, and that these “troublemakers” would modify their confrontational affect if they were given what they wanted.

Core Interests:

- To live in a peaceful, comfortable and harmonious community.
- To maintain Sudbury’s image, reputation and track record, as a town that has a strong community, good schools, and historical roots for town governance.
- To maintain and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of town government.
- To see good people in government.

Narrative B: “We’re frustrated. We want to be heard, included and informed.”

Background:

We heard this narrative emerge from people who tended to have gotten involved in town politics only in recent years, though a few who share this narrative have been engaged in issues for much longer. They expressed great concern for Sudbury, as well as a strong desire to make a difference for the better. For many who shared this narrative, their more active involvement in town government was prompted by a personal trigger event, which tended to be a negative experience of interacting with town government, particularly because they did not feel like their concerns were heard and addressed. For some, the trigger event was the 2007 murder at the Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School and the conclusion of the 2009 Budget Review Taskforce. Others had similar feelings about events that occurred later, most notably the dismissal of a teacher from a Sudbury Public School.

Experiences:

- **“We feel shocked and frustrated.”** For many who shared this narrative, the impactful events that got them more engaged had left them with a sense of shock. Coming out of events that felt extraordinarily disconcerting and difficult, many of these residents felt a need for connection, grounding, and closure. They also felt a need for change as an assurance that such events would not happen again.
- **“We feel silenced.”** Often, those who shared this narrative felt frustrated and angry, sensing that they weren’t being heard or taken seriously. Many related stories in which they felt dismissed and disrespected by town leadership – because of officials’ body language or failure to give their concern/inquiry the attention they felt it merited. They also felt silenced because they saw restrictions being placed on citizens’ comments, in 2010 and 2014.
- **“We feel unheard and unwelcomed.”** Many felt that attempts to reach out, connect, and learn more information had been rebuffed. They also expressed frustration at having no say in meeting agendas, and at having decisions sprung on them apparently without earlier consultation.
- **“We see that people have been treated unequally.”** Many who shared this narrative perceived differences in the lengths of time that citizens got to speak and the responses made to their comments.

Communication Platforms:

- **“We are frustrated by how town leaders and town committees communicate.”** Many expressed frustration and sometimes hurt or shock about interactions they had had with town officials, both in person and through digital communications. Some conveyed they were worn out by having to force and demand engagement, accountability and information from town government, which they felt were not forthcoming otherwise. Some expressed annoyance that they found town leadership slow to acknowledge its shortcomings.
- **“We value the One Sudbury Facebook group.”** Many shared the feeling that One Sudbury was an extremely valuable platform for residents to connect, share concerns, and share information. Some also felt it was the only way to learn about important issues that would otherwise be hard to learn about. Those with this narrative tended to view interactions on One Sudbury as constructive, well-informed, and self-moderating.

Inferences:

- **“A small, exclusive, insular group is in power.”** As part of this narrative, people explained their experiences as the result of a town government that only drew from a small pool of participation. They see a pool that is composed of a small group of long-time leaders who were socially close. In their view, the group in power had been allowed to take over town politics because of a general lack of participation in town – caused mostly by the transient nature of Sudbury – and had incentive to stay in government because of indirect benefits to personal interests. As a result, they resisted new voices and participation to avoid diluting their power – “if they [this small group] sense that you’re questioning what they’re doing, they’ll shut you down.” Some attributed character traits such as arrogance to those in power. These inferences underlie the calls for transparency issued by people who adhere to this narrative, by which they mean receiving explanations and rationales that can help dispel their suspicions.
- **“They have ethical conflicts of interest.”** Under this narrative, people perceived personal interests and connections among people they saw as belonging to the small group, and took this as evidence of that small group having ethical “conflicts of interest”. To some, it was important that town leaders could make decisions on behalf of Sudbury as a whole, and these “conflicts of interest”, whether perceived or actual, undermined that ability to serve the public interest wholeheartedly.
- **“It’s all part of politics.”** Those who shared this narrative acknowledged that politics had become more passionate in recent years, but often viewed this intensity as a normal and natural phenomenon. They saw it as a necessary part of a historical process of societal change. Sometimes they saw their own actions as contributing to the heat, but viewed them as expected consequences of a sometimes-difficult transition as more new voices enter the scene. Some expressed hope that the process was returning to a more stable state.

Core Interests:

- To see people treated fairly and equally.
- To have their input respected; to be listened to, consulted and represented.
- To see new and diverse voices involved in town governance; to see town government able to handle disagreements.
- To be accepted and respected as part of the town.
- To be kept informed.
- To be able to trust town leaders. (This interest may manifest itself in calls for transparency.)
- To see good people in government – transparent, accessible and open to diverse views.

Narrative C: “We feel hurt and bewildered. We wish the town could collaborate reasonably like we used to do.”

Background:

We heard this narrative emerge from people who tended to have been active in town politics for a longer time, and often had had past or present experience in volunteer positions in town. They expressed a sense of deep commitment to Sudbury, and a willingness to work hard to do what was best for the town. Many said that they served because they intrinsically valued public service. As far as they remembered, things had worked very well in town in the past. Town government was able to productively engage citizens who disagreed or had different concerns; some cited the Strategic Planning Committee in the late 1990s as a great example of that process. In more recent years, they felt things had become unhealthy, hurtful, and unproductive.

Experiences:

- **“We feel personally maligned and bullied.”** Many felt that people were being personally targeted for “bullying” by a group of people. They felt hurt by how they saw themselves personally described, and by how others interacted with them directly. Some related stories in which they felt demonized and ostracized as members of the community. Many shared that this had hurt and embarrassed their families as well.
- **“We feel unappreciated.”** Many felt that their hard work for the town and their good contributions were being ignored and devalued.
- **“We are confused about how some perceive us.”** Many with this narrative reported knowing that they were seen as part of a small, exclusive group with potential ethical conflicts of interest. However, they expressed concern and confusion about these characterizations, as they felt they had served as honestly and openly as they could. They felt they had done their best to consistently engage with citizens and take their input on board.
- **“We feel frustrated our words and actions are misunderstood.”** This narrative included a deep sense of frustration that their attempts to communicate and resolve differences wound up not going anywhere. Some felt rebuffed whenever they tried to reach out to those with different views. Many found that others in the community had understood and related their words differently from what they had meant to say, which has made them more cautious in their communications.

Communication Platforms:

- **“The town’s platforms for engaging with citizens are working well.”** Many felt that there were adequate feedback channels and that these were well-used by citizens. They thought that town officials and staff work very hard to be present in the community and give citizens airtime.
- **“For difficult issues, one-on-one, in-person, private conversations are best.”** Many expressed a strong discomfort with public tension, preferring to invite deeper conversation in more intimate settings.

Inferences:

- **“Issues and town governance are more complicated than they seem.”** Those who shared this narrative often concluded that many people did not understand or ignored the complexity of town issues, instead presenting easy solutions to hard problems. Some saw people with other perspectives as motivated by bias, and thus they did not feel able to rely on

those people to represent the interests of the town. They saw others as not appreciating or being willing to undertake the hard work that town governance requires, such as building a plan, garnering consensus, and doing thorough research.

- **“They have no basis for saying they are not heard.”** Because many with this narrative felt town government has tried their best to engage in dialogue and deliberation within the constraints placed on them by practicality and the law, they felt that there was little basis in people saying they were not being heard. They concluded that those people must conflate not being heard with not getting their way.
- **“They are using deliberate tactics to achieve their political aims.”** Many who shared this narrative concluded that expressions of anger and hostility were intentional tactics to intimidate them away from participation in government. For example, they saw events as being intentionally twisted and misrepresented. For some, this strengthened a resolve not to be “bullied” away from town politics.
- **“It’s just a vocal minority that’s causing trouble.”** Many thought that only a handful of people were at the root of the tensions, attributing them to their personalities or personal agendas.

Core Interests:

- To be respected.
- To be appreciated for their contributions to the town.
- To have past hurts healed.
- To feel safe when speaking up, serving, and volunteering; to not feel vulnerable to attack.
- To live in a peaceful, comfortable and harmonious community.
- To be able to trust others in town.
- To preserve what is good about the town.
- To maintain and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of town governance.
- To see good people in government – competent, honest, civic-minded.

Narrative D: “We care and we want to build understanding in town.”

Background:

We heard this narrative from those who were often labeled as belonging to either the “new guard” or the “old guard”, but who identified themselves as neither. These people were sympathetic to parts from both Narrative B and Narrative C.

Experiences:

- **“We don’t match the labels people put on us.”** Many with this narrative did not put too much weight on the perceived divisions in Sudbury, especially because they saw themselves being labeled by others in ways that didn’t match how they thought of themselves.
- **“We find merit in many perspectives.”** Many seemed to appreciate the substance of what people were saying, even if they did not agree with how it was said. They reported that they considered the views of people who saw them as part of an opposing camp.
- **“We feel dismayed at what people on all sides have experienced.”** They feel that recent tensions have caused damage to officials, staff and lay residents on all sides. They see the pressure placed on town leadership and why they might feel cornered; they also see the exasperation of those raising concerns and queries.

Communication Platforms:

- **“Communication through online social media is ineffective.”** Some with this narrative had experience trying to communicate through online social media, but they realized that their attempts to communicate online were ineffective. Some felt the subject of personal attacks, but they did not seem to be too personally affected.
- **“The town’s platforms for engagement are working, but have been plagued recently by hostile exchanges and can be improved.”** They feel that existing platforms are well-used and serve their purposes, but that more confrontational personalities have used them antagonistically. They do see room to adjust existing platforms to better meet residents’ needs.

Inferences:

- **“People in town have legitimate concerns.”** Those with this narrative felt that there were many legitimate concerns being raised, and that town government could be improved in many ways.
- **“However, people have unproductive ways of raising concerns.”** Those with this narrative thought that many residents may have legitimate concerns to raise, but *how* some of raise these concerns is unproductive or even destructive. When facing an adversarial stance, leadership may clam up, which in turn sends a negative message to those who are looking for transparency. When leadership does give information, adversarial residents believe that an aggressive approach is the only way to get that information.

Core Interests:

- To see people communicate more effectively, to help one another listen to each other.
- To see collaboration, to get things done, to take up good ideas.
- To be listened to and respected as individuals.
- To see good people in government.

DEVELOPMENT OF TENSIONS

Multiple Perspectives on Salient Events

The narratives that residents hold have developed over time, shaped by the various ways in which they view and experience particular events and interactions in town. These narratives also, in turn, become the lenses through which residents interpret events. As we spoke to residents, we found that there were many key events that they repeatedly identified as markers in the heightening of tensions and entrenchment of residents' positions. Naturally, individual residents may recall incidents significant to them personally that have shaped their own perspectives, as many shared with us. Without downplaying the impact of these individual experiences, we focus here on events that were salient for the town as a whole. We share what we heard about these events, presenting the observations that the respective perspectives focused on, the inferences they drew, and the impact that these events had on them and their opinions about other people in the town.

One way to make sense of the coexistence of different perspectives is to recognize that we each see a picture that is clear and coherent to us. The picture on the right is a familiar illustration of this: some see in it a young woman, while others see an old woman. Actually, *both* are depicted. In a similar way, our view can be coherent, logical and clear to us, while someone else can have a completely different view that is coherent, logical and clear to them. Simply going back and forth about whether this picture depicts a young or old woman is unhelpful unless we begin to ask why we each see what we see. Our hope is that relating these perspectives can help residents better understand the roots of these different viewpoints, as we attempt to lay out some of the critical events and reactions that residents shared.



Note: When sharing one perspective, we report from the point of view of the people who hold that perspective. **The perspectives we present are synthesized accounts from multiple individuals, not direct quotes from any individual. Any omissions and errors are inadvertent. We do not present any perspectives as truth, but only as perceptions and authentic experiences that have been related to us.**

Response to the Murder at Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School (2007)

In 2007, a student was murdered at the school by another student. This is still remembered as a tragedy that the community is healing from or seeking answers to. While most residents did not identify this as the start to the tensions in Sudbury, a significant number raised it as an incident that was handled in a way that troubled them – a building block for what they observed later on.

