CHAPTER 2: VALIDATING OF FACTS BY COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDERS

In order to validate the facts learned from the research presented in Chapter 1, a town hall meeting was scheduled and community stakeholders from the village of Panama were invited to attend. The Town hall meeting took place on October 5th, 2006 in the basement of the Branch Bank building at Panama. 29 stakeholders representing the community attended the meeting.

The student steering initiated the proceedings of the meeting with introductions and a brief explanation of the purpose of the meeting. The student groups followed the steering group presentation by meeting with small groups of stakeholders, in 5 round robin meeting sessions. An appreciative inquiry approach was adopted for the administration of questionnaires and the conduct of interactive discussions with stakeholders. The Appreciative Inquiry approach had been selected to orient and direct the course of community interaction to induce hope and optimism for accomplishing the community center initiative, while discouraging pessimism, despair and hopelessness from entering into the deliberations.
The findings of the research from secondary sources and the summary of findings from the focus group meetings are described in the following sections.
Findings from the Town Hall Meeting

1. Physical / Spatial Subsystem

For the October 2006 meeting discussions focused on three key areas, the desired site location, reusing existing buildings, and the need for parking. Participants were also asked about their preferences for:

a. a stand alone community center
b. a stand alone community center and a stand alone fire barn
c. a combined community center and fire barn.

The top two locations chosen were the area north of the café (See Figure 18) and the site of current fire barn (See Figure 19).

![Figure 18: Area north of Café](image1)

![Figure 19: Fire Barn site](image2)

i. Preferred Sites

There were several sites that were discussed for the location for the community center and some of the locations were: the area north of the café, the current site of the fire barn, and the open area at 8th and Locust. The two locations chosen most often during the meeting was the vacant area north of the café and the site of current fire barn. A particularly appealing aspect of the area north of the café is that the town already
owns this land, which would help address the concern that the town now owns too much land. It was noted that this area is currently subdivided into three lots. If this site is not selected for the community center/fire barn, the village board may choose to dispose of this property to a private party, in order to secure capital for the community center and also making the property eligible for the levy of property tax. Another appealing aspect of this location is its accessibility to the main sewer line which runs along Locust Street.

The other location that was frequently chosen was the site of the current fire barn. Even though this is a desirable location there was serious concern whether the community center and fire barn should be combined into one building. One of the concerns regarding combining the two is how to protect the fire equipment from vandalism since it has been occurring in the area. Another concern was regarding the potential for exposure to hazardous materials.

Another area that was discussed (but not chosen) for use was the village owned lot at 8th and Locust. No one at the meeting found this a desirable location for the following reasons:

1) There’s only one-way in and out. In order to correct this, the town would have to purchase additional land for a road.

2) It seems out of the way and especially for the elderly who live in the community.
3) The village may decide to add another ball field, and this site would be the ideal location.

4) This location is relatively distant from the downtown area.

5) The community center and fire barn could not be combined at this location since the fire barn would be relocated away from the center of town.

ii. Use of Existing Buildings

There are two existing buildings that could potentially be used for the community center:

1. the church, if it relocated to a new area
2. the abandoned school building.

It was learned that since no serious discussions regarding financing had taken place between the village board and the church authorities, the site was no longer under consideration as an alternative for the community center.

The old school building is privately owned and since the village board has no plans to acquire any additional land adjoining the school, this alternative was also no longer under consideration. The prohibitive cost of rehabilitation of the building was another factor that was considered a major deterrent for selecting the property for the community center.
iii. Parking

Parking was a major concern for some of the participants at the town hall meeting. The primary concern appeared to be the perceived spill over to the residential areas when such events as wedding receptions, were hosted at the facility. The number of people who may attend these events has been estimated by some citizens to be 200-250. Some participants observed that parking would not be an issue if a downtown location for the community center were chosen. Downtown businesses and the post office would be closed when the community center is used - primarily during evening hours. Some participants believed that the green space along the abandoned railroad tracks would be available for additional parking if needed.

