

## **ITEM 11 – Information**

September 18, 2013

Update on the Final Report “What Do People Think About Congestion Pricing? A Study of the Public Acceptability of Congestion Pricing Through a Deliberative Dialogue with Residents of Metropolitan Washington”

**Staff Recommendation:** Receive briefing on the attached Power Point presentation on the final version of this report, which responds to comments from the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), and on the implications of MAP-21 requirements and restrictions regarding the establishment of tolls on existing lanes.

**Issues:** None

**Background:** In January, the TPB was briefed on the draft report on a study of the public acceptability of congestion pricing in the region which was sponsored by the FHWA Value Pricing Pilot Program.

[Read the full report online.](#)



## Research Problem

- Transportation revenues are decreasing and congestion is increasing
- Congestion pricing is a tool that could partially solve these twin challenges
- ***But officials assume that support for congestion pricing is quite limited.***

## Joint research project

### When:

- 2011: Grant awarded from FHWA's Value Pricing Pilot Program
- 2011-2012: Research conducted
- 2013: Report finalized to reflect sponsor's comments

### Who:

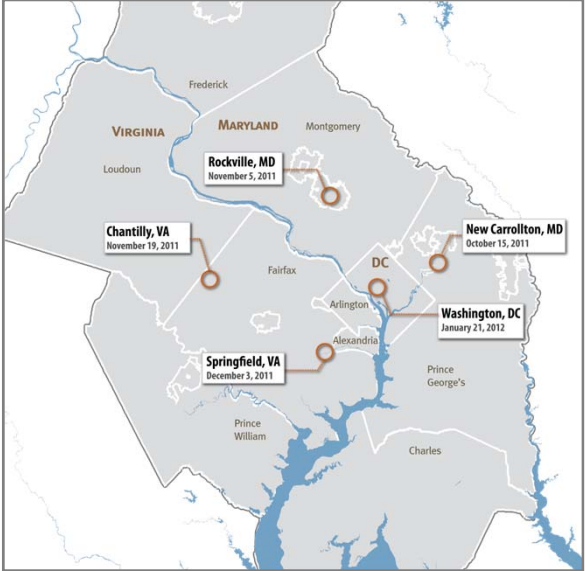
- Research partners:
  - TPB
  - Brookings Institution
- Public engagement consultant:
  - *AmericaSpeaks*

## Primary research tool: Deliberative forums



## Sampling the region

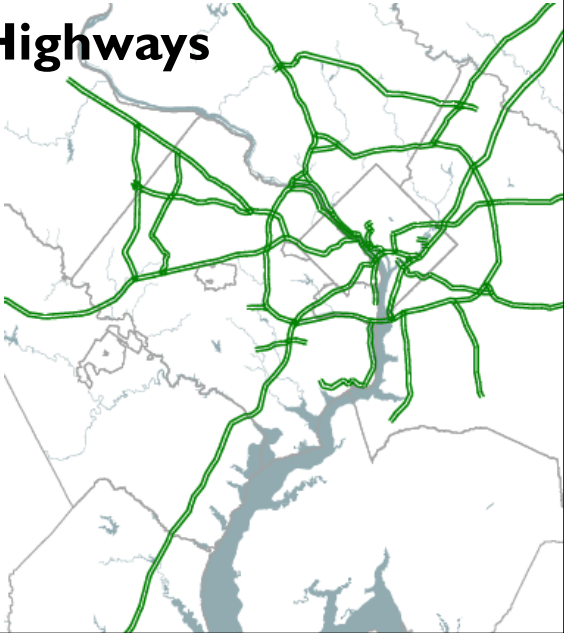
- Five forums
- October 2011-  
January 2012
- Each forum lasted  
4½ hours
- More than 300  
paid participants
- Broadly  
representative of  
the region



## Scenario I: Priced Lanes on All Major Highways

*What if...*

All major  
highways had at  
least one tolled  
lane with **free-  
flowing traffic?**