One Perspective:

“The murder was truly a shock and a tragedy for all. But some people just didn’t get that, and they harassed the school committee with unreasonable demands like armed guards, which we just didn’t need as we were all trying to heal.”

Another Perspective:

“The murder was a shock and a tragedy for all of us, and deeply troubling. We were hoping for our community never to have to experience something like this again, so we wanted to adopt reasonable measures that would prevent such occurrences. We just wanted some guidance from the schools. It didn’t seem like some accountability was too much to ask for, but the school leadership didn’t seem interested in offering any. They seemed to be closing up to public scrutiny. The committee that was formed to investigate seemed like they didn’t really want this job – we could tell by their body language and by the way they treated those who testified.”

Another Perspective:

“In a moment of tragedy, a lot of us simply wanted to come together and connect, and to feel that our leaders were there with us as a community. We wanted to heal. But they were aloof and seemed to be holding the whole town at a distance. That left us feeling abandoned and hurt.”

Budget Review Taskforce (2007–2009)

An overwhelming number of interviewees traced the beginnings of recent tensions to the Budget Review Taskforce. For the unfamiliar, this was a committee put together by the then Board of Selectmen, comprising lay residents who had interest/experience in finance and who wished to contribute to the town, to review the town budget and make recommendations. We encountered strikingly different accounts of what happened and its aftermath.

One Perspective:

“The taskforce worked really hard on reviewing the town budget for a long time. When it produced its report, town committees dismissed it, didn’t take it seriously, and showed no respect for their efforts. This made us feel that the incumbents were arrogant, closed to new views, and a small group of insiders interested in running the town their own way. We realized that in order for us to be taken seriously, we had to step up our formal political participation and leadership.”

Another Perspective:

“It was a good idea to involve more citizens. But it fell apart. Meetings were screaming matches. People were uninterested in the facts and the basis for existing practices. There was not even agreement on the factual basis for the report. We thought committees were giving the recommendations true consideration. We were confused about why some people were upset about the committees’ responses.”

Another Perspective:

“The municipal budget is mind-bogglingly complex. The taskforce was comprised of people who had no experience with town budgets. The suggestions looked good on paper, but they would be unworkable in practice or would require significant bureaucratic negotiation/effort to implement. Moreover, the report felt like an indictment on town government, rather than constructive suggestions; that might have made town government feel defensive.”

Another Perspective:

“We expected the report to keep to its mandate of cutting costs and raising revenue in a way that did not impact present delivery of services. The taskforce became overtaken by a political agenda, a departure from the non-partisan nature of our local government. Its report read like a fiscally conservative roadmap for the town and would call for a dramatic drop in service delivery. Out of that emerged new leaders for a new agenda to take over the town under their political roadmap.”

Elections (2009-2010)

The elections that followed in the subsequent years struck town residents as markedly different from previous elections.

One Perspective:

“Out of the Budget Review Taskforce emerged some new leaders of the ‘tax revolt’ camp, who contested the next elections. This period was when elections were noticeably more contested and very nasty. People targeted incumbents very personally and said very awful things about them and their families. People misrepresented information and presented easy, attractive solutions, when the real decision-making is much more complex. It felt as though they were so desperate to get elected, they would do and say anything. Not many of them won. Among those that did, we found that many didn’t deliver on their campaign promises, perhaps because it is not as easy as it had sounded.”

Another Perspective:

“Clearly, many people want change. It was unprecedented in Sudbury when a new candidate defeated an incumbent Selectman in 2010, because you *never* defeat an incumbent. Other new people also got elected to the school committees.”

Another Perspective:

“Because of how the Budget Review Taskforce was so undervalued and because we personally have had unsatisfactory experiences interacting with committees as regular citizens, we felt the need for more new voices to enter town government, as counterweights to the incumbents. A slew of fresh faces contested this election. This was an expression of our dissatisfaction with the incumbent government. Many of the new faces have lots to contribute to the town and have good ideas. It was very telling, from how hard the incumbents contested the elections, how desperate they were to keep these new voices out of the way.”

Response to Dismissal of a Sudbury Public School Teacher (2012)

In 2012, when SPS dismissed a longtime teacher, it was a controversial decision that drew much public reaction.

One Perspective:

“When a teacher was dismissed, it was so abrupt, and we wanted some kind of direction and reassurance from our schools about their policies. But they wouldn’t speak with us and hear our questions, which frustrated and angered us. They stonewalled our attempts to connect and left us feeling abandoned.”

Another Perspective:

“School officials had their hands tied in terms of what they could disclose, and so there was nothing they could really say. When, all of a sudden, a bunch of angry people showed up at a school committee meeting, we understand why they might have felt threatened and not known how to respond. Every day the school committee was getting flak in the press – it was horrible for them.”

Another Perspective:

“By now, it was clear that this was just another example of town leadership covering up illegitimate choices and disrespecting taxpayers who deserve to know more. We can accept if some personnel matters cannot be disclosed, but we were not helped to understand that the process and decision were fair and right.”

“Lavendergate” / Town Meeting / Appointment of BOS Chairman (2012)

At Town Meeting in May 2012, the Board of Selectmen (then a board of three) appointed its Chairman for the next year. The appointment was by a vote and turned out to be contentious. After Town Meeting, some town officials had a gathering in the restaurant, Lavender, which became controversial because of the time it ended (relative to liquor licensing hours), the involvement of policemen in dispersing the gathering, and a car crash by one town employee. Residents who had concerns brought them up on an online page created to discuss this incident. The incident was also discussed at a Board of Selectmen meeting in June.

One Perspective:

“Lavendergate was an event that really broke through to the wider town, not just to those who typically keep themselves abreast of town government. It prompted more people to get involved in town government. Many of us were infuriated and shocked that such things could happen. To us, the way those involved had acted seemed arrogant, like they were abusing the power they had held for a long time. The whole process of finding out what happened and holding them accountable was more difficult than it had to be – everything was hushed up, and those involved seemed evasive. It was great when a page was created so that we could actually talk about our reactions to the Lavender incident and what we had found out.”

Another Perspective:

“We would set Lavendergate in the context of the wider power struggle in town, because it coincided with a contentious appointment of the Chairman of the Board of Selectmen, and the loud reactions to Lavendergate seemed to focus on discrediting the officials involved. To us, the way that other residents humiliated and attacked officials came across as vindictive and politically motivated. It made it difficult for us to trust them.”

Another Perspective:

“We don’t understand why Lavendergate was blown out of proportion. While it’s true that the Selectmen are the liquor licensers for the town, we doubt that it was really a show of bad character on their part. The town employee who crashed her car might have exercised poor judgment that night, but it’s unfair to paint everyone with the same brush. We felt embarrassed for the two Selectmen who were publicly shamed at the Board meeting. We felt sorry that the town employee involved in the crash was disproportionately demonized and humiliated by people in town. If not for them, we don’t think she would have been given a jail term. It was painful, distressing and disruptive for her and her family.”

Another Perspective:

“Going by the Board of Selectmen’s tradition of rotating chairs, it was unfair that the Selectman whose turn it was to be appointed Chair that year got passed over. It was a departure from tradition. We see this as part of wider attempts to exclude some members of town government. The Lavendergate fiasco seemed to demonstrate that too: while some said it was simply a gathering to celebrate a successful Town Meeting, it appeared more like an exclusive gathering because not all town officials and Selectmen were invited.”

Expanding the Board of Selectmen from Three to Five (2013)

Following Lavendergate, a proposal was put forward to expand the Board of Selectmen to five sitting members. This was eventually passed by the town.

One Perspective:

“Though we were not active in creating the proposal, we thought it was a good thing for the town, to include more voices by expanding the board. The minority thought that by expanding the Board from three to five, they would get more people on their side onto the Board, but as the elections turned out, they didn’t.”

Another Perspective:

“We saw wide support for the move from Three to Five. We felt that it reflected an awakening of pockets of the town after Lavendergate. We were offended by how strenuously others fought the change – all the way to Beacon Hill. To us, that showed their zeal to keep power within a small, insular group, as well as their resistance to greater participation and open discussion of diverse views. We felt triumphant when it got passed, and were hopeful that it would enable us to increase participation and include more diverse viewpoints.”

Anonymous Postings (up to ~2013)

Prior to 2012 or 2013, Sudbury Town Crier and Sudbury Patch¹² allowed anonymous online comments to be made. Anonymity was discontinued in 2012 or 2013.

Dominant Perspective:

Almost everyone we heard from decried the anonymous online comments on the Patch and the Town Crier, reflecting that they were extremely negative and nasty, to the point of demonizing people. There was a predominant sense that this was a low point for the town and that it is a good thing for the town that anonymous commentary has been discontinued and is no longer possible.

Below are some more discreet facets of people’s perspectives on these anonymous postings.

Additional Perspective:

“The worst of the tensions is over now that the anonymous online commentary is gone. Nothing happening now gets close to the vitriol that was online. So, we are hopeful that things will get better. Perhaps some still carry baggage from that period of time, but we feel we should look forward and not be held back by what happened in the past.”

Additional Perspective:

“Having been targeted by nasty online comments, we feel extremely hurt. It’s made us want to retreat from the community. We find ourselves unable to trust those that we think were behind those comments, or to even maintain any relationship with them. People say the town should move on, but it’s hard to move on and forget when the scars run so deep.”

¹² There may have been more online pages that had active anonymous commentary sections in the past. We refer to the main ones that we heard about most frequently during our engagements with residents.

Meeting to Appoint Chairman of Board of Selectmen (2014)

Many residents remember this meeting as representative of an antagonistic climate in Sudbury. Things got heated when the Selectmen were explaining the reasons for their nominations. The appointment was by a vote and turned out to be contentious again.

One Perspective:

“This was a really embarrassing night for the town. We had adults just going at each other like children would. The Selectmen meetings have become the talk of the town. It’s dysfunctional.”

Another Perspective:

“Some awful things were said that night. It was yet another time that the other Selectmen ganged up on one member. This Selectman was personally attacked in public and had to defend himself. This was also the second time that he got passed over as Chairman. We see that he has been systemically excluded: his goals were not included by the Board of Selectmen, and his attempts to put things on the agenda have been blocked. Those of us who voted for him feel like we are being not included and our views and priorities are not valued.”

Another Perspective:

“We get why the acting Chairman called for nominations and then reasons for and against – it was a process that allowed deliberation, to avoid what happened the last time when people got upset that the Chairman was not appointed in accordance with the traditional rotation. But it turned into a fight and it’s hard to tell which of them went on longer than they should have!”

Another Perspective:

“After the heated exchange over the appointment of the next Chairman, we felt embarrassed for the Selectman who found toilets placed on his lawn the next morning. It seemed to us like a retaliation and we were ashamed that people in our town might do something like that.”

Another Perspective:

“We didn’t understand why people reacted so strongly to the “toilet incident”. Other people involved in town government have suffered property damage in the past, but have kept their dismay to themselves.”

Open Meeting Law Complaints (2014-15)

In 2014-15, residents filed multiple complaints of violations of the Open Meeting Law against members of the Board of Selectmen. The Attorney General has ruled some as violations.

One Perspective:

“The Open Meeting Law is notoriously easy to violate. There’s a reason why the state legislature has exempted itself from it. We don’t see any ill intent in what the Selectmen did. But now that the legal position is clearer, let’s move forward.”

Another Perspective:

“The Selectmen got a chance to address it – by which we mean addressing it publicly at a BOS meeting – before the official complaint was filed, but they refused to. It’s a legitimate expectation that our officials should be asked to comply with the law. The AG ruled that the citizens were right! That means it’s not a small matter. The Selectmen involved didn’t seem particularly remorseful.”

Another Perspective:

“The complaints come across as a personal attack on officials, as an attempt to discredit and embarrass them. They seem to be motivated by anger. We don’t understand why it could not have been brought up informally and privately to the Selectmen first, to give them a chance to have a conversation with those residents about it. Some of us suspect it was blown up to sway the elections.”