After review of the factual opinions and suggestions volunteered by the stakeholders, it was concluded that:

a. Available downtown locations and immediately adjacent areas are the most preferred sites.

b. Sites with existing buildings were not considered as preferred sites.

c. Parking is an important issue that needs to be considered. It would be useful to conduct further investigations into the parking issue, once the community center location is settled.
d. Proper signage will be necessary to assist visitors find parking during special events with a large number of visitors.

e. Proximity to the trail system is considered a definite asset and could provide the needed space for spillover parking.

f. Some citizens thought the close proximity of the community center to the fire barn presented itself as a nuisance ranging from excessive noise during events to odor and difficult design problems.

g. Concern about providing playground equipment at the community center was expressed as a concern. The site must have adequate space for playground equipment that needs to be certified for safety and either purchased new or relocated from other locations in the village.

Table 1 shows a matrix comparison of possible sites based on a simple scoring system. Points are added if the site characteristics are considered beneficial, while points are subtracted if the characteristics are considered detrimental to the community. It may be observed that the site that secured the highest score and the highest rating is the one north of the café in the industrial zone.
The primary purpose of the focus group meetings with community stakeholders was to:

a. revalidate the findings of the survey
b. verify the level of existing support for the community center
c. verify the prospects for additional support for the initiative
d. confirm findings with any amendments as needed.

The focus groups reiterated and confirmed most of the findings from the community survey. The first major conclusion from the focus group meetings was a strong sense of community existed in Panama. Stakeholders stressed that the community center if implemented would fulfill urgent community needs, because current facilities in the village were not adequate to host events and community groups. The expressed preference for the community center was for a facility that had similar attributes to those in other communities with the capacity to host large

### Table 1: A Site Comparison Using a Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Village Owns Property</th>
<th>Close to Downtown</th>
<th>Located on Locust along Sewer System</th>
<th>Provides Parking Opportunities</th>
<th>Provides Trail and Playground Opportunity</th>
<th>Provides Access to Traffic</th>
<th>Located Adjacent to Residential</th>
<th>Total Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CC/Fire Barn at Existing Fire Barn Site</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CC at Existing Fire Barn Site, Fire Barn at New Site</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North of Café</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old Schoolhouse</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Near Ball fields on 8th Street</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. Social and Demographic Subsystem

The primary purpose of the focus group meetings with community stakeholders was to:
events. The community did not believe that there was competition among neighboring communities with respect to community centers.

The focus group meetings revealed the existence of a number of community groups already in existence, such as little league, senior groups, people who play cards, various interest groups and church groups who would be interested in using the facility. Stakeholders emphasized the need for a place to host a wedding. There appeared to be some doubts about how strongly the village board supported the residents in the interest for the community center. Communication between residents and the village board appeared to be an item that needs to be strengthened.

3. Economic/Financial Subsystem

It was very evident from the discussions that funding had to be considered under two categories:

a. Capital cost for constructing the community center

b. Operating costs to for on going maintenance and support of the community center, once it is built.

The following matrix in Table 2 summarizes the potential sources for funding the community center under each of the aforementioned categories.
Table 2: Community Center costs

A community center could be used as a vehicle to attract businesses to Panama by creating a place where people gather and opportunities for local businesses to recruit customers. The long term vision communicated by the citizens indicated they were hopeful the Village would have a stronger downtown area in the future if they had a community center.

The community felt quite reassured that Panama was assured of securing funding for a new fire barn. The prospects of funding for the fire barn appeared to give the community a ray of hope about the community center if it could be included as part of the fire barn complex. A percentage of citizens surveyed indicated they would support funding for the community center if it was guaranteed that the community center would be integrated into the fire barn complex. However, it became very...
evident that a detailed cost comparison of the two alternatives - separate buildings and a combined facility – would be necessary before the community came to any overwhelming agreement relating to funding.

Several members of the community indicated that they have fundraising and grant writing experience in the past. Fund raising by selling items door to door, conducting pancake feeds and soup suppers, running concessions, organizing car shows have been very productive in the past and this experience is believed to be community strength. The citizens expressed their readiness and willingness to participate actively in fundraising because they recognize its crucial role in making the community center a reality.