## Scenario 2: Pricing on All Streets and Roads

*What if...*

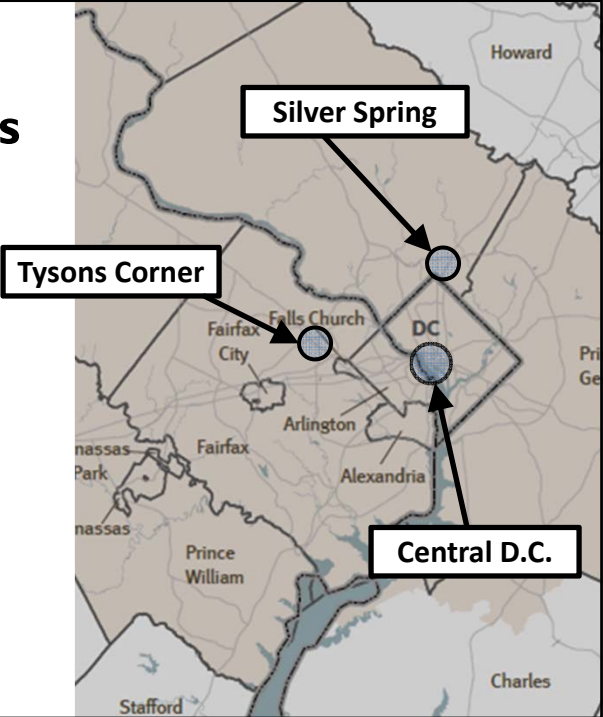
Instead of paying gas taxes, drivers paid per-mile fees calculated by GPS?



## Scenario 3: Priced Zones

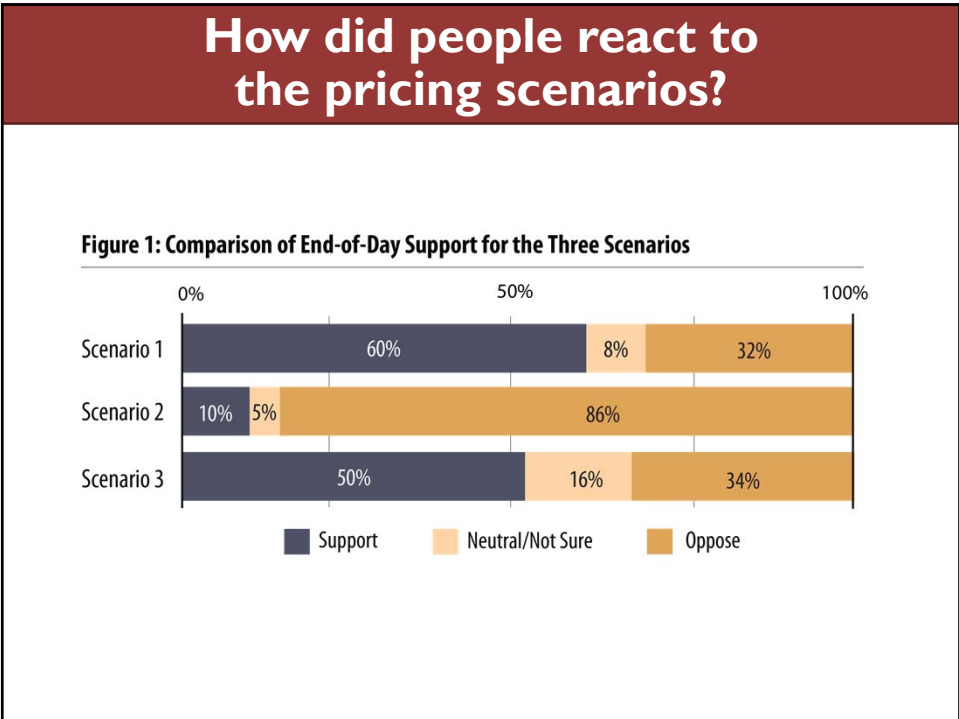
*What if...*

Drivers had to pay to enter central Washington, DC, Silver Spring, or Tysons Corner?



## How did people react to the pricing scenarios?

- **Scenario 1: Priced Lanes on All Major Highways**
  - Garnered the most support
  - Offers choice and predictability
- **Scenario 2: Pricing on All Streets and Roads**
  - Strong negative reactions
  - Concerns about privacy, complications, impracticality
- **Scenario 3: Priced Zones**
  - Seemed logical and straightforward to participants
  - Was not seen as regional



## What's the basis for people's opinions?

- **Choice:** Pricing must provide options.
- **Privacy:** Significant concerns. People are worried about government overreach and a loss of control.
- **Effectiveness:** Doubts about whether pricing will actually work; people assume most driving is not a choice.
- **Use of revenues:** Guarantee transparency and accountability.
- **Fairness:** Not pivotal.