Another Perspective:

“These complaints are a cry that we cannot be heard. We have to go to such lengths to force an issue on our officials and to get them to do what they should be doing.”

Having conveyed how salient events in town have been interpreted in markedly different ways, we turn in the next section to detail how residents, again viewing things through different lenses, have divergent perspectives on avenues of communication in town.

COMMUNICATION PLATFORMS

The divergent perspectives on town engagements extended to residents’ reviews of existing avenues of communication. Here, we review what residents shared that they value and are concerned about with regard to existing platforms, as users or observers. We use quote marks to indicate the perspectives of various people. **Note that the comments are not direct quotations from any individual, but rather are representative of what we have heard from various people.**

PLATFORMS	WHAT VARIOUS PEOPLE VALUED	CONCERNS VARIOUS PEOPLE RAISED
<p><i>Town Meeting</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “It inspires pride because it’s the longest running Town Meeting in the nation.” • “It brings the town together.” • “Good projects get passed by the town.” • “It is a lot more efficient than 20 years ago.” • “Town staff members make it a point to follow up on questions from Town Meeting, and they email answers.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “It has a low participation rate, out of the whole population.” • “It is too long.” • “It is boring.” • “It feels like a waste of time.” • “It is inconvenient to attend every session.” • “Long agenda makes it difficult to gauge when you should attend to hear an issue you’re interested in.” • “Time constraints make it difficult to give everyone a chance to speak.” • “Questions at Town Meeting are not always addressed.” • “Strong disagreements by board and committee members are sprung on their own board/committee at Town Meeting, rather than expressed early on.” • “Town Meetings are large, so it is intimidating to voice one’s opinion there.”
<p><i>Our Observations:</i> 53% of survey respondents reported using Town Meeting to voice their opinion – the highest participation among the official platforms. Nevertheless, there exist genuine practical obstacles to attendance and wide participation due to its length, especially for working adults with children. Additionally, there seems to be a tension between efficiency of process and granting all who wish to speak a chance to speak. Since this tension is inherent to any process, the moderator must seen as fair and respectful when deciding who speaks.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">➔ For recommendations on Town Meeting, see Section 11: Recommendations 3E and 3F.</p>		

PLATFORMS	WHAT VARIOUS PEOPLE VALUED	CONCERNS VARIOUS PEOPLE RAISED
<p>Board of Selectmen (BOS) Meetings, Hearings, Citizen's Comments, Emails/Calls to them, Office Hours</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Selectmen are available by email and calls." • "Selectmen offer to meet and discuss residents' questions and issues." • "BOS packets are all uploaded online." • "Citizens' comment section has resumed after a period when it was not in use." 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Public BOS meetings can be unproductive, confrontational and personal." • "Recently the Selectmen tried to constrain a resident's airtime during citizens' comments. This was reminiscent of past constraints on citizens' comments, when the board seemed to have discontinued the process for signing up to make a comment." • "Public comment is a courtesy to the public (not legally required), so it should not be misused by hogging time or expressing things unrelated to that board's business." • "Speaking time is unequally and unfairly allocated to different citizens." • "Agenda is not set through an open, deliberative or collaborative process with input from citizens or other Selectmen." • "There is no follow-up from the Board to citizens' comments." • The existence of Office Hours is relatively unknown to residents.
<p><i>Our Observations:</i> Judging from the survey, emails or calls to Selectmen seem to be an effective mode of making one's concerns and views known, with 43% having used this channel and many singling this out in their comments. As for Board of Selectmen meetings, there appear to be differing expectations and understandings of its process. For example, regarding the role of public comment at the meeting, residents seem to have different expectations of what responses to comments are sufficient or appropriate (and allowed under the Open Meeting Law), what process for decision-making among Board members is best, and what issues are suited to this forum. A mismatch between expectations and actual delivery/usage seems to be a significant cause of negative sentiments about the way the meeting is run.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">→ For recommendations for the BOS, see Section 11: Recommendations 2A, 2B, and 2C.</p>		

PLATFORMS	WHAT VARIOUS PEOPLE VALUED	CONCERNS VARIOUS PEOPLE RAISED
<p>Other Committees/Boards Meetings, Hearings, Emails</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “The public can attend and comment at any meeting--the channel is open.” • “Direct calls to the relevant committee or official are a good way to give feedback or raise a concern.” • “Some school committee members reported finding their meetings to be productive, collaborative, and open to diverse viewpoints.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “It is inconvenient to attend the many committee meetings on various nights.” • “Very few members of the public actually attend and use the opportunity to learn about deliberations and make comments.” • “Some on committees are more cautious about the Open Meeting Law than others.” • “Some comments are viewed automatically with suspicion.” • “Confrontational exchanges happen at some meetings during the comments section.” • There have been occasions about which residents reported dissatisfaction with committees’ responses to their inquiries during meetings (e.g. in the aftermath of the murder at Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School, after the dismissal of a teacher in 2012). • “Some on committees have experienced yelling and aggressive body language from other committee members or members of the public who attend.”
<p>Our Observations: We do not have sufficient data about committee/board meetings across the town to make a reliable assessment of how well their processes are functioning. However we have heard some reports of confrontational exchanges during the comments sections, which seem typically to be left to the chairperson to moderate. Notably, anecdotal data from interviewees and focus group participants suggests that regular citizen attendance at these meetings appears to be low, which could be due to the timing of meetings, but seems to be inconsistent with the strong desire that citizens expressed to be heard and to contribute input. Yet, a good number (36%) of survey respondents reported having used public comment at committee meetings to share their opinion at some point. It is unclear if they engage regularly or only when a significant event or issue occurs.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">➔ For recommendations for Boards/Committees, see Section 11: Recommendation 6.</p>		

PLATFORMS	WHAT VARIOUS PEOPLE VALUED	CONCERNS VARIOUS PEOPLE RAISED
<p>Town Staff Communications Websites, Newsletters, Forums, Emails, Calls, Drop-ins</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Issue-specific forums (e.g. rail trail forum) work well, and generate a good amount of public debate.” • “Dropping in at the town office for a one-on-one meeting, or making a call to town employees is a quick and easy way to get a question answered or issue resolved, while fostering human connection between town staff and residents.” • “Some departments maintain very active websites stocked with all their memos and documents.” • “Some residents expressed satisfaction with these communications and reported feeling heard.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “The website does not post all the information that some residents want to access.” • “Very few people drop in to see town employees about their issues or concerns. The strongest critics of town government do not do so.” • “Responding to residents’ questions over email places time pressure on town employees. There is no designated information officer.” • “Town tries to engage people throughout a project, from early on, but often interest only peaks before the conclusion or when it interferes with people personally.” • “Town tends to flood information; not sufficiently concise.” • “Communications tend to highlight strengths and hide weaknesses, rather than address them.” • “Town government needs to grapple with new forms of media apart from more traditional, websites, emails and in-person meetings.” • “It is difficult to communicate to citizens the full complexities of town governance.” • “There is interest in a Town Forum where citizens can decide the agenda for discussion.”
	<p>Our Observations: There appears to have been a shift in the channels through which citizens prefer to engage with town staff, creating a possible mismatch between what town staff can offer and what citizens expect. While some town employees and residents prefer traditional methods of in-person engagement, many residents have been dealing with them electronically from a distance, which means that residents and town staff may not get to know one another personally. Also, there is a tension between town employees’ desire to respond to inquiries and their resource/time constraints. Moreover, town government’s absence on social media seems to be hampering its ability to reach some segments of the town with information. While the town’s website is stocked with information, it is unclear how much of it is read and how accessible it is to the reader.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">➔ For recommendations on Town Staff Communications, see Section 11: Recommendations 3A, 3B, 3C, and 3D.</p>	

PLATFORMS	WHAT VARIOUS PEOPLE VALUED	CONCERNS VARIOUS PEOPLE RAISED
<p>One Sudbury Facebook group</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “It keeps people informed about what’s going on in Sudbury.” • “It is a platform for Sudbury residents to have dialogue.” • “Though some don’t actively participate, they can follow it to learn of others’ views.” • “It feels like a community.” • “It is an open forum, where anyone is welcome to comment.” • “Social media is a convenient and accessible channel for many to receive their news.” • “People can only participate with their names, not anonymously, so they communicate more responsibly.” • “Anyone can join it – it’s ‘closed’ only in that you have to request to join, so that advertisers and spam postings are kept out of it.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Only a small portion of its membership is actually active in posting and commenting.” • “It feels like an ‘echo chamber’. Much of the information there is inaccurate.” • “If one is not on Facebook, one cannot see what is going on there or be informed about One Sudbury events like the recent forum it organized.” • “If one expresses a view that goes against the grain of the more vocal members of the group, one receives a deluge of aggressive responses.” • “If one is viewed as part of an ‘opposing camp’, one’s comments are not given a fair hearing.” • “Some do not wish to join because they view it as partisan or headed by one faction in town.” • “Some comments are expressed in a hostile way. In one notable case, when the point was reframed in a calmer manner, it got across more effectively.” • “People don’t call out unproductive comments.” • “Though committee members wish to correct misinformation online, they feel unauthorized to speak on behalf of the whole committee.”
<p>Our Observations: Reviews of the utility, hospitality and neutrality of the platform were very polarized. While it serves the needs of many residents very well, it lacks the trust of many others. While One Sudbury has 800+ members, it appears that the level of active participation on social media could be relatively low – only 20.6% of survey respondents had used social media to voice their opinion about town issues, and 26% found it a helpful resource in understanding town matters. At the same time, between 35-37% of respondents found social media unhelpful in understanding town matters or making connections to others in the town. Nonetheless, as social media is increasingly an indispensable feature of community interaction especially among the younger generations, the town would benefit from a social media platform that is trusted by all sides.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">➔ For recommendations on Facebook forums for town participation, see Section 11: Recommendation 5A.</p>		

PLATFORMS	WHAT VARIOUS PEOPLE VALUED	CONCERNS VARIOUS PEOPLE RAISED
<p>Other Online Media Comments sections on Town Crier and Sudbury Patch</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “The worst is over now that anonymous commentary is no longer allowed; there is hope that people have learned and moved on from this phase.” • “In its previous format before it restructured, the Patch was an alternative source of media with a harder take on issues in Sudbury.” • “Editorials in the Town Crier are a way of sharing one’s opinion.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Anonymous comments were extremely nasty. Those serving on committees/boards and as employees felt extremely hurt, discouraged, and demonized by what felt like attacks on themselves and their families, by calls for their dismissal, and by a lack of appreciation for their efforts.” • “It is difficult to forget and move on because the scars run deep.” • “Relationships remain strained as a result: there is distrust of some residents due to suspicions about who were behind those comments.” • “Some online comments are easy to address in substance, but town government finds it unconstructive to engage there. Town staff find it too time-consuming, and are wary of using unofficial platforms to make informal representations that people might construe as promises or guarantees.”
	<p>Our Observations: There is a clear consensus that anonymous commentary was extremely negative and harmful to the town. Many expressed hopes that things will get better now that Sudbury is past the anonymous commentary. Nonetheless, there is a need to acknowledge the hurt caused by that period in Sudbury’s recent history, as those who personally bore the brunt of those comments remain bruised and worn out.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">➔ For recommendations on online media, see Section 11: Recommendations 5A and 5B.</p>	

Cross-cutting observations

These are our observations on issues applicable across the whole range of platforms.

Direct, one-on-one communication seems most common among more engaged residents

Judging from the survey, 45-49% of residents would, at least sometimes, express their opinions or concerns on town issues directly to the relevant Selectmen, committee or town employee, in one-to-one meetings, phone calls or emails. However, a few expressed confusion about who would be the appropriate official or committee to contact in a given situation.

The most common mode of engaging with one another about town matters happens in informal conversations with friends, with 82% of residents being comfortable doing this.

