

2025

Public Engagement + Community Conversations

SUMMARY REPORT

poudre libraries





introduction

Poudre Libraries' community engagement model is based on the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation's "Turn Outward" practice. This nationally-recognized engagement model encourages governments and other public organizations like libraries to turn their perspective from looking inward—at our best guess about what the community needs—to looking outward—at a community's actual aspirations as stated by a wide sweep of residents.

Poudre Libraries practices turning outward to better understand our community, be more proactive to community needs and issues, and put community aspirations first. Using the "Turn Outward" practice, which includes a variety of activities and tools, Poudre Libraries authentically engages members of the community and generates "public knowledge" to inform decision-making of all kinds.

PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE	EXPERT KNOWLEDGE
<p><i>Comes from authentically engaging with people about their aspirations, their concerns, and how they see or experience their community.</i></p>	<p><i>Comes from professional analysis and reporting of statistics, trend data, poll data, audience and market studies.</i></p>
<p><i>Presented in plain language that everyone can understand.</i></p>	<p><i>Often presented in language only professionals understand.</i></p>

By using “public knowledge” alongside “expert knowledge” from other local, state, and national organizations, entities like Poudre Libraries can make more strategic and informed decisions about services and long-term planning.

Our Approach

Poudre Libraries used two specific “Turn Outward” engagement methods to gather, analyze, and share citizen input about their aspirations for our community’s future while also informing the Library’s 2026-2028 strategic plan.

1. ASK INTERVIEWS

The “Ask Interview” approach serves as a quick way to engage people and learn what matters to them. Poudre Libraries used four questions at various community events as well as online to interact with individuals. All questions were presented in English and Spanish.

2. COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

Facilitated, small group conversations develop a deeper understanding of people’s shared aspirations and concerns and provides key insights into people’s lived experiences. Poudre Libraries conducted three Community Conversations in 2025 which used 10 questions designed to create dialogue. Participants ranged in age, socioeconomic status, and neighborhoods, representing a variety of perspectives.

By starting with shared aspirations, people articulate what they are for (not against) and reflect actionable, doable, and achievable goals. Focus on what matters to people creates an immediate sense of possibility.

- Rich Harwood



community aspirations

Between May and August 2025, Poudre Libraries held numerous “Ask Interview” sessions in-person and online to engage with residents across the Library District’s service area.

The quick, 4-question conversation included:

1. What kind of community do you want to live in?
2. Why is that important to you?
3. How is that different from how you see things now?
4. What are some of the things that need to happen to create that kind of change?

The information collected by the Library reflects more than 1,300 individuals’ perspectives and experiences living in Fort Collins and surrounding communities, and over 4,800 unique comments.

The following six themes emerged from the responses and reflect the most prevalent hopes for the community.

Aspirations + Actions that Can Make a Difference

One sentiment that came up repeatedly is concern that we have become (or are becoming) a less kind and caring community. People often mentioned current social and political divisiveness as a barrier to achieving community cohesion and change.

Despite areas of divisiveness, participants are proud of the Fort Collins and Northern Colorado community and feel strongly that there are many benefits to living in the area. Individuals point to places like Old Town and the many wonderful parks and natural areas as highly valued amenities.

1. CARE, SUPPORT, & KINDNESS

Our community members aspire to live in a place founded on compassion, kindness, and mutual support. They desire neighborhoods where people know each other and look out for one another, lending a hand when needed. People want a community where acts of kindness, civility, and empathy are the norms.

Possible Community Actions

- Create neighborhood-focused events and outreach to build connections
- Host community potlucks, bonfires, etc.
- Do acts of kindness
- Slow down (in life, while driving, trying to do too much in one day)
- Participate in volunteer opportunities
- Help people with empathy and kindness
- Seek compromise

“When people feel safe, seen, and supported, they’re more able to contribute their unique strengths and help create a stronger, more vibrant place for everyone.”