## What does it mean?

People are:

- Skeptical of pricing as an overall solution, but they may support specific proposals if they see direct daily benefits.
- More concerned about losing options than they are about "Lexus Lanes."
- Lack confidence in government and fear government overreach.
- More likely to support obvious solutions – such as increasing gas taxes – than radical approaches like congestion pricing.
- Want to know that congestion pricing is part of a wider strategic vision.

## MAP-21 and Tolling

Expanded toll authority under MAP-21:

- Authority provided to build new tolled capacity without obtaining a specific agreement with FHWA.
- Authority provided for conversion of HOV lanes to HOT lanes (both on and off the Interstate system) without obtaining a specific agreement with FHWA.

## MAP-21 and Tolling

Restricted tolling authority under MAP-21:

- Under Section 129 of Title 23, new toll projects generally cannot reduce the existing number of toll-free general purpose lanes.
  - Continued possibility to toll existing capacity under some conditions: Reconstruction of bridges & tunnels; reconstruction of non-Interstate Federal-Aid roads.
- Some continued opportunities to toll existing capacity through:
  - Interstate System Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Pilot
  - Value Pricing Pilot Program



# WHAT DO PEOPLE THINK ABOUT CONGESTION PRICING?

A Study of the Public Acceptability of Congestion Pricing  
Through a Deliberative Dialogue with Residents of Metropolitan Washington



**National Capital Region Transportation Planning Board  
Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments**  
In Partnership with the **Brookings Institution**



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# Executive Summary

## **RESEARCH CHALLENGE: Understanding Public Attitudes Toward Congestion Pricing**

*Too much congestion. Not enough funding.* These two problems increasingly have come to define transportation policy woes in our nation's metropolitan areas, and the Washington, D.C., region is no exception. Many experts agree that congestion pricing—charging tolls or fees that are higher when and where congestion is worse—could at least partially solve both of these challenges.

But what does the public think? Despite the increased use of road pricing in our region and across the country, decision-makers and opinion leaders in metropolitan Washington often assume that citizens will oppose congestion pricing proposals, particularly those projects that would put tolls or fees on roads that are currently free of charge. Such perceived public opposition is frequently cited as an obstacle to implementation. A 2010 article in the *Journal of the Transportation Research Board* noted: “Although the implementation of road pricing has come a long way in the United States over the past two decades, political wariness of the idea holds strong.”<sup>1</sup>

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1- Taylor, Brian D, and Rebecca Kalauskas, “Addressing Equity in Political Debates over Road Pricing: Lessons from Recent Projects,” *Journal of the Transportation Research Board*, No. 2187, p. 44, 2010.

**Deliberative forums make it possible to solicit more informed feedback from the general public on concepts or ideas that are unfamiliar or especially complex.**

However, common assumptions about public opposition are not necessarily grounded in public opinion research. In our region, we do not know the extent to which perceived opposition to congestion pricing concepts really exists, and, if it does, whether it is based upon inadequate or inaccurate information. Even more important, we do not know which factors people care about most—or worry about most—when they are presented with specific pricing proposals.

As a research challenge, this study explored the baseline opinions of regular citizens toward congestion pricing and whether more information and education about pricing could influence their attitudes. The study also sought to unravel key factors—issues like fairness, effectiveness, or privacy—that make a pivotal difference in determining opinions. The study’s ultimate purpose was to help decision-makers better understand how they might attract public support for congestion pricing, if they were to decide to pursue such a policy solution.

The National Capital Region Transportation Planning Board (TPB) carried out the research in partnership with the Brookings Institution. The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) provided grant funding for the research through its Value Pricing Pilot Program (VPPP). The TPB also engaged the non-profit organization *AmericaSpeaks* to guide the design and implementation of the five deliberative forums—essentially “mega focus groups” with keypad voting—that were the primary research vehicle for this study. Preliminary research, including the TPB’s 2010 *State of the Commute* Survey, a review of public opinion research around the country, and a series of listening sessions with stakeholders, informed the structure and content of the study’s research approach.

