



*Tioga County Countryside Council*  
Tioga County, Pennsylvania

A working-group of the Tioga County Partnership for Community Health

## A Report on the Walking Forum Series in 2009 and 2010

The Walking Forum is a tool available to the public that has the potential to reinforce community identity and lay the groundwork for consensus building by bringing decision makers out of their offices and to allow them to interact with people who are affected by the decisions they make on a daily basis. Several people working in government attended the Walking Forums. One individual related that the polarizing influences of our time are seeping into decisions being made even at the local level. The comment envisioned a day when every citizen would willingly participate in a positive process like this.

The Walking Forum Series was conceived at a “mission review and brain-storming session” of the Tioga County (PA) Countryside Council, a workgroup of the Tioga County (PA) Partnership for Community Health. The primary mission of the Countryside Council is to facilitate communication between citizens who live in towns and have a more urban outlook, and those who live in the more rural parts of the county, in order to protect the natural and rural ambiance of the County. During that discussion, the topics included the overall health of the citizens, and our need for more exercise, and went on to the question, “Why do we always seem to make decisions about our environment and natural resources, indoors?”

The result was a conversational protocol, based upon leading questions posed to the participants, and discussed while walking in groups. What emerged was an experience that thrilled the participants, because they felt like they could speak their minds into a social space where everyone had an equal opportunity to be heard. The design of the walks included four “conversation stations” where a general concept, or question, was discussed, and the answers were recorded. Those notes, in turn, were used to build a case study and to inform the 2010 Tioga County Comprehensive Plan. In addition, a social space created out of a common meal of locally produced food rounded out the day. The most powerful aspect of the design was the “learning circle” at the end. Each person was asked to speak to the assembled group and share the most significant thing they learned during the day. In this way, each person attending came away with the impressions of all the other participants, not just their own.

During 2009 and 2010, there were four Walking Forums, one in each season, and in four different but significant environments in Tioga County: 1) A watery environment where streams fed a lake; 2) A forested environment where the services of the forest ecosystem were examined, particularly the impact on air quality; 3) A farm environment, where the earth, minerals and soil fertility were examined, and 4) A town environment, where business, social and home life, and energy consumption were examined. Several months passed after the end of the fourth Walking Forum when the Tioga County Countryside Council reviewed the notes taken from the sessions.

What was most striking in this overview of the notes taken from the Walking Forum Series was the diversity of opinion that emerged. There was evidence of a latent criticism in some comments from the “learning circle” that the design of the day favored those who “preach to the choir” in advocating against development in favor of the natural environment. But for each of those criticisms, comments from the sessions revealed clearly articulated voices advocating for business development to support a living wage for citizens, and meaningful work to provide economic opportunities for the next generation. And thus there emerged a consensus that business needs to go on, and that business practices that lead to the destruction of the beauty of the natural ambience of the area would “kill the Goose that laid the Golden Egg.”

How can this be, that such seemingly opposing views could be aired in this way? The design of the Walking Forum created collaboration by giving each participant the opportunity to speak in answer to an open-ended question, where the intent was actually to capture the opinion of the speaker. The result was that a social field of trust and acceptance was created. This process of sharing seemed to reinforce a sense of community identity, which further created the sense of safety while acknowledging and honoring the diversity of opinions. Furthermore, this structured activity created an educational environment where self-discovery could take place, a “bottom-up” education where pride in local ideals of skills, mutual help, neighborliness, and life-long learning could be experienced in a palpable way. Many comments from the notes described the participants’ sense of “positive energy” from the Walking Forums, and that this was their “best experience” learning about the differences between “natural law” and “civic law.” The Walking Forum’s simple process of sharing lends itself to the development of a sense of community, interconnection, and positive energy. In short, it is a process where diversity of opinion can be held in a common space and where the potential for consensus can be found.

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