



Discussion Guide

Neighborhoods AND the New Normal

Thank you for agreeing to moderate one of the Twin Cities Daily Planet community conversations about the new normal. We appreciate your insight and expertise, and your willingness to bring out the same in others. This month we are tackling the theme of Neighborhoods and the New Normal.

Use the article [Hard times, hard choices: How should neighborhoods respond to the new Normal?](#) to frame the 2 hour conversation on neighborhoods. You will want to pay close attention to time in order to get everything done. Here's a quick look at the format and timing for the conversation.

Context & Purpose Twin Cities Daily Planet 10 mins

Introductions 10 mins

Framing Article 15-20 mins

Discussion Questions 50-60 mins

Wrap Up 10 mins

Evaluation 10 mins

→ *Facilitation Materials (Optional):* Nametags and some large paper, preferably chart paper.

The New Normal: Deciding Community Priorities in a Downsized Economy

www.tcdailyplanet.net/newnormal

GUIDING QUESTION

In a time of budget deficits and decreasing resources, how can we best promote the economic vitality and livability our neighborhoods?

→ *Facilitation*—State the guiding question, but do not attempt to answer it right away. If a TCDP representative is present they'll have presented the question, so you can skip this step.

CONTEXT

→ *Facilitation*—If a TC Daily Planet representative is present, we will present the context for the conversation. If not, use this excerpt from [Hard times, hard choices: How should neighborhoods respond to the new Normal?](#)

“Whether we've come across the phrase or not, all of us, in some way, are experiencing a "New Normal." Because of the economic downturn we may have lost a job or experienced job insecurity. We may be worried for the first time ever about whether we can afford to keep our house, make rent payments, or pay for health insurance. Many of us may be monitoring the price of gas more closely or choosing to bike, walk, or take mass transit whenever possible. Feeling the pinch, we're scaling back. We're nervous about our futures and the futures of younger people in our lives.

“Then we open up the morning paper or turn on the news and learn about budget cuts at the federal, state, and city level. Foundations, we discover, are scaling back their levels of giving, too. Programs we've come to rely upon are suddenly under the knife, their futures uncertain. Communities throughout the Twin Cities metropolitan area are feeling the impact. Neighborhood-based organizations are confronting a host of challenges. There's growing need for their services, but less revenue and strained resources. Painful adjustments must be made in this harsh, new environment.

“This month the *Twin Cities Daily Planet* launches [a series of news stories and community conversations devoted to exploring the New Normal and seeking solutions](#). We'll be asking people, in person and online, about the obstacles they're confronting and how they've adjusted their priorities and goals. Each month, from March through November, the *Daily Planet* will focus on a different aspect of this new set of realities. We'll look at how the New Normal affects the state budget, work, health care, immigrant communities, the environment, public services, education, and inequality.”

→ *A quick note on the term the “new normal.” We don't want to focus the conversation on the term, and we won't take sides on whether current economic hardships are permanent (“the New Normal”) or temporary. For the purpose of the discussion we are supposing that the current economic situation will certainly last a number of years, if not become permanent.*

PURPOSE

The purpose of this conversation is to help groups identify and prioritize ways to address problems posed by the current economic situation in Twin Cities neighborhoods. The highlights from these community conversations will be reported in the Twin Cities Daily Planet and used in policy recommendations to policy makers.

→ *Facilitation*—Read the purpose out loud to the group. If a TC Daily Planet representative is present they will have presented the purpose beforehand, so you can skip this step.

PARTICIPATION

Everyone in the group is a participant, no matter their expertise or occupation. Please remember to give the floor to others after you speak, and to keep your comments limited to the subject at hand. Everyone's thoughts are valued at the table.

→ *Facilitation*—Remind group members of this point upfront in order to reduce potential problem of people monopolizing conversations and/or talking too long.

Discussion

INTRODUCTIONS

Please introduce yourself by telling us your name, the name of your neighborhood, what you like best about it, and tell us about a problem in your neighborhood.

→ *Facilitation (optional)*—Have people write these four items on their nametag. This will keep the intros focused and prevent people from listing too many things. If there is a large group, consider breaking off into small groups and having small groups report back to the large group.

FRAMING ARTICLE

Use the article [Twin Cities Neighborhoods Grapple with the New Normal](#) to frame the conversation and as a springboard for discussion. In your summary you'll want to answer these quick questions: What was the article about and what are the main points? What were the problems posed by the new normal? What people doing to address those problems?

The New Normal: Deciding Community Priorities in a Downsized Economy

www.tcdailyplanet.net/newnormal

→ *Facilitation (optional, but recommended)*—Consider assigning 1-2 paragraphs to individuals or pairs. Give people a few minutes to read their assigned paragraph(s). Then ask people to summarize the main points. Give a 30 second time limit to keep the summary moving quickly.