**(Left) Participants engaged in small-group discussions led by trained facilitators. (Right) “Scribes” at each table used laptop computers to record the key points of the small-group discussions.**





## RESEARCH DESIGN: Using Deliberative Forums to Explore Public Opinion

A deliberative forum is a public engagement event in which people come together to learn and talk about a problem and to explore potential solutions. Through a process of group deliberation, participants have the opportunity to discuss benefits and costs, hear the opinions of their peers, and potentially modify or solidify their opinions. This process makes it possible to solicit more informed feedback from the general public on concepts or ideas that are unfamiliar or especially complex. The extended exchange of ideas and opinions that takes place during a deliberative forum also mirrors the wider process of public deliberation about policy issues and can thus help identify the challenges and opportunities that decision-makers might face if they were to advance congestion pricing proposals publicly.

More than 300 participants who were broadly representative of the region came together in five forums—two in Virginia, two in Maryland, and one in the District of Columbia—that each lasted four-and-a-half hours. Presentations provided information on the current and projected state of transportation funding and congestion and three hypothetical congestion pricing scenarios that could be applied in the Washington region:

- ❖ **Scenario 1:** Priced Lanes on All Major Highways – variably-priced lanes on all interstates, as well as some other major roadways
- ❖ **Scenario 2:** Pricing on All Roads and Streets – variable, per-mile pricing using vehicle-based GPS systems
- ❖ **Scenario 3:** Priced Zones – drivers pay a fee to enter or drive within a designated area

Participants engaged in facilitated small-table discussions, which were documented on laptop computers. They also recorded their individual opinions through keypad voting and paper surveys. Discussion topics included an opening opportunity for participants to define the region's transportation problems, separate discussions about each congestion pricing scenario, and a final discussion in which participants suggested their alternatives for dealing with the region's transportation problems.

(Left) Scenario 1: Priced Lanes on All Major Highways. Drivers would have the option to pay a toll to travel in free-flowing lanes or drive in general purpose lanes free of charge. (Center) Scenario 2: Pricing on All Roads and Streets. A fee would be applied based on distance traveled, time of day, and road type. (Right) Scenario 3: Priced Zones. Drivers would have to pay a fee to enter major activity centers.

Congestion resonates as a critical problem more than funding shortfalls do.

## FINDINGS: What Did the Public Tell Us?

The study provided insight on the following key questions:

### 1. How do people see the region’s transportation problems?

A vast majority of participants agreed that congestion is a critical problem facing the region and emphasized its personal impacts, describing the ways it limits opportunities and lifestyle choices. The burdens of congestion seem to rob people of a sense of control over their lives, furthered by the feeling that driving is the only transportation option for most people in the region.

Congestion resonates as a critical problem more than funding shortfalls do. Participants who said they wanted more transportation alternatives rarely connected the lack of those options to the lack of funding. Some participants expressed doubts about the reality or extent of funding problems. Many said they lack confidence in the government’s ability to solve transportation problems even if enough funding were available.

Participants were generally unaware of the details of how transportation is currently funded, including the fact that the federal gas tax has not been raised in nearly two decades and is not indexed to inflation.

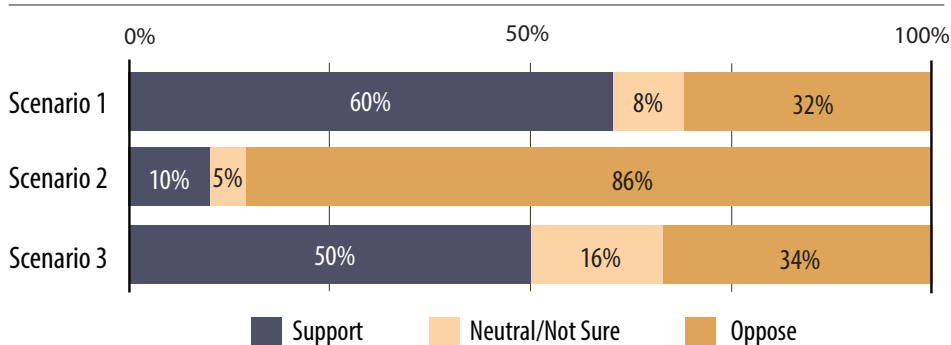
### 2. How do people react to different congestion pricing scenarios?