People are self-censoring

A number of people expressed reluctance to speak up online or in a public meeting because they feared being personally attacked or ridiculed (whether by officials or by other residents). For instance, one respondent said, “You have to be careful what to say to whom, or you can be ganged up on.” Another expressed being “afraid to comment publicly and risk verbal attacks that are personally directed.” This is consistent with what we heard in our interviews, about people deciding to “lie low, keep [their] heads down” to avoid a backlash.

Other reasons (besides self-censorship) that residents gave for not utilizing the existing platforms were that they lack interest, have not encountered issues to raise, or find it intimidating to speak in front of many people.

Open Meeting Law

Overall, it seems like the Open Meeting Law is a double-edged sword. All acknowledge that it is well-intentioned and is meant to protect citizens and their right to open and accountable government. For that reason, both residents and officials seemed keen to observe the Open Meeting Law and to see that all boards and committees do so. Particularly in a climate where a segment of Sudbury’s population is less trusting of government, residents are more willing to reach for the Open Meeting Law to protect themselves.

At the same time, many with experience on committees and boards shared that they often feel like their hands are tied by the Open Meeting Law. While they do wish to observe the law, in their view it can prevent some conversations that need to happen from happening. It can also hinder boards and committees from responding to citizens’ input immediately. They shared that it is extremely difficult for a group to reach consensus in a fully public meeting where the heated and emotional debates needed for consensus and internal negotiation are on public display. Sometimes cited was the fact that the Massachusetts legislature has exempted itself from being bound by the Open Meeting Law, demonstrating the pragmatic need for discourse to be taken “offline” sometimes, not out of a malicious intent but because it enables candid deliberation.

Freedom of Information Requests

Similarly, while everyone seemed to agree that the Freedom of Information Act is important to protect citizens and that it supports open and accountable government, and while those currently in town government shared with us that they were willing to share information and answer inquiries from residents, the manner in which the requests are made can put officials and employees in a defensive position. From the point of view of the recipient, the requests can feel like an attack on them because it can feel like residents are using the force of the law to coerce officials to release information, rather than engaging with them personally about it. To the recipient, this approach seems to suggest that officials are doing something illicit. While Freedom of Information requests are routine and detached in a federal government setting, citing the law to compel official action can come across as hostile in a small local town where individuals recognize one another. This impression is compounded when it is directed at an official individually, rather than his/her board and committee as a whole.

PART III: ASSESSMENT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

ASSESSMENT

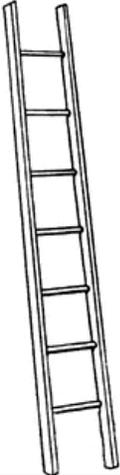
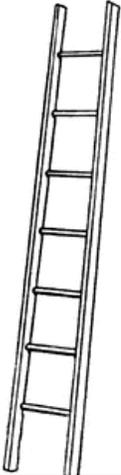
Drawing from our observations in Part II, we suggest here some overarching takeaways about the current situation in Sudbury. The purpose of these suggestions is to help Sudbury residents gain some understanding of the patterns behind what has been going on. We want to emphasize that these suggestions are *not* meant to justify the actions or words of any party, nor are they meant to lay blame on any party. Rather, we hope these can be used as shared starting points for furthering mutual understanding in Sudbury.

1. People are focusing on different data to interpret events.

How people experience events shapes their narratives.

As we outlined in the Section 6, different residents came away understanding the same events differently. Often, this arose because of differences in what people picked up on, which was in turn shaped by what their primary concerns were in the moment.

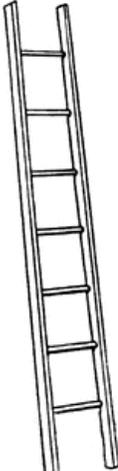
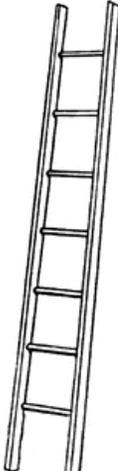
As one example, the reception of the Budget Review Taskforce (“BRTF”) was perceived markedly differently from different perspectives (see [Section 7](#)). These different perspectives reflected people’s **different assumptions and expectations** as they “moved up” **two different ladders** of inference (see [Section 4](#)) to form their conclusions. The following is a highly simplified example of how this might happen:

		One Perspective	Another Perspective	
Differing Conclusions		Town insiders are unwilling to listen to anyone outside their circle.	We shouldn’t adopt recommendations that don’t reflect a thorough understanding of all the underlying issues.	
Different Assumptions Guiding Interpretation of Data		If the committee respected the viewpoints of people other than themselves, they would give new suggestions a try.	History is important for understanding why the town is currently doing what it’s doing, before we decide to change things.	
Differing Data that Stood Out		The school committee did not adopt the suggestions of the BRTF.	Some BRTF members objected when a member wanted to share more about the history of why a policy was designed that way.	

Different observations, guided by certain assumptions and focusing on different observations, led to vastly different conclusions on the same event. In time, as more of these events like these accumulated in residents’ experiences, they **coalesced into divergent narratives** about what was going on (see [Section 6](#)). These narratives were **reinforced** as people with similar views tended to speak primarily with each other and interact informally with those with less frequently.

Narratives then shape how people interpret events.

These reinforced narratives then became the **lens** through which residents interpreted later events. That is, the narratives changed what data people picked up on; in particular, people tended to focus on data that confirmed their narrative. For example, one perspective might pick up on something that happens at a Board of Selectmen meeting that confirms their narrative, while from another perspective, that same piece of data leads to a different conclusion.

		One Perspective	Another Perspective	
Differing Conclusions		The chairman is using his authority again to unfairly silence contrary viewpoints.	The chairman is doing his best to manage difficult situations.	
Different Assumptions -- Past Experience Guiding Interpretation of Data		The chairman just doesn't want to hear viewpoints contrary to his.	Rules need to be applied more strictly to some people who would cause trouble on town platforms.	
Same Data		The chairman of the Board of Selectman gave one person a chance to speak for only three minutes, while another person could speak for much longer.		

As narratives help shape what stands out to residents, what stands out to residents then reinforces those narratives. This cycle can be broken by **creating opportunities for “walking down the ladder”** with each other, either interpersonally or institutionally.

➔ *For more on “walking down the ladder,” read about the ladder of inference in Section 4.*

2. There is no shared informational basis for engagement because people are relying on different sources.

In our conversations, residents conveyed rather divergent information on the same issues. With residents operating on divergent information, it becomes hard to have a shared, productive conversation.

Partly, this pattern may be a result of the **differing communication platforms** that residents with different narratives tend to use. Narrative B, for example, tends to favor the One Sudbury Facebook group, through which much information gets disseminated. Because the information is filtered through the lens of Narrative B, information that might help explain other perspectives may be left out or under-emphasized. As a result, before dialogue even occurs, it can be hindered by differences in the information available to parties.

This pattern may also be the result of the massive amounts of information that is being shared. For example, residents have commented that the town website offers much data with little crystallization or consolidation. As a result, even if all the data is there, people may find it more convenient to rely on the interpretation of the data provided by particular people or narratives.

These challenges can be overcome by creating commonly trusted platforms for wider engagement, as well as making it easier for information shared by the town to be useful for deliberation.

- ➔ *For platforms for wider engagement, see Section 11: Recommendations 3D, 3E, 3F, and 5B.*
- ➔ *For improving how information is shared by the town, see Section 11: Recommendations 3A, 3B, 3C, and 3G.*

3. People tend to assume the views and intentions of others.

A significant component of the narratives we heard were sets of assumptions about the views and intentions of others (see Section 7). However, as far as we could tell, those assumptions were often **mismatched with the actual intentions** of others. As discussed in [Section 4](#), these assumptions often occur if we entangle *intent* with *impact*: based on our feelings and the impact on us, we attribute intentions to others. For example, one area where we often heard mismatches between what people heard and what others meant was around requests to speak. In the boxes below, on the right is the intent that we as listeners assume based on the impact we felt, while on the left is the intent that we as listeners may be unaware of.

They really mean: “We want to be involved and understand something that really affects us.”	They do/say to us: Request a meeting to speak, ask a series of questions.	We hear and think they mean: “We want to grill you for information in order to hold you accountable.”
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In another situation:

They really mean: “We want to speak with you privately to really understand your concerns.”	They do/say: Suggest a time to meet over coffee, rather than in a public forum.	We hear and think they mean: “We don’t want to answer you or be open about our work. We don’t find your concerns important enough to be aired in public.”
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Again, the assumed intentions of others feed into the narratives we already hold, further entrenching our diverging perspectives. This challenge can be overcome by disentangling intent from impact.

- ➔ *Read more about disentangling intent from impact in Section 4.*

4. People are not aware of how they come across.

In our conversations, we also found that residents made assumptions about how their words or actions would be received. However, as far as we could tell, those assumptions were often **mismatched with the actual impact** those words or actions had on others. Again, this is because *intent* and *impact* are entangled: based on our intent, we assume they will receive it that way. Moreover, in the context of wider tensions, this disjunction between the assumed and actual impacts is both a manifestation of the entrenched narratives and a means of reinforcing these narratives.

To reuse the example above, now from the position of a speaker, what someone with Narrative C intends to say could have a very different impact on someone with Narrative B. On the left is the impact that we as speakers assume we will have, based on what we intend to convey, while on the right is the impact that they as listeners actually receive, of which we may be unaware.

We think they'll hear: "We want to speak with you privately to really understand your concerns."	We do/say: Suggest a time to meet over coffee, rather than in a public forum.	They hear: "We don't want to answer you or be open about our work." They are dismissing our concerns as too unimportant to be aired in public!
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Likewise, someone with Narrative B might intend to signal one thing, but have a different impact on someone with Narrative C:

We think they'll hear: "We want to be involved and understand our part in making a decision that affects us."	We do/say: Request a meeting to speak, ask a series of questions.	They hear: "We want to grill you for information in order to hold you accountable."
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This challenge can also be overcome by **inquiring and sharing about impact**.

➔ *Read more about disentangling intent from impact in Section 4.*

5. People are not communicating their interests and reasoning.

In our conversations, we sometimes heard important interests that were confided to us but not communicated to those who needed to hear them most, who in turn sounded like they wished to hear these things or would be greatly benefitted by understanding them. Here are some interests and reasoning that we heard from people in town, which often were important and relevant but remained unexpressed. Note that it also matters that these are expressed to the people who most need to hear it.

For Committees and Board Members:

- Reasons they designed a process a certain way.
- Reasons why they are not adopting a particular viewpoint or position.
- Reasons why they are unable to address a particular concern.
- The complexity of town decision-making (e.g. the inability to meet all interests at once, the obstacles and stakeholder engagement that lie in the way of a proposed course of action).
- Efforts they have made to consult and engage with citizenry while making a decision.
- Resource constraints.

For Residents:

- What it would take to feel heard and satisfied with the process and outcome.
- Interests in connection and continued collaboration.
- In what ways they prefer to receive information, provide input, and connect with members of town government.
- Reasons why an issue or process is important to them or something they feel strongly about

It would benefit all involved in any conversation to move from the superficial "positions" level to underlying interests and reasoning level. This often means walking down the ladder with yourself and with others, as well as using active listening and adopting a stance of curiosity to allow that space to open up in the conversation.