QUESTIONS – 50 minutes (15-20 mins for each)

→ *Facilitation (optional, but recommended)*—Use four large pieces of paper to record main points for the remainder of the conversation. Label them: **ARTICLE**, **VISION**, **HOW**, and **PRIORITIES**. Record the gist of issues as people talk about them. This is important because at the end of this discussion we'll want people to prioritize some of the actions they talked about during the conversation, and they can't do this unless they're all looking at the same items.

1) ARTICLE What did you find most interesting or relevant about the article?

2) VISION With fewer dollars available to spend on neighborhood services, how can we best maintain the vitality of our neighborhoods? Are there creative ways or models that we can lean on?

→ *Facilitation*—Below are some examples. Do not say these before participants' respond, but clarify if some one is confused about your meaning, or to get the conversation going if it halts)

- 1) maintaining current levels of police and firefighting
- 2) supporting neighborhood businesses
- 3) maintaining funding for home improvement grants
- 4) maintain funding for parks and libraries.

3) HOW AND WHO Given a scarcity of resources, how can we achieve some of these goals? Who is responsible for achieving them?

4) PRIORITIES Which of the suggestions mentioned should be our priority? Pick 2-3 of the list of suggestions we've recorded so far. If those are your priorities, and you can't have it all, what are you willing to give up?

→ *Facilitation*—Below are some examples: Do not say these before participants' respond, but clarify if some one is confused about your meaning, or to get the conversation going.

- 1) *Neighborhood organizations should reorganize resources to be more efficient, collaborate more with other groups, rely more on volunteers.*
- 2) *City government should raise property taxes to make up budget shortfalls, when necessary, to support neighborhood organizations.*
- 3) *Government funding should be directed to basic services, property taxes should be cut, which will strengthen neighborhood vitality.*

WRAP UP

- 1) Do we have any common ground or consensus on priorities that we can partner on as we move forward?
- 2) What are you coming away from this conversation with?
→ *Facilitation—You can do this in one minute if you have people limit their answers to 2-3 words and pass around an object, like a light bulb or something more handy like a pencil or pen.*

EVALUATION

Please have participants fill out the evaluation at the end of this guide. It's important to allow enough time for this!

FOLLOW UP

We want to continue the conversation online!

Send us a blog post, article, video or audio clip answering our guiding question, "In a time of budget deficits and decreasing resources, how can we best promote the economic vitality and livability our neighborhoods?" That way, we can incorporate your thoughts from your community conversation in our final article synthesizing community conversations from around the Twin Cities. Send material to lisa@tcdailyplanet.net.

Quick tips for facilitating discussion

We have that the conversation participants will offer great discussion. We do, however, want to give you a few quick tips in case you encounter any of the following problems:

People are confused about the purpose of the conversation

We hope we can avoid this by clearly outlining our purpose and guiding question. If people ask during the conversation, simply come back to these two points on the discussion guide.

Someone hijacks the conversation

You can gently remind the group at the beginning of the discussion that we want to hear from all participants. Most people are mature and understand that from the get-go, but if someone insists on monopolizing you may want to suggest a time limit and stick to it.

Someone goes way off topic

Often other participants in the group will help get the conversation back on track. You can use the discussion questions to ask, “how does that relate to this question?” When moderating a large group some people use an additional piece of chart paper, call it “the parking lot” and write unrelated comments there. You might say, “that’s an interesting point, I’m not sure it directly relates, but we’ll put it on the parking lot,” and move on.

Can you relate that back to the question we were talking about?

There is tension over a given topic or statement

It happens. We want to encourage debate, but if things get out of hand you reserve all rights to move on to another topic. You can say something like:

It’s clear you don’t agree on this. Are there any points of common ground?

There seems to be some tension on this point, let’s come back to it later...

People are not elaborating or explaining

It’s usually hard to get people to stop talking once they’ve started, but just in case people feel tongue-tied you may want to ask a few questions to get them to explain.

What makes you say that?

How do you feel about that?

Someone uses too much jargon, or is simply being unclear

We want experts in their field and in the community to tell us, and each other, what they know. But we also want to make sure all participants understand each other. If some one is being unclear or too field-specific, you might ask some one:

How would you explain this to some one completely outside your field?

Evaluation - Neighborhoods

Date _____ Location _____ Name (optional) _____

1. **Did you enjoy participating in tonight's discussion?**
 - a. Not at all
 - b. A little
 - c. Somewhat
 - d. A great deal

2. **How much did you learn from the information presented tonight?**
 - a. Nothing
 - b. A little
 - c. Some
 - d. A great deal

3. **How much did the discussion help you think through neighborhood issues?**
 - a. Not at all
 - b. A little
 - c. Somewhat
 - d. A great deal

4. **Do you feel greater willingness to work with the people you met tonight on solving civic problems?**
 - a. Not at all
 - b. A little
 - c. Somewhat
 - d. A great deal

5. **Please share your insight on the question, "In a time of budget deficits and decreasing resources, how can we best promote the economic vitality and livability our neighborhoods?"** Use the back of this sheet if necessary.