The community was receptive to the idea of relocating the Village Offices to the community center. Rent from the Village Offices could reimburse part of the operating costs. Whereas the prospects of renting the community center building to private businesses was discussed, the idea was not supported. One of the approaches that was suggested to minimize operating costs was to restrict the use of the community center to a limited number of activities to be conducted on a part time basis.

Citizens were asked about the possibility of re-using an existing building to locate the community center. The cost of acquiring this property together with the additional cost involved with renovating the
abandoned building which was in considerable ruin were two factors justifying why this option was not favored.

The prospect of Panama partnering with neighboring communities to build a shared regional community center was discussed. Such a community center had the potential of adding such activities as exercise facilities, a larger gymnasium, larger spaces for entertainment and a larger kitchen. Since most of the surrounding communities already had their own community centers, Panama stakeholders expressed a very strong desire to have a community center of their own.

4. Values / Behavioral Subsystem

In order to revalidate whether the Village of Panama a sense of community or not, the Values/Behavior subsystem group designed and administered a questionnaire as part of the proceedings of the focus group activity. The questions are listed below:

i. If there were no limitations, what would you most like to see in your town?

ii. How would a community center help you achieve those goals?

iii. Which comes first, community, or a community center?
A total of 20 respondents responded to these survey questions. who were attendants at the meeting? Following is the results of our survey answers.

A place for youth and senior activities was considered as Panama’s top priority for additions to their community.

Next to Panama being quiet and safe, a sense of community was considered important. Stakeholders believed that a sense of community was present in the village. However, they felt that without a community center, Panama would never be able to grow. With community listed as a definite priority for these citizens, it is very likely that a community center will be utilized to grow and strengthen and sustain “community” in Panama. It was reassuring to learn that a community center, if it was built, was very unlikely to be unused.

A lack of businesses was also a common concern among the stakeholders. However, many residents also noted that a community center would be an important catalyst for the community to grow in numbers. They reasoned that increased interaction among residents and a friendly first impression of the town for those seeking to relocate in the area could help Panama attract new businesses and residents to locate in Panama.

A lack of local interaction, business, and activities are other important issues identified by the respondents. This observation justifies the
assumption that a community center would be very instrumental in creating and maintaining a stronger sense of community in Panama.

Community participation and socializing were the two items that were considered quite important to the community but there was no place for any significantly sized crowd to gather. This suggests the need for a gathering place in Panama which appears to be assured of use if it existed in the community at the present time. This final observation was confirmed by 8 out of 14 stakeholders who believed that they would use the center frequently.

In summary, it was confirmed that community support for a community center is very evident in Panama. Whereas a sense of community is present in Panama, a community center is necessary in order for this town to achieve and maintain higher levels of community interaction and a healthy community. Continued support, commitment, and motivation are essential if the Village of Panama has to achieve this common goal of building and supporting a community center.

5. Decision Making and Communication Subsystem

The following questions were directed at stakeholders who attended the focus group:

1. How did you hear about the meeting today?
2. How do you communicate with others in and outside the community?
3. Do you have mobile phones or internet facilities?
4. How do you communicate with the bank? How do you keep yourselves informed?

5. Have you organized any previous community activity? If so who were the decision makers?

6. What works in your community? Do you have a committee, if so who are the members?

7. How do you involve young people in decision making?

8. How long do you think will take for your community to make a decision about the realities of a community center? Immediately or a long time?