2. INCLUSION & BELONGING

Our community members want to live in a place that is welcoming to people of all ages, backgrounds, beliefs, and abilities; where people feel safe and valued no matter their identity. Respondents expressed that a welcoming community is important for feeling safe and a feeling of belonging helps all to thrive.

Possible Community Actions

- Create more peer support programs
- Provide Spanish and American Sign Language classes
- Host family activities on evenings and weekends (outside of typical working hours)
- Plan cultural celebrations with food, music, education, etc.
- Elevate the different voices of our diverse community to share experiences and stories
- Create spaces that reflect the diversity of community
- Provide multigenerational, family and kid-friendly programs and spaces

“Communities are stronger and better adapted to change when they are welcoming to those who seek to be a part of it.”

“Conversations often feel rushed or surface-level, and it can be hard to find consistent spaces for deeper connection, collaboration, and cultural curiosity.”

“I want to live in a space where we value human well-being through community and connection.”

3. CONNECTION & ENGAGEMENT

Our community members expressed a growing sense of disconnection and isolation. They desire more opportunities for social connection to learn from each other and bridge differences to improve quality of life.

Possible Community Actions

- Host community forums for guided discussion
- Provide more community involvement and volunteer opportunities
- Offer tech-free opportunities to interact with people (e.g., without phones, ear buds, screens)
- Build more gathering spaces that are free and accessible
- Plan community-wide cultural events
- Create more civilian board reviews



4. ACCESS & EQUITY

Our community members want to live in a place where everyone can safely and readily get the resources and services they need to not just get by, but to thrive. They stressed that access should be easy for everyone in our community, no matter their age, race, background, income, abilities, or zip code.

Possible Community Actions

- Establish multilingual community navigators to help people find resources
- Focus on improving accessibility/ADA
- Expand outreach from organizations, government entities, nonprofits, etc.
- Expand resources for addiction and mental health support
- Improve healthcare options and access
- Improve housing options and affordability

5. EDUCATION & LEARNING

Our community values lifelong learning across a wide range of topics and ideas. They value both formal and informal opportunities including classes, activities, and casual skill-sharing. Many also described education as foundational for community building and civic engagement.

Possible Community Actions

- Offer more informal and collaborative educational opportunities
- Support the arts and humanities
- Strengthen local news coverage
- Read more books
- Attend history discussions and learning opportunities
- Expand preschool and early learning activities
- Create kid-focused learning activities (e.g., meet civic leaders, eco science fair, young writers' group, etc.)

"... our community can do a better job at increasing access to a variety of services for community members with more limited means."

"I want to live in a community that values learning and welcomes all who are wanting to broaden their knowledge and perspectives."

"Easy access to free lifelong learning is the spine on which community holds together."





**“Art & nature
are resting
places for
the soul.”**

6. ENVIRONMENT & SUSTAINABILITY

Our community appreciates the wide availability of outdoor recreational opportunities, are committed to being good stewards of land and resources, focused on protecting the environment, and care about protecting environmental resources even as growth and traffic continues in the region.

Possible Community Actions

- Expand the bike trail system into surrounding neighborhoods
- Open community kitchens
- Invest in more public transit
- Open a community garage
- Offer environmental education
- Build public parking lots on edges of town with public transports
- Protect green spaces
- Establish a composting service

“... A community of good stewards that is caring for all things around us.”



community conversations

Poudre Libraries hosted three Community Conversations in late October and early November 2025. Each session lasted approximately 90 minutes and included diverse perspectives from community partners, frequent library users, and stakeholders. A Library staff team facilitated the conversations and synthesized the responses to create the following report.

Community Aspirations

What do people want Fort Collins and surrounding communities to be?

SAFE

People want Fort Collins and surrounding communities to be safe places to live. They would like to experience both physical safety—low crime rates, increased opportunities for kids to play and run through the neighborhoods, and expanded pedestrian and bike-friendly infrastructure—and psychological safety where all people feel respected, protected, and able to belong. For some residents, safety extends to environmental harm and includes preparing to face the long-term challenges of climate change at a local level.