Of the three scenarios, Scenario 1 (Priced Lanes on All Major Highways) garnered the most support. People liked it because it is optional (toll-free options would generally be maintained) and offers added predictability. But they were concerned about fairness and congestion displacement.

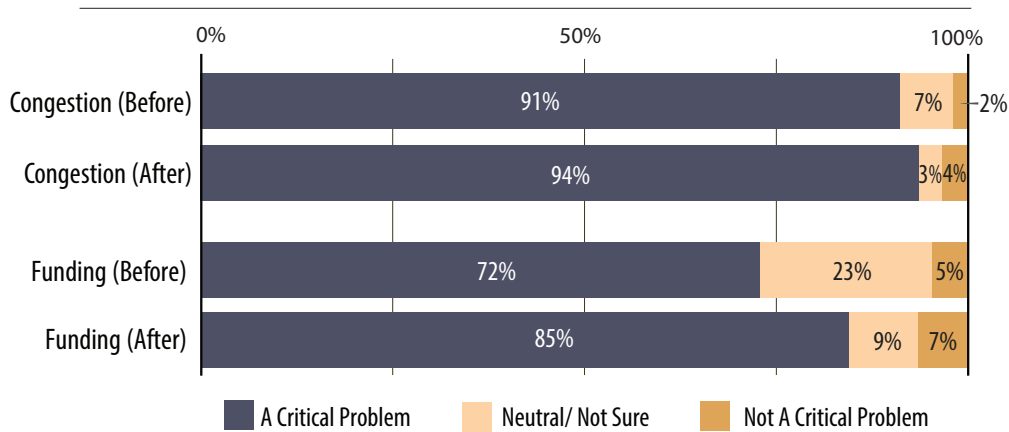
People had strong negative reactions to the GPS-based Scenario 2 (Pricing on All Streets and Roads). They saw it as an invasion of privacy, too complicated, and impossible to implement. Scenario 3 (Priced Zones) seemed logical and straightforward, but many participants were less interested in it because they felt it would not do enough to solve regional problems.

Of the three scenarios, Scenario 1 (Priced Lanes on All Major Highways) garnered the most support.

Figure 1: Comparison of End-of-Day Support for the Three Scenarios





**Figure 2: Perceptions of Congestion and Funding Shortfalls as Critical Problems**

People were skeptical about the effectiveness of the scenarios, particularly in reducing congestion. They did not believe that pricing could actually reduce demand because, they said, driving for most people is a necessity not a choice. Participants emphasized that people in this region drive because they have to, not because they want to.

### 3. What's the basis for people's opinions? Which specific factors influence attitudes about congestion pricing and how?

"Privacy" and "choice" were the most important factors in determining support for the scenarios. Comments about privacy were often related to wider apprehensions about losing personal control in an increasingly complicated world.

A sense of choice seems vital to cultivating public support for congestion pricing. Many participants said that because driving is not a choice for most people, pricing should be. The availability of other options besides driving—such as transit, walking, and biking—increased receptivity to pricing. Participants also spoke favorably of proposals that would maintain non-tolled lanes or routes for those who cannot or do not want to pay.

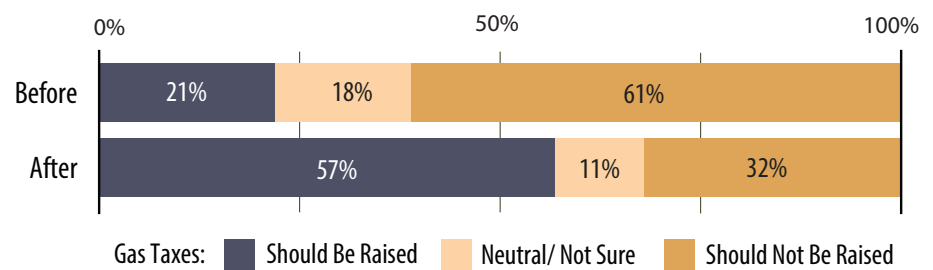
Participants seemed to doubt inherently that congestion pricing would be effective in improving the region's transportation system. Therefore, framing pricing as an effective tool for addressing congestion problems and funding shortfalls does not seem to resonate with the public. However, if congestion pricing can effectively create specific and useful transportation alternatives, people showed more interest. Participants indicated they would be more likely to support the scenarios if transparency and accountability with the funds was guaranteed.