The responses are presented in the following table:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Group</strong></th>
<th><strong>Media used for Town hall meeting.</strong></th>
<th><strong>Communication</strong></th>
<th><strong>Community Meetings are held at</strong></th>
<th><strong>Decision making</strong></th>
<th><strong>Youth participation</strong></th>
<th><strong>Community activities in the past</strong></th>
<th><strong>Time factor for community to take a decision</strong></th>
<th><strong>Any official body in the community</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Group 1</strong></td>
<td>Newspaper, Utility bill.</td>
<td>Landline phones.</td>
<td>Town building - behind the post office</td>
<td>Village board</td>
<td>No youngsters</td>
<td>Women’s club, Blood Drive’s Pan Cake week, Fire department, Panama centennial celebrations</td>
<td>20 or 30 years</td>
<td>Town board. Elected officials. (7 members). Official town business takes place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Group 2</strong></td>
<td>Phone, Local Newspaper, Mail through bank, Word of mouth.</td>
<td>Landline phones. Few of them use mobiles.</td>
<td>Post office.</td>
<td>Open to public for decision making. Town board decides about the decision.</td>
<td>Youth doesn’t know about the happenings in the community.</td>
<td>Heard about the Centennial celebrations. But was not present.</td>
<td>6 months</td>
<td>Town board. Elected by public. 4 members.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Group 3</strong></td>
<td>By accident, Newspaper, Flyer, Campaigning, Utility Bill.</td>
<td>Internet Facility. No mobiles.</td>
<td>No space to accommodate Christmas party, Easter, craft fairs.</td>
<td>Town board.</td>
<td>No youngsters in the community.</td>
<td>Firefighters, Blood drive’s pan cake week active participation for fund raising. Bagels, Craft fairs held by women’s group.</td>
<td>Not mentioned.</td>
<td>Town board. Aim is to develop community foundation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Group 4</strong></td>
<td>Utility bill, Flyer, Newspaper, Word of mouth in and outside the community.</td>
<td>Land Phone. Absence of tower/booster so no mobiles. Internet facility is good.</td>
<td>Post office.</td>
<td>Town board. Huge disconnect between the board and the people.</td>
<td>Not a priority for youngsters. as most of them are working and studying elsewhere</td>
<td>Women group collected funds for their group. Arranged carnival for kids.</td>
<td>No idea.</td>
<td>Village board. 7 members in the committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Group 5</strong></td>
<td>Village News letters, Outside panama people were called by Bill. Word of mouth, Personal contacts and telephones.</td>
<td>Few responses to internet facility. Not much usage mobiles.</td>
<td>Church, cafe (60-65). More than that people go to different community</td>
<td>People can put their inputs. Village board is the decision maker.</td>
<td>Youngsters are more involved in high school. They don’t know about the meeting.</td>
<td>Women group is the active group. Centennial celebrations.</td>
<td>1 year and Four months for decision.</td>
<td>Unofficial is the village of panama board. Another is the Ball team committee is used for scheduling ball games.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 3: Findings from responses to questionnaire*
It was learned that most of the respondents received information about community meetings through utility bills, on which the meeting details were printed. The other primary resource is the daily newspaper “THE VOICE” which is printed under the instruction of Bill Bryant. Additional resources for sharing information include landline telephones and word of mouth. Bill Bryant himself plays a vital role in spreading the message across the community.

Most of the attendees agree that they rely on landline phones. Due to the absence of a cellular phone tower close to the community, there is minimum usage of cell phone in spite of the fact that most of the community's residents have one. A few also agree that they have provision for internet facility which is sparingly used. The presence of the reporter from “THE VOICE” means that residents are aware of the community activities.

Stakeholders were informed that Blackboard and Breeze are two tools that are employed by the students involved with this study to communicate with stakeholders. All participants were invited to use these tools to maintain communication with the planning team of students.

The residents unanimously agreed that they do not have a separate gathering space. If the crowd is large (50 to 60) they congregate in the church and if smaller, they assemble at the post office or the cafe which are available for use during the evenings. Most of them
expressed that weddings or any other big events usually take place in community centers in other communities.

It was learned that the village board needs to secure more direct public input as a prerequisite for justifying public decision making. The current procedure adopted by the village board is to administer to determine support for any emerging decision. The results of the survey are compiled and a decision is made with due consideration to the survey results.

Decisions relating to the use of public funds are usually taken by the village trust which was created following the centennial celebrations. The village trust in turn is governed by the village board.

It was observed that the town hall meeting was conspicuous by the absence of young adults in attendance. Those in attendance mentioned that this was due to the lack of employment opportunities for the young people that essentially forced them to seek employment away from the village. Their absence was attributed to most of these young adults being away at work.

Community activities that have previously occurred include Women’s club, Blood Drives, Pancake week, Fire department events, Panama centennial celebrations, and fourth of July activities. It may be concluded that the residents of Panama do take part in community activities and that this participation would likely increase if their ability to
gather as a group was facilitated by the construction of a multiuse center within the limits of Panama.