WELCOMING & INCLUSIVE

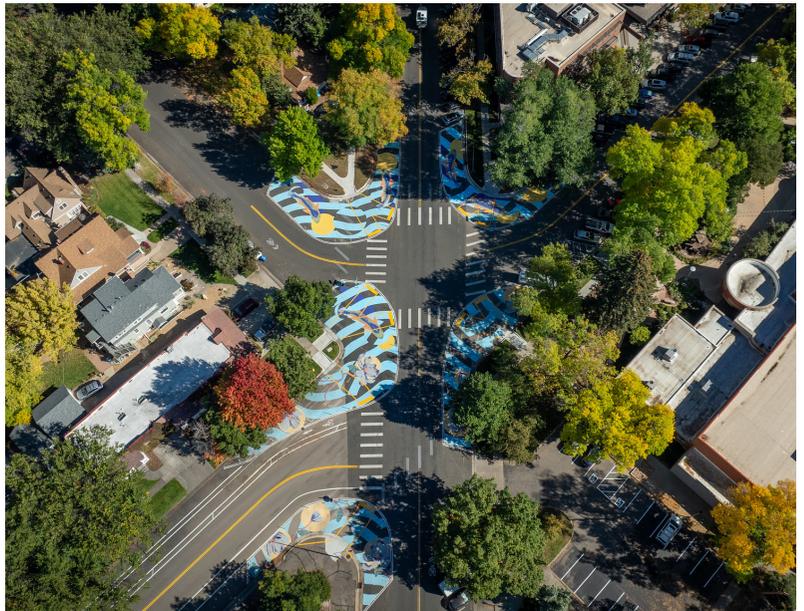
People also want to live in a place that is friendly, equitable, and rooted in strong connections across generations. It is a community where all people are supported, recognized, and valued, and where diversity is respected and reflected in shared spaces and neighborhoods. People want to know their neighbors and build relationships across differences.

ACCESSIBLE

Residents in Fort Collins and surrounding areas want an accessible community that creates opportunities for everyone to participate and thrive, including BIPOC, LGBTQ+, neurodivergent individuals, and people of all abilities. Community members want to see a strong safety net for individuals in need regardless of income or circumstance. Just as important, accessibility means feeling welcome to share one's culture and identity openly, knowing the community is built to support and include all people.

ENGAGED & INFORMED

People want an engaged and informed community where people participate in ongoing community conversations and where voices of all ages and backgrounds are represented. They value curiosity, lifelong learning, and strong connections with schools, higher education, and institutions like Colorado State University to enrich civic life. Residents feel a responsibility to better understand local government, meet with elected officials, and partake in decision making and/or feedback activities.



photos courtesy of city of fort collins

SUSTAINABLE

People also want to live in an environmentally friendly and sustainable community. They wish for walkable neighborhoods and bike-friendly streets that support health and reduce reliance on cars that cause traffic congestion, noise, and pollution. Reliable public transportation is valued as an essential option, even as there are limitations in service and access. For residents, sustainability also means balancing development and growth with the protection of nature and preserving natural spaces and habitats.



Community Concerns

During our conversations, we identified key themes in response to questions about the issues surrounding Fort Collins and neighboring communities. Many of these themes came up repeatedly in the Community Conversations session and reflect the themes emerging from the Ask Interviews conducted over the summer.

COMMUNITY BUILDING

In every conversation we had, people expressed concern about the growing challenges of building connection in an increasingly polarized environment. While many people share common values and care about the same local issues, it can feel difficult to talk across differences in views and perspectives, especially when conversations are shaped by political or social extremes.

At the same time, there is a strong desire to reconnect in simple, human ways—through small, everyday interactions like walking a dog, checking in on a neighbor, or sharing cookies—that can build relationships, foster understanding, and remind us of the shared community we all belong to.

ACCESS & INCLUSION

During our conversations, the topic of access and inclusion came up often, particularly in relation to other key concerns like affordability, mental health support, and safety. Community members noted that the color of one's skin can significantly shape how people move through the world and experience daily life. For many, this reality affects their sense of safety, belonging, and ability to fully participate in community spaces and opportunities. Fears related to discriminatory attitudes and policies—including support for mass deportation—have heightened anxiety and vulnerability for people of color, impacting their well-being and trust in public institutions.