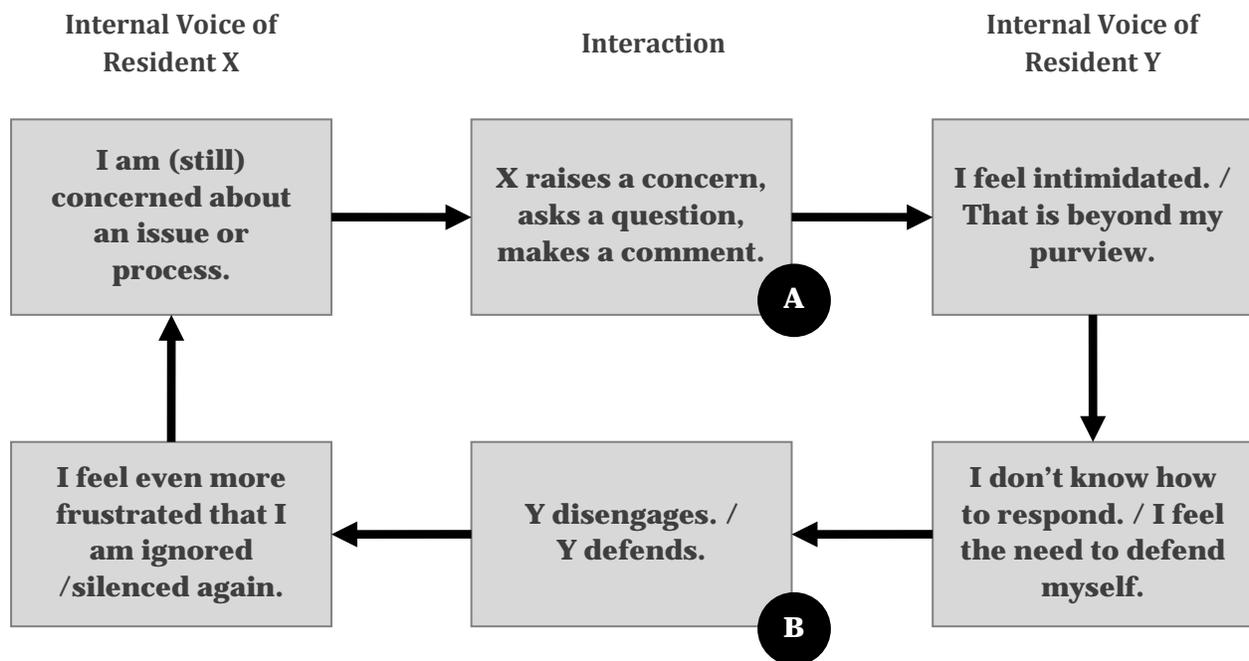
➔ *For more on "walking down the ladder", read about the Ladder of Inference in Section 4.*

➔ *For using active listening and adopting a stance of curiosity, see Section 10.*

6. A self-reinforcing cycle causes conflict to escalate.

When narratives are entrenched, and intent and impact are entangled, those dynamics join to form a cycle of misunderstanding and escalation. This plays out in many ways and across many different disputes. For example, we often pieced together interactions that generally followed the sort of path laid out below, in the case of a hypothetical resident with a concern:

Resident X is concerned about an issue or process, and seeks to raise it. In Resident X's interaction with Resident Y, Resident Y may feel intimidated, or may conclude that the concern is beyond his or her purview. Resident Y may not know how to respond, or may feel a need to defend him or herself because of how the interaction is going. As a result, Resident Y may disengage from the interaction or speak or act in an attempt to defend him or herself. The impact of this on Resident X is that Resident X may feel even angrier, ignored or silenced. Resident X is still concerned, and on top of that, frustrated, and so the cycle may repeat and escalate. Both residents feel increasingly surprised, frustrated, and hurt as they participate in this system.



At each interaction (labeled A and B in black circles in the diagram), there is clearly great potential for impact to misalign with intent. As the parties' views of the situation get increasingly entrenched as more of such interactions take place, the parties may be increasingly inclined to make attributions about a lack of openness or about ill-intent. This can create a cycle of escalating conflict. In order to better meet the interests of Resident X and Resident Y in these situations, such misalignments need to be corrected such that they break the cycle. Here is what might help specific parts of the contribution system:

Interaction A

Often, if Resident X's underlying interest is to gain a clearer understanding of why something is happening, or to fix a problem he or she observes, it is tempting to try to be helpful by advancing proposals or suggestions. However, Resident Y may not be empowered to act on that specific

proposal, even if there are other ways he can meet Resident X's interests. What may help Resident X here is to move from positions to interests: if Resident X **communicates interests**, that helps allow Resident Y to collaborate in finding ways to meet it. It may also help to find informal opportunities to better communicate interests between them.

➔ *For more about moving from positions to interests, see Section 4.*

Interaction B

Sometimes, there may be legitimate reasons Resident Y's hands are tied with regard to responding to Resident X's concerns. From our conversations, however, it seemed that the impact of simply saying "we can't respond" or "thank you for your comment" (with no visible follow up) was to frustrate those with the concerns, leaving them to feel dismissed or ignored. In such cases, it is important for Resident Y to clearly **communicate the reasons** he or she cannot entertain particular proposals, and also to **inquire into the underlying concerns/interests** behind those proposals. Often, it is those underlying concerns that most need to be addressed.

➔ *Again, for more about moving from positions to interests, see Section 4.*

➔ *For suggestions on active listening, see Section 10.*

7. It's become difficult for residents to empathize with diverging perspectives.

While we heard of the extraordinary emotional and material toll that the tensions in Sudbury have created, we were struck by how rarely residents recognized the costs incurred by those whom they viewed as being on the "other side." The persistence of entrenched narratives seems to have made it difficult for residents to see how those with whom they do not identify have also suffered.

At least in part, the lack of human connection among those who hold different perspectives has been both a result and a cause of this challenge. Many of those we talked to reported having few personal relationships with people who subscribe to a different narrative of what has been going on in Sudbury. This is exacerbated by the prevalence of online communication about and with people with whom they have had little or no real-life connection. As a result, opportunities to take the time to understand different viewpoints have become rare.

On the other side of the same coin, residents are also drawn to socializing with other residents who already share their experiences, along with their assumptions and inferences. Social media forums may amplify this effect. These interactions might further entrench residents in their preexisting perspectives.

We think that increasing opportunities for a broader, more diverse range of town residents to engage informally and enhance mutual understanding is vital to healthy town discourse.

➔ *For institutional changes to build relationships in town across a wider network, see Section 11: Recommendation 4 and 5B.*

8. Sudbury is grappling with broader patterns in politics and technology.

In many of our conversations, we heard people claim that divisions in Sudbury reflect national trends in politics, in particular, the partisan gridlock between liberals and conservatives or Republicans and Democrats. While we recognize that some of the forces driving national politics may be at work in Sudbury, we also believe that, as a local democratic community, Sudbury has a greater

opportunity to chart its own course with respect to how its residents govern themselves and relate to each other.

We also observed that online communication—online commenting, Facebook, and even email—often created the conditions for the escalation of animosity and entrenchment (see [Section 8](#)). How to use these tools in a way that promotes productive civic discourse is a shared challenge for our era. We suggest it is important to establish shared norms and expectations for how residents engage with one another in online mediums, and that processes are put in place to develop those shared norms and expectations.

➔ *For suggestions on managing social media, see [Section 11: Recommendations 3B, 5A, and 5B](#).*

9. Are “difficult personalities” part of the problem?

In our conversations, many expressed the strong belief that Sudbury’s tensions could be attributed to a handful of “difficult personalities.” Similarly, more than 60% of survey respondents believed that confrontational personalities were the number one explanation for why town discourse is the way it is.

We do not believe it is particularly helpful to focus on “difficult personalities”, both because attention to personal identities often leads to a destructive “blaming” stance, and because “personalities” themselves are difficult to change.

However, we do believe that how the Sudbury community reacts to these personalities is indicative of deeper, underlying issues that are beyond any single individual. If we find somebody “difficult”, it can be an invitation to consider: What underlying frustrations have found expression through these individuals? We suggest that individual residents have legitimate core interests around communication and process that need to be met in some way. Where these interests have been failed, interactions can become strained (due to a combination of the dynamics outlined earlier in this section) and can be experienced as difficult by the individuals involved. For those seeking to reduce Sudbury’s tensions, then, it is vital to work together with those who are frustrated in order to come up with ways to meet shared core interests.

10. Collaboration is necessary—and possible.

The costs are too high.

As outlined in [Section 5](#), the costs of the conflict in Sudbury are high, both to individual residents and to the town as a whole. As far as we could tell, there were few who have wholly benefitted from the current tensions in Sudbury.

What about not collaborating?

Some who were firmly entrenched in Narrative B expressed the hope that their “side” could prevail in winning elections and controlling town government with fresher voices. Some in Narrative C expressed the hope that, if that happened, they would step back and let them fail.

We think that it is neither realistic nor sustainable to refuse to collaborate with those who hold divergent perspectives, or who have been on the opposite side of past disputes. Regardless of who may hold a majority at a given time, other perspectives will not disappear and must, in some way, be

dealt with. Furthermore, in the long run, it is important to find ways to continue handling tension and conflict in Sudbury even if the narratives and parties change.

Conflict and change can often be productive, allowing for new voices to be included in choices that are important to the community. In Sudbury's case, however, the human cost accompanying that change has been too great. If Sudbury as a community is willing to prioritize community and connection as shared values, the benefits of transformation can be reaped at a much lower cost.

We see significant potential.

From our conversations, in particular our Community Focus Groups, we have seen significant potential for people with different perspectives to come together, connect, and share their perspectives and ideas in a constructive way. Many also gave us the feedback that they came away with a sense of hope for Sudbury's future.

We also heard some relate improvement in how they related to and worked with others who supposedly belonged to another "side." Some of those we talked to were sympathetic to the interests of those on both "sides" of the conflict, and expressed eagerness to find ways to reach out and begin collaborating more effectively.

Those voices willing to engage may find themselves easily crowded out by more entrenched voices that may be louder or more prominent. But as more people are encouraged to look beyond their entrenched perspectives and as they persist in building bridges across divides, it is possible for residents to collectively shift their energies toward finding more collaborative ways to meet their substantive and procedural interests.

Others might be dissuaded from reaching out across divides because of the assumptions they hold about other residents. From our conversations, we have often observed that the perspectives individuals assume of others are in fact mistaken. We urge Sudbury residents to question their assumptions about who belongs in what "camp" and stretch beyond their comfort zones to reach those whom they may assume to be unwilling to engage.

From what we have seen, we are confident that—if Sudbury residents so choose—they can break the cycles of tension and escalation, find new ways of working together to meet their own goals and interests, and bring the town to its fullest potential.

RECOMMENDATIONS I: FOR RESIDENTS IN THEIR PERSONAL CAPACITY

While the contribution system in Sudbury is complex, we believe there are many ways that residents can, through their own individual interactions, make a big difference to how communication and relationships work in Sudbury. These recommendations will require the special attention and personal effort of individuals, but we believe they can have significant impact.

1. Use “best practices” for listening

Using “best practices” for listening can best serve the interests of yourself and others in any conversation.

Allow the other person to be and feel fully heard.

It is frustrating when any party in a conversation does not feel heard. This can quickly derail any hopes for the conversation to be collaborative or productive.

Our survey found that, for Sudbury residents to feel heard, it was most important to them that **their comments were acknowledged, that the merits of their comments were addressed, and that their perspective or contribution was recognized as important**. Far lower in priority was that the listener agreed with them or that incorporated their suggestions in some form in the final outcome.

To help the other person be heard, consider **summarizing or paraphrasing** back to them what they have told you so that you can check your understanding; that way, they have a chance to tell you whether you understand them fully. This also conveys to the speaker that what they have to say is indeed important to you.

Listen to learn

Sometimes, our first instinct when hearing something might immediately be to say, “That’s wrong.” But it is often unhelpful to contradict surface assertions without understanding the underlying reasoning behind it. Instead, we encourage in those moments shifting to a “Tell me more” stance: listen to learn about the other person’s viewpoint. Get curious.

To help this happen, consider asking **open-ended questions** that give people space to more fully explain their perspective. If there is anything that confuses you, ask **clarifying questions** from a place of curiosity. These are both helpful in moving the conversation **from positions to interests**, so that you can fully understand the concerns underlying what the other person might be saying. This also allows us to avoid making unhelpful assumptions about the other person’s intentions.

Sometimes, “**identity quakes**” get in the way of becoming curious. If you feel your core identities being challenged, be on the lookout on whether your reaction is coming from defensiveness rather than curiosity.

→ *For more about moving from positions to interests and “identity quakes,” see Section 4.*

2. Help others hear you

Represent your interests as well as options.

To help others be able to buy into what you are saying, it is important not only to communicate what you want to see happen, but also why. Again, move **from positions to interests**, and work together to find options that will work for all parties in the conversation.