Participants were asked their opinions about how fairly congestion pricing would treat two groups: low-income people, and people who are dependent on driving. Participants said that fairness mattered, but it does not appear these concerns were pivotal in determining levels of support for different congestion pricing scenarios. However, many people did express concerns about whether pricing would be fair to them personally, relative to the assumptions they had built their lives upon.

**Participants suggested that congestion pricing could play a role in the future, but would need to be tailored to the region's needs and integrated into existing systems.**

Support for raising gas taxes nearly tripled between the beginning and end of the forums, once people learned more about it and considered congestion pricing alternatives.

**Figure 3: Change in Support for Raising Gas Taxes**



**4. After learning and talking about congestion pricing, what do people think?**

As the dialogue progressed, opinions regarding specific scenarios shifted in telling ways, revealing comparative preferences: support increased for Scenario 1 (Priced Lanes on All Major Highways), whereas opposition to Scenario 2 (Pricing on All Roads and Streets) increased, and people became less interested in Scenario 3 (Priced Zones). Support for raising gas taxes nearly tripled between the beginning and end of the forums, once people learned more about it and considered congestion pricing alternatives.

Participants suggested that congestion pricing could play a role in the future, but would need to be tailored to the region’s needs and integrated into existing systems. Participants expressed a desire for more integrated problem-solving that includes strategies such as land-use changes to reduce trip lengths (e.g. more affordable housing near Metrorail or more jobs closer to where people live, especially in the suburbs) and enhanced transit alternatives to serve the region’s growth and increasing densities. Many people emphasized that, before anything else, they want to see commonsense improvements, such as better coordination of construction schedules or improvements in the Metro system.

**CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS: What Do the Findings Mean?**

Based on the findings outlined above, this study offers several conclusions and recommendations for policy makers:

**1. People are skeptical of pricing as a comprehensive solution to regional transportation problems, but may support specific proposals if they see direct benefits in their daily lives.**

- » Congestion pricing proposals should explicitly state a compelling value proposition for individuals, emphasizing benefits such as increased choice and individual control. The costs of the congestion pricing policy must be, at least implicitly, acknowledged, and the benefits must be shown in a clear and compelling manner to outweigh those costs.
- » Pilots or trials may reduce skepticism regarding the effectiveness of congestion pricing. For example, the introduction of a congestion priced zone

in Stockholm, Sweden, was preceded by a trial phase that demonstrated to a doubtful public that the program would actually reduce congestion.

- » Incremental implementation of congestion pricing, such as the new 495 Express Lanes on the Capital Beltway in Virginia, may also help ease the transition to more comprehensive programs or more controversial projects.
- » Education campaigns may also help reduce skepticism, particularly regarding the region's transportation funding shortfall and the need for creative solutions.

## **2. People are much more concerned about losing options than they are about “Lexus Lanes.”**

- » Congestion pricing proposals should avoid imposing mandates that do not provide individuals with a reasonable array of options. In some cases, this may mean maintaining toll-free lanes. In others cases this may mean improving transit service or other alternatives before implementing road pricing.

## **3. People lack confidence in government and they fear government overreach.**

- » Proposals should clearly indicate how revenues raised through congestion pricing will be used, and ensure transparency and accountability in the allocation of these funds.
- » Commonsense improvements, such as better coordination of construction schedules or visible improvements in the Metro system, should be implemented in an effort to rebuild the public's confidence. Such a demonstration could be a key component in implementing any major congestion pricing system in the region, or any other attempt to raise significant additional revenues.

## **4. People are more likely to support more obvious solutions—such as increasing gas taxes—than more radical approaches like congestion pricing.**

- » State or federal leaders should consider conducting a public information campaign on the inadequacies of current transportation funding mechanisms and the need to increase gas tax revenues, at least as a short-term strategy.

## **5. People want to know that congestion pricing is part of a wider strategic vision.**

- » Develop a wider strategic plan and implement various elements before or concurrent with the implementation of congestion pricing. While the public cannot be expected to articulate (or even know about) the details of such a plan, they do need to see and feel that the pieces of this strategy fit together and that they will produce a more dynamic and vibrant region that will enhance their own personal lives.