Participants believe these concerns underscore the need for the community to actively promote equity, protect the dignity and safety of all residents, and ensure that everyone feels welcomed, supported, and able to thrive regardless of race or background.

AFFORDABILITY

Community members have voiced growing concern about affordability and its impact on long-term stability and upward mobility. Many people find it increasingly difficult to envision settling permanently—such as buying a home or putting down roots—because wages and job opportunities do not keep pace with the cost of living, the rise in childcare costs, and other necessities.

The increase in cost of living in many areas has created a sense of displacement and disconnection for many residents and students. They are concerned about the prevalence of jobs that lack long-term prospects, making it harder for young people to stay in the community. One person points to the professionalization of “side jobs” that once offered accessible income and learning opportunities for youth, like dog walking or yard work.

DEVELOPMENT

City and County development decisions shape daily life in Fort Collins and the surrounding communities. People recognize that planning is necessarily long-range; however, they want more transparency and to understand how today's choices affect walkability, traffic, access to green/open space, and neighborhood cohesion. Balancing growth with preservation, improving transportation choices, and supporting neighborhood-level connection are key concerns as the community navigates how development can enhance, rather than erode, quality of life.

Some conversation participants identified zoning rules as possible barriers to progress and suggest that as a starting point for discussion and problem solving.

MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

Another theme that came up in conversation is concern about gaps in mental health support and the lack of safety and care for individuals who are neurodivergent or living with mental health conditions. Many feel these individuals are often “othered” or misunderstood, rather than supported with compassion and inclusion.

Various community members noted that mental health challenges are compounded by broader community stressors, including fears around housing stability, financial security, discrimination, and social division. As uncertainty increases, so does the need for psychological safety—places and relationships where people feel accepted, understood, and able to seek help without stigma. Addressing these concerns is essential to fostering a community where everyone can feel secure, connected, and supported in their well-being.

Recommended Actions

The following recommendations from Community Conversations participants are not an exhaustive list of what can be done to achieve community aspirations but serves as a potential starting point for the community.

RESOURCE SUPPORT & SHARING

- Create easy-to-connect opportunities for people in need to access local services via resource hubs, public signage, and public transportation.
- Reduce barriers and create more safety and belonging for marginalized and underserved communities so they can easily access resource information.
- Create safe public spaces that are welcoming and responsive to all cultural contexts, including issues of hidden bias.
- Increase awareness of how people can help their neighbors in need or contribute to and volunteer for local resources.

CONNECTION & BELONGING

- Create easier and more visible ways for people to connect with each other and their neighbors.
- Reduce isolation and vulnerability by providing spaces and informal activities for people to interact with others without financial or time restrictions.
- Offer community events that are free and curiosity inspiring.
- Focus on safety—both physical and psychological.
- Offer people learning that is exploratory-based and doesn't require expertise.
- Encourage intercultural awareness and empathy by providing learning opportunities that focus on history and language.
- Promote ways for people to celebrate their identities and to build social-emotional skills to better understand other people's experiences.
- Support nonprofits within our community so that people's lives are less driven by profits or corporate goals.
- Support locally owned businesses to create more financial stability and connection points locally.

EDUCATION

- Provide people with supportive opportunities to explore and try new skills outside of their career path or social environment.
- Provide clearer career pathways to help young people navigate from the academic world to the workplace.
- Develop more trusted places where children and young adults feel safe, have a sense of belonging, and continue to learn and develop skills to support their education, careers, housing opportunities, and financial stability.
- Offer parents more support while raising young children and provide ways to stay engaged with civic activities that don't negatively impact finances or time.
- Organize civic activities such that parents can participate and not be blocked by lack of childcare or loss of work time or pay.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

- Build better ways for the public to connect with civic (and civil) engagement such as information on how to join boards or contribute input at local meetings.
- Create a hub for grassroots advocacy and a space for people to connect for the common good.