Separating positions from interests can also be helpful in the context of town decision-making, where it can be difficult for decision-makers to satisfy all constituents at once. While a decision might not be compatible with the positions of some residents, it can remain possible to work together to satisfy at least some of their underlying interests in the substance *and* process of the decision.

→ *Again, for more about moving from positions to interests, see Section 4.*

Be aware of how well your impact is matching your intent.

We all have blind spots as to how our words make it into the ears of those we are talking to. Expect that what you mean won't always be what other people hear. Luckily, you can check others' understanding of your words by checking in: “Does that make sense? Is there anything there that sounds confusing?” You can also explicitly clarify what you intend and what you *don't* intend.

→ *For more on disentangling impact from intent, see Section 4.*

3. Build relationships across perceived divides

As explained in [Section 5](#), Sudbury residents are often far more complex than the narrative of two opposing camps allows. We frequently found that how people saw themselves, how other people saw them, and what their actual positions entailed could often be very inconsistent. Unfortunately, those misperceptions result in many people who otherwise would be able to find common ground often not even interacting. The potential, however, is there. We encourage residents to take the chance to reach out in the possibility that perceived divides are not as wide as one might expect.

We heard several stories of reaching across to people on the other side of perceived divides that ended up being very successful. We encourage more of these kinds of interactions happening: through informal events, invitations to dinner or coffee, and many other opportunities. It is these relationships that allow more contentious issues to be handled with greater efficiency and creativity when they come up.

4. Keep referencing the “Selected Toolkit” in Section 4

We encourage you to keep in mind and apply the concepts in [Section 4](#) to your conversations and interactions moving forward.

RECOMMENDATIONS II: FOR THE COMMUNITY AND TOWN GOVERNMENT

We propose the following recommendations to improve the town’s communication and processes in ways that meet the interests of residents, volunteers on committees and boards, and employees. These suggestions are not offered to burden town government; rather, we hope that all residents will consider these suggestions, whether or not they are serving the town in any official capacity. Many of these recommendations draw on ideas brainstormed by our interviewees and Community Focus Group participants. We further developed those ideas by drawing upon our background knowledge in dispute systems design as well as research in the field of conflict management.

The decision of whether to implement these recommendations is one for the Sudbury community to make—as a town community, as town staff, or as individual committees and boards. Bear in mind that these recommendations represent *options* for residents to better meet their core interests. In working together to implement change, it is important to keep residents’ interests at the forefront and avoid turning specific recommendations into all-or-nothing positions. This will allow for creative flexibility in moving forward together.

We have supplemented each of these recommendations with a box indicating the potential difficulty and potential impact of implementing the recommendation. Our estimations of potential difficulty are intended to take into account demands that the recommendation might make on relationships and resources broadly construed, but do not intend to involve accurate estimations of cost. These are extremely rough indications intended solely to help readers think about “low-hanging fruit” versus longer-term investments.

1. Develop the town’s capacity for conflict management and process design

1A. Civic Conversations Group

<i>Impact:</i> High	<i>Difficulty:</i> Medium
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Purpose: To build expertise on process matters and conflict management on which the town can readily draw; to institutionalize opportunities for citizens to engage constructively and regularly.

What it entails: We propose the formation of a group of town residents that are specifically **trained in dispute resolution**, handling difficult conversations, and dispute systems design. This group can have two kinds of responsibilities:

- **Planning and holding forums, focus groups and listening sessions** that provide opportunities for town residents from diverse perspectives to foster connection and engage in dialogue. It could do so in partnership with committees or boards on particular projects;

or it could hold them independently. 58% of survey respondents felt that more opportunities for community-wide engagement would be useful to the town, going forward.

- **Serving as consultants or advisers to various committees or boards**, making suggestions to improve their processes (e.g. process used in committee meetings, process used in obtaining and responding to citizen feedback and input for projects, etc.) either at their initiative or at the request of the various committees/boards.

It is important that the civic engagement committee be **neutral** vis-à-vis the substantive policy matters being discussed in the platforms it designs and hosts. It should steward its influence over the process to further the **public interest** in engaging citizens through a fair process, encouraging participation, and arriving at a good outcome for the town.

The group should comprise residents who have the **capacity and willingness** to acquire and practice the skills of conflict management. Its members should not hold positions in town committees and boards. The process of convening this group – at its inception as well as to set in place a process for subsequent recruitment and training in the future – should be open and transparent, possibly conducted by a neutral, third party.

Challenges: The ability to influence process design carries power; hence it is imperative to bear in mind the emphasis above on the public interest and neutrality. Funding will be needed to convene and train the group, though there exist organizations that may be willing to provide pro bono consultation and training.

For further consideration: Process of convening the group; who conducts the training; process for availing its expertise to town committees and boards.

1B. Conflict resolution training for the public

<i>Impact:</i> Medium	<i>Difficulty:</i> Low–Medium
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Purpose: Increase individual residents' capacity to **engage productively** with those who hold contrary positions to their own, whether in official or unofficial settings, in public or in private.

What it entails: We propose offering workshops in **Problem-Solving Negotiation** and in **Difficult Conversations**, with enrollment **open to all Sudbury residents**. This may be of particular interest to residents who serve on committees and boards, or who are otherwise actively engaged in town government issues. Participants in our focus groups conveyed that their positive experiences of communicating with others in town were marked by collaborative and interest-based problem-solving as well as active listening. These workshops help to **hone participants' skills** in balancing empathy with assertiveness, active listening, creating and distributing value in town matters, practicing a learning stance, and managing fellow residents' emotional and identity interests.

Several options exist for how to implement this: it could be organized by the Civic Conversations Group after it has been convened and trained; conducted by HNMCP in a follow-on project; or conducted by conflict management firms that offer such services to public interest clients.

Challenges: Funding will be needed to carry out the workshops. Also, residents must be aware and willing to attend, which will require a publicity effort.

For further consideration: Frequency of workshops; whether to charge a fee; details of publicity and registration.

2. Board of Selectmen: Build relationships and consensus about process

2A. Board of Selectmen Retreat

<u>Impact:</u> High	<u>Difficulty:</u> Medium–High
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Purpose: To offer an opportunity for a newly composed Board to start on a good footing with a consensus on their expectations and processes; to allow continuing Selectmen to refresh their minds on terms of engagement and to improve processes for the next year based on their experience.

What it entails: We propose establishing an **annual, informal, collaborative retreat**, before every newly composed Board begins its service, during which the Selectmen can establish the terms of their engagement with one another. This idea emerged from Community Focus Group participants, some of whom shared positive experiences of reviewing common norms in other committees. 70% of residents surveyed also believed that having ground rules for town engagement would be helpful for Sudbury’s dialogue; the Board can take the lead in establishing this.

The Retreat should be **facilitated by a neutral third party**, and should aim to:

- Establish **shared norms** of engaging with one another and with residents;
- Set common **expectations of the process** of their meetings and executive sessions, including issues such as when/how votes are taken, when/how consensus should be built, when/how agendas are set, confidentiality, next steps in relation to concerns raised during citizens’ comment; and
- Build consensus around **policy priorities** for the Board for the coming year.

Before the Retreat, the facilitator should meet with the Selectmen individually to conduct a stakeholder assessment and be acquainted with their interests, experiences and existing relationships, so as to design a Retreat process that can be most constructive for the Board.

Challenges: The main challenge is to implement this Retreat in compliance with the **Open Meeting Law**. If possible, we would recommend that the Retreat be held privately so as to enable frank and open discussion about past and present tensions and issues of trust among Board members. However, given the likelihood that the Open Meeting Law may be construed to apply to such a Retreat, we outline procedures that would enable this Retreat to serve its purpose while complying with the publicity requirements of the Open Meeting Law.

- Public notice and attendance: Insofar as the contents of the Retreat may constitute a “deliberation” under the Open Meeting Law,¹³ the law requires that this meeting be publicly

¹³ While the Selectmen’s discussions about their own processes and communications do not directly pertain to substantive legislative matters, it is arguable that the contents of the Retreat will constitute a “deliberation” about “public business within [the Board of Selectmen’s] jurisdiction”, such “public business” being the workings of the body: MASS. GEN. LAWS. Ch. 30A, §18 (2010). The Massachusetts Attorney General’s Open Meeting Law Guide

posted 48 hours in advance, be open to the public, and its minutes be publicly available. It is possible that the public nature of the Retreat may inhibit candid discussion about Board members' working relationship and mutual trust. However, as we recommend that this Retreat be facilitated by a neutral third party, the facilitator will be able to control the process to ensure that this meeting remains professional, productive and purposeful.

- **Public participation:** The Open Meeting Law does not require public participation in the Retreat.¹⁴ In our view, if members of the public do attend, it would be advisable that they merely observe the Retreat while it is underway. Our concern here is that immediate reactions and comments from citizens may hamper and complicate the Selectmen's attempts at working out ground rules and shared expectations about their own processes and communication, which may require a certain level of trust and autonomy. It is in residents' interests to provide them with such space, because the outcome of the Retreat is meant to facilitate the Board of Selectmen in having more effective dialogue among themselves and with citizens in the future.

Another consideration is that, to implement the benefits of a Retreat, the Selectmen will each have to support and commit to its process and outcomes.

For further consideration: Facilitator for Retreat; methods of revisiting, evaluating and refining shared norms and processes during the course of the year; gaining the Selectmen's support.

2B. One-on-one meetings among Selectmen

<i>Impact:</i> High	<i>Difficulty:</i> Low–Medium
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Purpose: To provide opportunities for individual Selectmen to build relationships that are vital to functioning as a group, enabling the Board to model effective leadership for the rest of the town.

What it entails: We propose **regular, informal one-on-one meetings** between Selectmen. This suggestion emerged from Community Focus Group participants, who were eager to see the Selectmen develop more collegial relationships.

These meetings should be opportunities for them to **evaluate their working relationship**, as well as to **manage or clarify differences** between them before these develop into major misunderstandings. The following questions may be a guide to their discussion:

- What is working well in our working relationship as it stands?
- What could be done differently in our working relationship as it stands?

includes within the definition of “public business” “[c]ertain discussions regarding procedural or administrative matters... such as where the discussion involves the organization and leadership of the public body, committee assignments, or rules or bylaws for the body.” (COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS OFFICE OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL, OPEN MEETING LAW GUIDE (2015), at 4, available at www.mass.gov/ago/government-resources/open-meeting-law/attorney-generals-open-meeting-law-guide.html.) Moreover, substantive legislative issues will almost certainly be implicated and at the forefront of their minds as they consider how to design their processes. Given the likelihood that the Open Meeting Law would be construed to apply, we outline procedures that would enable this Retreat to comply with the publicity requirements of the Open Meeting Law.

¹⁴ MASS. GEN. LAWS. Ch. 30A, §20(G) (2010); COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS OFFICE OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL, OPEN MEETING LAW GUIDE, *supra* note 13, at 15: “The public is permitted to attend meetings” but “may not address the public body without permission of the chair” and “may not disrupt a meeting [...] and, at the request of the chair, all members of the public shall be silent.”

These meetings may also be **social** in nature, letting the Selectmen connect as individuals.

Operationally, the pairings could be scheduled in advance on a roster. They could rotate on a weekly or other regular basis, providing regular contact with each of the other members of the Board.

Challenges: One challenge is to ensure compliance with the Open Meeting Law.

- As these one-on-ones do not constitute a quorum of the Board, it is unlikely that they will be considered “deliberations”¹⁵ under the Open Meeting Law.¹⁶
- Even if the Open Meeting Law poses an obstacle to implementing scheduled one-on-ones for the Selectmen to discuss their working relationship, one-on-one meetings that are entirely social in nature will still be valuable for the Selectmen and are unlikely to implicate the Open Meeting Law.