HOUSING

- Provide more pathways to connect people to affordable housing.
- Consider the addition of more service providers with proven track records (such as Neighbor-to-Neighbor).
- Consider zoning changes such as Accessible Dwelling Units (ADUs).

TRANSPORTATION

- Develop smarter ways for people to move around town that reduce traffic, increase walkability, and connect people to their neighborhoods.
- Leverage public transportation options.
- Consider zoning changes to create walkable hubs or car-free areas of the city for pedestrian safety and wellness.

ENVIRONMENT & SUSTAINABILITY

- Provide progress updates and calls-to-action around park development and neighborhood community gardens.



what can be done

Many people we spoke to said that even though they have concerns, they truly love living in the Fort Collins area and trust many individuals and organizations to take action to help move the community forward.

People trust local City and County government to take action but would like more transparency about prioritizing community goals and gathering public input. People trust organizations like Larimer County Sheriff's Department, the City Natural Areas Department and Cultural Development Department, Poudre Libraries, the Center for Public Deliberation, and Interfaith Council. They also trust community organizations like Colorado State University, Larimer County Small Business Development Center, and Partnership for Age-Friendly Communities. Other organizations mentioned were ISAAC, Bohemian Foundation, United Way of Larimer County, Matthews House, La Familia, Alianza NORCO, and Outreach Fort Collins.

All of us—local government, schools, businesses, nonprofits, healthcare providers, individuals, families, the library, and many others—share the responsibility of building a more hopeful future for everyone in our community. Achieving the aspirations identified in this report will require ongoing commitment from each of us. By working together, we can address the concerns our community members have raised.

Poudre Libraries' Role

Poudre Libraries will use this information to inform our 2026-2028 Strategic Plan and identify how the library can play a role in supporting community aspirations as we continue to build library services throughout our area.

In addition to the work of our 2026-2028 Strategic Plan, we identified specific ways the Library can contribute to the community's path forward.

- **People want to experience and share kindness.** The Library can help build a caring and kind community by offering free and welcoming spaces for everyone, with caring people to assist, and opportunities for personal interaction, cooperative learning and helping, and relationship building.
- **People are looking for ways to connect.** The Library is a natural platform for facilitating social and personal connections whether through community conversations, programs, or spaces for people to gather. We can develop meaningful opportunities for people to connect with each other, not just with the Library, and help individuals feel less isolated and lonely.
- **People want spaces for community interaction and engagement.** We are mindful of the importance of the Library's meeting spaces, study rooms, computer labs, and other essential areas for community interaction. The Library's spaces are public resources open to everyone and can serve as a hub to launch community discussions, collaboration, and engagement.
- **People want to learn more.** Our community is looking for trustworthy information, opportunities for ongoing education and growth, and access to resources. The Library can continue to serve as a platform for formal and informal learning through our programs, collections, and partnerships. While the Library plays an essential role in literacy and school-readiness, personal and professional learning, exploration, and discovery spans a lifetime.

Next Steps

As we move through 2026, Poudre Libraries looks forward to hosting additional Community Conversations to engage people in further discussion and to work collaboratively toward solutions. We are investing in "turning outward" because it strengthens the Library's work and our community.

Libraries don't operate in a silo. The Library plans to follow up with the public to share our findings and to share the summary report directly with strategic partners, local nonprofit organizations, and governmental agencies who can use the information to make decisions about their services and priorities. By enlisting allies, focusing on identified concerns, and taking advantage of emerging opportunities, we can all move the community forward together.



ABOUT

poudre libraries

MISSION

To create opportunities and build connections to strengthen our community

VISION

A vibrant and inclusive gathering space where people connect, exchange ideas, and build a stronger community together

VALUES

- 1 Curiosity
- 2 Collaboration
- 3 Innovation
- 4 Inclusion
- 5 Intellectual Freedom
- 6 Accountability

poudre libraries

➤ 301 East Olive Street
Fort Collins, CO 80524

➤ 970-221-6740

➤ poudrelibraries.org