Another challenge is that individual Selectmen have to agree to participate in these one-on-ones. Mistrust between Selectmen may make them unwilling to meet, or hamper the effectiveness of their meeting. This could be overcome by starting off with **mediated** one-on-one meetings, involving two Selectmen and a trained neutral party who can facilitate their dialogue about their working relationship and terms of engagement. Over time, as trust is built, they may decide to meet without a mediator.

A final challenge is that individual Selectmen may have concerns about meeting one-on-one with a Selectman of a different gender, whether due to their personal comfort level, their sense of propriety or their family. This can be overcome by inviting both Selectmen’s spouses/partners along to the meeting. This could even facilitate friendship between both families and provide an atmosphere that supports honest dialogue. Thus, even when Selectmen of the same gender meet, they could consider inviting their spouses/partners to their meeting as well.

For further consideration: Legal advice on compliance with Open Meeting Law; requests for mediators, if any.

2C. Social events for Selectmen

<u>Impact:</u> Low–Medium	<u>Difficulty:</u> Low
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Purpose: To provide opportunities for Selectmen to build relationships that are vital to their effective functioning as a group.

What it entails: We propose that the Board of Selectmen attend or organize purely social gatherings among themselves, when they can get to know one another better without the pressure of a meeting agenda. Out of an abundance of caution (for compliance with the Open Meeting Law), these

¹⁵ Defined as “an oral or written communication through any medium, including electronic mail, between or among a quorum of a public body on any public business within its jurisdiction”: MASS. GEN. LAWS. Ch. 30A, §18 (2010).

¹⁶ A qualification is that the Massachusetts Attorney General’s Open Meeting Law Guide states that “[c]ourts have held that the Open Meeting Law applies when members of a public body communicate in a serial manner in order to evade the application of the law”: COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS OFFICE OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL, OPEN MEETING LAW GUIDE, *supra* note 13, at 4. In our view, the one-on-one meetings we suggest will not fall afoul of this as long as none of the Selectmen are using the series of scheduled meetings in order to accumulate serial discussion about a particular policy matter. However, the Selectmen should seek legal advice before implementing this.

gatherings should be publicly posted and open to the public, since there is a quorum at such gatherings, but there should be no agenda or deliberation about town matters at such gatherings.

3. Town government: Make communications and forums more user-centric

Background: From what we heard, town staff were keen on making improvements to their communications so as to better serve the public and get people information in the forms they prefer. We suggest that residents' interests surrounding town communications and forums include:

Distribution and receipt of information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ease of receiving information • Options to receive information through their preferred channels • Notification in early stages of a project
Process of dialogue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Equal and fair treatment (actual and perceived) • Having the opportunity to speak • Having some kind of say in decisions that affect them • Having comments understood, acknowledged, and reflected back to them, and possibly addressed directly • Different preferences for face-to-face or electronic communication
Content shared	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accessible and comprehensible information • Comprehensive information (e.g. include both good performance and areas of improvement) • Communicate reasons behind decisions and reasons for rejecting a particular argument or proposal

3A. Improvements to the Town website

<u>Impact:</u> Medium–High	<u>Difficulty:</u> Medium–High
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Purpose: To make information more accessible and comprehensible to the general public; to increase understanding of town government's policies and rationales; to increase town government's capacity to respond to inquiries.

What it entails: We propose that town government conduct an assessment of its website and suggest the following goals and methods of achieving them:

- Make information and policy rationale accessible and comprehensible: Town communications should be presented in a way that helps the public to readily understand the important facts and reasons behind decisions. Lengthy memos and meeting packets in bureaucratic speech may not interest the average citizen who has many other responsibilities to attend to. These should remain publicly available, but could be supplemented by more **concise communications** that are easier/quicker to digest, perhaps supported by appropriate visuals and headlines.
- Give better direction on how to reach the appropriate town officials: With so many town committees, boards and staff, residents have expressed confusion at who is the appropriate

official with whom to raise a concern. It is unclear to residents what their respective portfolios are. A couple of suggestions to meet this deficit are:

- Provide a **visual map** of the organization structure of all the branches of town government (including all the committees and boards), stating their interrelationship (if any) and their portfolios.
- Create a **centralized online feedback or inquiry intake form**, which residents can fill in. Allow residents to select from a drop-down menu what category and sub-category their issue falls into. This selection would determine which board or committee receives this resident's entry in email form. That board/committee will then be responsible for responding to and addressing this resident's concern.
- Provide a way for residents to raise concerns on the website: When residents express their concerns and inquiries to other residents or on other social media platforms, town employees may not see or hear of them, and thus are unable to address them. The town could provide an option for residents to raise concerns online in ways apart from a direct email or phone call. This could take the form of:
 - An online feedback or inquiry intake form, as described above.
 - A **bulletin board** on the town's website for residents to post questions (with their identities and possibly addresses, not anonymously). When designing this, one factor to consider is whether answers are emailed or posted to the bulletin board.
- Create a form for residents to sign up for the town's mailing list: In that way, residents can receive notifications of the town's calendar, updates and new resources posted to the website, without going to seek it out themselves. Another way that this could be done is to allow residents to opt into the town website's RSS feed (the way that news websites and blogs deliver updated content directly to their readers).

Challenges: The main challenge is that of resource and financial constraints. Concise communications take time for employees and officials to generate. Improvements to the website will require money. Without a website moderator, it can be difficult to keep up with the entries received online.

For further consideration: Pressures on resources; assessment of website; technical changes.

3B. Social media updates

<u>Impact:</u> Medium	<u>Difficulty:</u> Low–Medium
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Purpose: To reach the segment of Sudbury's population that receives their news on social media.

What it entails: Town office could open an **official Facebook page** as a mode of **distributing** their information. Unlike a Facebook *group*, the central content on a *page* is produced by the owner of the page. The town office could use this page to post links to documents it has uploaded on its website, so as to alert residents that new information is available. Other kinds of posts might be posts that provide a concise explanation of a policy or decision. Residents who 'Like' and 'Follow' the page will be updated whenever the Town issues a new post.

Challenges: Posting new content and keeping up with comments (if they choose to allow comments) will place resource and time constraints on town employees, as there is currently no designated information officer.

For Further Consideration: Pressures on resources and time; who is responsible for running the page; whether to allow comments on the page (it is common for many organizations not to do so).

3C. Town media and information coordinator

<u>Impact:</u> High	<u>Difficulty:</u> Medium–High
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Purpose: To allow the town to more effectively streamline information and to more actively engage with social and other media.

What it entails: The town could hire a designated media and information coordinator, whose role would specifically be to carry out some of the tasks that Recommendations 3A and 3B entail. For example, this role could in charge of:

- Creating easily digestible summaries of town communications and posting them to the website;
- Running and posting to the town’s Facebook page;
- Staffing an online feedback or inquiry intake form on the website;
- Running and moderating a town bulletin board on the website; and/or
- Making the website accessible and concise; and maintaining those standards.

Challenges: It would be important to make sure that this role is perceived as neutral. This role also cannot be perceived as an additional layer of bureaucracy, as getting in the way of direct access to town officials. This role would also require a financial investment by the town.

For Further Consideration: How the role fits into current roles and responsibilities of town officials.

3D. More issue-specific forums

<u>Impact:</u> High	<u>Difficulty:</u> Low–Medium
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Purpose: To provide avenues for more focused debate and discussion among residents.

What it entails: Unlike Town Meetings which have a full agenda, issue-specific forums can enable more focused debate. Many reflected in interviews and Community Focus Groups that the single-issue rail trail forum had a good level of engagement and satisfactory deliberation. Such forums may be organized by Civic Conversations Group (if implemented), town staff, or boards and committees. They could be held regularly at multiple stages of progression in a project.

For Further Consideration: Publicity; regularity and timing of engagement; organizing body; (process of) selection of issues for a focused forum.

3E. Consider re-structuring Town Meeting

<i>Impact:</i> Medium–High	<i>Difficulty:</i> High
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Purpose: To facilitate wider participation in policy-making in Sudbury.

What it entails: Based on feedback about practical obstacles to participating in Town Meeting, we propose that the town **revisits its rationale for structuring Town Meeting** the way it is currently run. For example:

- What purpose is served by it being three nights in a row? What alternatives has the Town tried?
- What purpose is served by the decision-making process at Town meeting (a direct vote of those who are present at the meeting)?
- What purpose is served by the current process for citizens to comment on Articles? What alternatives has the Town tried?

If the existing structure is found wanting, possible adjustments are to:

- Break Town Meeting up into quarterly or half-yearly segments; or
- Open the vote for a few days after the actual in-person meeting, so that residents who are not present can find out about an Article that is up for a vote, and still get a chance to cast their vote.

For further consideration: Rationale and design of Town Meeting; best way to meet residents' needs and interests.

3F. Improvements to Town Meeting process

<i>Impact:</i> Medium–High	<i>Difficulty:</i> Low–Medium
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Purpose: To facilitate wider participation; to ensure actual and perceived equal treatment of residents during deliberations.

What it entails: To better meet the needs of residents and ensure that residents feel included and respected in the process, we propose the following changes:

- **Use a visible timer:**¹⁷ With a visible timer, all in attendance can ensure that residents who make comments keep to the same time, and are given the same amount of time. If residents agree to allow for a time extension, the extra time should also be visibly timed. This could apply to citizens' comments at Board of Selectmen meetings as well, to address concerns residents raised about commentators being accorded unequal treatment.
- **Integrate technology into Town Meetings:** Technology tools could be used to allow residents in attendance to make bite-sized comments (with their names) that could appear

¹⁷ This suggestion can be applied to the citizens' comments section at Board of Selectmen meetings as well, to serve similar purposes.

live on a screen at the front of a hall. This gives residents a chance to provide input even if they do not get a chance to speak or are too intimidated to speak in front of a large crowd.

- **Employ dialogue-mapping tools:** By visually capturing comments that have been made, the speaker can see that his/her point has gotten across and now forms part of the discussion. This can ensure that residents feel heard when they provide input. For possible tools, consider ideas from the book “Dialogue Mapping” by Jeffrey Conklin.¹⁸

Challenges: Making choices about technology and dialogue-mapping tools may require expertise and consultation. The Civic Conversations Group could undertake the task of assessment. Alternatively, the town could engage an external consultant, or consider tools being used by other towns or the federal levels of government.

For further consideration: Technology tools and dialogue-mapping tools that work well for government-citizen engagement and large organizations.

3G. Clarify process for declarations of conflict of interest

<i>Impact:</i> Medium	<i>Difficulty:</i> Medium
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Purpose: To help address the concerns of some residents about ethical conflicts of interest by town officials. *NOTE:* We are not in a position to evaluate to what extent such ethical conflicts of interest have actually affected town decision-making. We do not take a stand on whether or not any actual conflicts exist. Nevertheless, we recognize that perceptions of conflicts of interest have at least been a source of tension and mistrust in the town. Thus, we believe some steps can be taken to address the perception of town officials having ethical conflicts of interest, and thus enhance trust and confidence in town government.

What it entails: We propose that town government clarifies the process by which officials and employees declare conflicts of interest and recuse themselves from deliberations. We are aware of town officials who have recused themselves in the past. However, some residents seemed not to have been aware of these practices. We suggest that when recusals happen, the town might wish to:

- **Publicly notify regarding recusals** (perhaps through the town website), especially to key stakeholders in the issue/decision;
- In its public communication about the recusal, expressly **explain the practical consequences** of that recusal. For example, will the person in question continue to attend meetings? What does it mean in practice for the person to not work on an issue? Will the person still be able to help distribute documents? Will documents ever bear the person’s name?

We also suggest that the town engage in a **wider process of determining standards** for what constitutes a “conflict of interest”, whether ethical or moral, perceived or actual. While engaging with town residents, we found possible mismatches of expectations around such issues. A consensus-building process may be helpful in coming to a shared understanding of norms and expectations. This process should engage both town officials and concerned residents.

¹⁸ JEFFREY CONKLIN, DIALOGUE MAPPING (2005).

Challenges: With regards to publicizing recusals, challenges might include: institutionalizing the process of publicizing recusals; and gaining buy-in and a common understanding of these expectations from all town officials. The latter may be served by a consensus-building process as we have suggested.

With regard to the consensus-building process for determining standards, challenges might include: gaining participation and buy-in; determining who will host such a process (possibly the Civic Conversations Group: see Recommendation 1A).

3H. Consider forming a Town Ombudsperson

<i>Impact:</i> High	<i>Difficulty:</i> High
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We present this as something to keep in mind, but not necessarily as a recommendation at this time. At some point, the town may also want to consider the formation of an ombuds office that could be responsible for taking in complaints from town residents. At this point this may be outside the resource constraints of the town.

4. Consider opportunities for low-threshold involvement of more residents in town initiatives

<i>Impact:</i> High	<i>Difficulty:</i> Medium-High
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Purpose: To involve more residents; to give more residents opportunities to become familiar with the workings of town government; to capitalize on residents' talents to contribute to the town.

What it entails: We propose that the town considers designing low-threshold opportunities for residents to get involved in serving the community. This suggestion arose from our Community Focus Groups, in response to a shared desire to see greater participation in town and to capitalize on residents' myriad of talents and skills. It is also an attempt to respond to the need for volunteers to have some experience before joining a board/committee, by providing opportunities for them to start getting involved and acquainted with town matters and processes. We highlight that it should be low-threshold – in the sense that little prior experience is required, commitment levels can be flexible, and time spans should be shorter or even one-off – so that it can be an invitation to those might otherwise be too busy or too hesitant to get involved.

We imagine that some options for designing these low-threshold engagements might be to:

- Design a process whereby groups of residents can periodically propose and carry out a short-term initiative for community-building or to fill unmet needs in the town, according to a set timeline. This could allow residents to gather around a ground-up initiative that is pertinent to them. It could alternatively be a way to draw on a skill set that a group of residents shares.
- Form a database of lay volunteers who can help out with practical roles at community events, town forums and issue-specific forums, focus groups run by the Civic Conversations Group (if implemented: see Recommendation 1A), and so on. Residents, especially those who have recently moved to the town and who may not be familiar, could be mailed a questionnaire asking them to indicate whether they would like to volunteer in particular areas of interest.

In that way, they can be responding to the town’s invitation to get involved, rather than having to take the initiative to seek out positions that they can fill.

For Further Consideration: Design of opportunities; ownership of initiatives; coordination with any boards/committees (if needed).

5. Social media: Enhance trust and leverage for community-building

5A. Develop Facebook forum commonly trusted by wider range of stakeholders

<i>Impact:</i> High	<i>Difficulty:</i> Medium
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Purpose: To provide opportunities for engagement on Facebook in a way that is inclusive and comfortable for as many residents as possible, such that the strengths of communicating on Facebook are leveraged and the costs defrayed.

What it entails: Social media is increasingly an indispensable part of community interactions, and, from what we heard, many town residents greatly value it as an easily accessible source of information. At the same time, we also heard significant challenges to some residents being able to trust and engage with the primary existing social media forum, the One Sudbury Facebook group (see [Section 8](#)), whether because of its origins or because of their experience using it.

Thus, for any forum for Sudbury residents on Facebook, we encourage the following best practices:

1. **Establish clear ground rules for the forum:** Especially when town matters are deliberated, we believe there should be high expectations for how residents engage with each other. To facilitate this, platforms should establish clear community guidelines in order to encourage constructive participation. These should be clearly posted and “pinned” at the top of the page.¹⁹ When drafting these community guidelines, consider the following:
 - **Clear purpose:** What is/are the purpose(s) of this forum?
 - **Standards of decorum:** What kind of language is acceptable? How will “tone” be gauged, if at all, and what kinds of “tone” are unacceptable, if any?
 - **Post removal:** When will a post be removed by a moderator? How will the moderator follow-up? These expectations should be very clear, as post removals are often the source of controversy and friction in Facebook groups.
 - **Inaccurate information:** What happens when information is inaccurate? Because people seem to be relying, at least in part, on Facebook for information, it may be important to develop a norm where people should expect to make clarification about where their information comes from.

¹⁹ A pinned post is a message that gets a fixed position at the top of the page, as the first message that all see when they visit the page, regardless of the activity and buzz on other posts visually below it.

- Direction to other channels: When the interests underlying a post can be addressed through another more formal channel, how will other channels be called attention to? Will this be encouraged? For example, if a specific grievance can be brought directly to a town office, it could be an expectation that moderators or other community members suggest the right person to contact, rather than leaving a frustrated resident without a solution from the town offices that actually have the ability to address it.
2. **Establish the perceived and actual neutrality of the forum’s administrators**: In order to engage as many residents as possible, it is important that whoever administers the forum not have, or be perceived as having, a particular affiliation or agenda (e.g. not someone who may be viewed by some as being on one of the two “sides” that residents have observed (see Section 5)). This administrative or moderating role could potentially be played by the Civic Conversations Group, if implemented (see Recommendation 1A).

Challenges: Sudbury already has a well-used Facebook forum, namely the group called “One Sudbury”. A challenge to implementing this recommendation is to work out how the commonly trusted Facebook forum that we suggest would relate to the existing One Sudbury group. We envision two possibilities:

1. **Option 1: Enhance the (perceived and actual) neutrality and openness of One Sudbury, allowing it to serve as the suggested forum**:

This might entail two adjustments to the present group:

- a. Change the group’s settings to be an “open” rather than “closed” Facebook group. We would highly recommend changing this setting so as to enhance the page’s image as a neutral and inclusive one. Even if any resident of Sudbury is currently able to join the Facebook group if they apply to the moderator for permission, being set as a “closed” group still may risk a perception that there is a gatekeeper to this community. Additionally, it disallows people who are not on Facebook from even viewing the page, and we have heard from residents who *are* interested in the happenings on the One Sudbury page but do not wish to join Facebook. Unfortunately, currently Facebook policy only allows groups to switch from “open” to “closed” (and not from “closed” to “open”). We encourage the current moderators of One Sudbury to find other ways to ameliorate this concern.
- b. Have the One Sudbury group administered by people who are not involved in the tensions in Sudbury, for example the Civic Conversations Group, if implemented.

The potential cost of implementing this options is that some who presently do not feel welcome on the forum may continue not to engage there.

The potential benefits are that One Sudbury could retain the engagement of those who already feel comfortable using it, and even expand its engagement further.

2. **Option 2: Develop a new platform in place of One Sudbury**:

This would entail a new Facebook group, set to the “open” setting, for Sudbury residents to join. It would be administered by a group of residents not involved in Sudbury’s tensions, such as the Civic Conversations Group. Alternatively, the Sudbury Listening Project page,

currently administered by HNMCP, could be turned over to such a group of residents to be used as the town forum.

We think it is important for only one Facebook forum to lay claim to being the common Facebook forum for all of Sudbury. If two forums exist, it may defeat the purpose of a common Facebook forum: as different groups with different interests and positions cluster to one forum or another, truly constructive dialogue *across* divergent perspectives may be hindered even as both forums claim to be a space for it. As a result, if a new forum is formed, it is vital to act in coordination with One Sudbury's present constituents to find a way to maintain only one such forum.

The potential cost of implementing this option is that the community may lose the involvement of some residents if there is a migration from One Sudbury.

The potential benefits are increased trust and confidence that this is a new, neutral forum.

For Further Consideration: Especially when discussing town matters, Facebook is very weak in several respects. It is worth considering forums other than Facebook that may better meet the needs of Sudbury residents:

- Reddit-like forums: One feature of Facebook is that every comment in a group is given equal weight—as a result, those observing may assume that those who comment the most are most representative of the users of that particular forum. It might be worth considering a Reddit-like forum, where user entries are subject to **up-voting and down-voting**. This may better surface issues that are more pertinent to more people, thus encouraging wider participation.
- Decision-making websites: Sites such as Loomio.org are **designed for efficiently gathering input, building agreement, and deciding** as a group. It may be worth exploring such software for local decisions.

5B. Adopt other platforms designed specifically for local community-building

<i>Impact:</i> Medium	<i>Difficulty:</i> Low
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Purpose: To create social media venues for neighborly relationship-building in town, where such opportunities seem lacking.

What it entails: We suggest residents make use of new free, online services that enable connection with neighbors at an everyday level, e.g. sharing local tips and advice, planning block events, asking to borrow things, or offering to help. Two websites to consider are:

- **NextDoor:** A private social network for neighborhoods. <<http://nextdoor.com>>
- **Front Porch Forum:** A free community-building service. <<http://frontporchforum.com>>

6. Boards/Committees: Acknowledge viewpoints and communicate reasons

<i>Impact:</i> High	<i>Difficulty:</i> Low
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Purpose: To allow residents to know when they have been heard and to understand where decision-makers are coming from. From our conversations and surveys, we explored what it would take for people to feel that they are treated in the way they feel they deserve to be treated, as fellow residents of Sudbury. Many said they expected and even welcomed disagreement, but expressed frustration because they felt that their concerns were not even being heard in the first place; even if avenues and processes existed for soliciting residents' input, some expressed doubt that their comments were actually being heard, whether due to the body language they perceived or to the lack of response they encountered. Many also said they can accept a decision that they disagree with, as long as they had been heard and the rationale is communicated to them.

As mentioned in [Section 10](#), our survey found that, **for residents to feel heard, it was most important to them that their comments were acknowledged, that the merits of their comments were addressed, and that their perspective or contribution was recognized as important.** Far lower in priority was that they were agreed with or that their suggestions were incorporated in some form in the final outcome.

What it entails: We suggest that members of boards and committees take extra effort to **acknowledge and reflect back** the concerns of people to demonstrate full understanding. Concerns should be **addressed directly**, or accompanied with explanations of how they are considering a matter or why they have decided for/against a position. If boards and committees feel unable to address a particular concern at that time, it would help residents if they explained their constraints around addressing it now. Care should be taken to explore interests underlying those apparent concerns; sometimes those underlying interests can indeed be met in other ways. Disagreement should be explained with reference to the data and reasoning that leads to it. (See [Section 9.5](#) and [Section 10](#).)

The **Open Meeting Law** has inadvertently caused frustration for many residents. We heard the Open Meeting Law invoked as the reason that some officials have been unable to acknowledge concerns that are not on the agenda. We suggest seeking legal clarification on how to engage citizen concerns collaboratively during a meeting, while respecting the law. For example, even if concerns not on the agenda cannot be deliberated, perhaps that could be explicitly explained. Then, officials might wish to convey what the next steps might be: e.g. whether that concern could go onto the next meeting's agenda, whether it could be directed to a more appropriate forum, and so on.

CONCLUSION

Our time in Sudbury this semester gave us a deep appreciation for the courage and dedication that residents showed in sharing their stories, experiences and perspectives with us. Many of these stories were ones of both personal investment and personal cost. We have come to see in Sudbury's residents a common deep commitment and love for this town, and a desire to do what is best for their communities and families.

For many residents who engaged with us in interviews and Community Focus Groups, the "high points" in their experience of town discourse in Sudbury were times when people of different minds collaborated to solve a problem together; times when people felt that they were understood and valued. We had a taste of that dynamic in some of our Community Focus Groups, where people of multiple perspectives pooled their energies to brainstorm ways for the town to move forward and better satisfy one of Sudbury residents' core interests: a desire for greater inclusion in Sudbury.

To be such a town, one that includes and welcomes the participation of a wide range of residents with diverse talents to offer, it is crucial that Sudbury's climate feels safe for people to step up and contribute, without feeling either vulnerable or silenced. Various experiences in the recent past seem to have built up narratives that make it difficult for residents to partner one another in building such an environment. We have attempted to make sense of how and why town discourse is the way it is, on both individual and institutional levels, and to suggest some ways to enable the town to move forward in a more fruitful direction.

As stakeholders in the town, it is in your hands to decide how you will respond to this report, how you will relate to fellow residents in the light of what you have read, and what recommendations you wish to take up. We are sincerely hopeful that Sudbury's community can draw on the dedication and public-spiritedness of its residents to find a path of deeper understanding, healing, connection and collaboration.

