



The People's Agenda

Camden

January 2021

For the past year, residents and news organizations in three New Jersey cities, including Camden, have gathered to break bread, listen to each other and discuss priorities and concerns in their communities as part of a project called Voting Block.

This was the second time the Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University has coordinated Voting Block, a project intended to amplify underrepresented voices. The 2019-2020 program was focused in Paterson, Newark and Camden. In each city, small groups of residents shared meals and discussed issues that mattered to them. The dinners connected people of diverse ages, ethnicities, religion, political leanings and priorities – people who otherwise might never connect. It also connected journalists to community members they might not ordinarily cover.

Although Voting Block began with in-person meals, it pivoted to virtual dinners due to the pandemic, with local restaurants delivering meals to neighbors' doorsteps so they could join the conversation from the safety of their homes. In many ways, the new format evoked more honesty and empathy as participants grappled with illness, job loss and schooling for their children.

Camden City Councilwoman-At-Large Sheila Davis and her colleague Councilwoman Shaneka Boucher joined for the third and final dinner. Topics included education, illegal dumping, public safety and community engagement. There was disagreement and unexpected common ground. Accusations turned into opportunities to see others' perspectives and pledges to help each other do better.

Journalists also participated in the conversations, fielding complaints about their coverage while at the same time seizing the opportunity to address those complaints by listening to new points of view, connecting to new sources and building lasting relationships. Journalists and residents themselves produced stories based on the conversations they had and the connections they made.

Throughout Voting Block, we knew that one of the outcomes we wanted for the project was the creation of a **People's Agenda**: an agenda that we could present to lawmakers that was built entirely upon what Camden residents said they wanted to see happen in their city.

On behalf of those residents and Voting Block, we respectfully ask you to consider these priorities as you continue to lead our city through the second wave of the pandemic and beyond.

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The following items were compiled from Voting Block participants and residents of Camden.

EDUCATION

Three main themes emerged from the residents who cited education-related issues as their main priority: inequality in public schools, wasteful spending and the process of hiring professional staff.

On inequality:

“Kids need an education. It’s become a business now. They’re plucking off the best from the charter schools. But it’s about the marketing of it. Public schools need to market better and promote how good they are. It goes to economics.” —Rashaan H.

On wasteful spending:

“Education is almost tied into the gentrification of Camden where you have less children overall in the school system. And they seem to be privatizing the Camden city school system with these renaissance schools which are private but not private run by outside agents that are not in the city of Camden. Basically, all this money is being given out to all these outside agents while the Camden city school district is crying ‘we have a bunch of deficits.’ But if you cut these contracts that you’re giving to the outside agents, you have the money.”

—Candida R.

On hiring:

“The process of hiring needs to be reevaluated. They’re just plugging in folks into spots. Then you have these teachers and supporting staff not treating the children right, abusing them verbally, bullying them or expressing racism. They should interview them better and get some more back door information before filling up a spot. That’s a problem.” —Evangelista B.

QUALITY OF LIFE

Two main themes arose when talking about the challenges of daily life in Camden: noise pollution and inadequate waste management, including but not limited to illegal dumping.

On noise pollution:

“Waterfront South has a lot of issues – neglect and destruction – the kinds of things that arise from drug violence. It’s also adjacent to a lot of industry. There’s been, over the years, very active participation by residents who make life better in this area concerning those environmental issues. It constantly feels like a really heavy lift. It’s heartrending how many people live in this community that are being impacted daily by these things, almost on a subconscious level between the smell and the noise and whatever is floating in the air. And that’s not to mention the johns dropping women off on the street. Through the night, I can hear the scrap metal facility at work. It sounds like Godzilla vs. Radon out there sometimes. Should they be allowed to do this at 1 a.m.? I can hear it through my bedroom window. It’s waking me up. I have no idea where to begin to address that.” —Cassie M.

On illegal dumping:

“The big problem is the dumping and the upkeep of the neighborhood. Outside my house there are two dumpsters that have trash spilling out of them. They’ve just been there. On Magnolia Avenue there’s this lot that people just dump trash into sometimes. You can’t have that happening on a business corridor because that doesn’t attract business. It drives people away.” —Shaniyla J.

“You’ll see industrial stuff – tires and stuff. People working on properties don’t want to pay to dump this stuff. People put their old mattresses out and they don’t call the Department of Public Works because waste management doesn’t pick up everything now. So they take it to a vacant lot. It amazes me that people are comfortable dumping on Camden. They just dump everything here. They just dump. It should be constant upkeep. We need accountability all the time.” —Tracy C.

On waste management:

“The alleyways are a major problem. They’re not taken care of. They’re not paved. The trash is out of control. You can’t even drive down some of these alley ways in the city because there’s so much trash. What type of funding would we need to get the lidded trash cans that the suburban communities have? How cost effective would that be for Camden to invest in trash cans like that?” —Rashaan H.

DISENFRANCHISEMENT

Two main themes arose regarding the lack of community engagement in Camden: neighborhoods are isolated, disenfranchised and operate on their own with limited resources, especially when the city government forgets them in the rush to revitalize downtown. Compounding that problem is the lack of civic education among residents in those neighborhoods who don’t know how to advocate for themselves.

On neighborhood empowerment:

“People don’t really understand at the very lowest level their own responsibilities and what’s expected of them. These are the expectations that have been placed on us as residents. You are poor therefore you must live poorly. We talk about taxpayers, but it doesn’t matter if you pay taxes or not. Renters, temporary housing people, people who live in shelters are all residents of your city and they deserve to be counted too. They’re also part of that solution. It’s going to take a lot, but awareness and healing is where it needs to be at a grassroots level. Neighborhood associations where you have blocks getting together is the only way that’s going to happen. I don’t step into your neighborhood. I don’t know what’s going on in there. It’s scary.” —Candida R.

“When you wake up one morning and suddenly there are three enormous telephone poles behind your house, it’s so demoralizing. Pretty soon as a little ole resident you start to feel like what happened? That sense of being disenfranchised that people complain of, that’s where it comes from. I feel there must be a way to create channels of communication. I don’t think anyone has bad intentions. We haven’t created the mechanism for people who want to plug in and find out the facts and what we can do about it. I want to feel like I can participate in my own life. Democracy with a small d. This is not national politics. This is, how can I work with my neighbors and other people who are impacted to do something effective? I think it’s possible but somehow there’s this structure we have to break through and create a new pathway. There needs to be power built from the ground up.” —Cassie M.

“The problem here in Camden has always been accountability. No one wants to be accountable for their role or their position – not the appointed people, not the non-appointed people. It has become an area of the haves and the have nots. Because you’re a resident of Camden people disregard the fact that we’re taxpayers. And we deserve certain amenities for our taxes. The quality of life is bad here because there’s no accountability. They want downtown to look great so they pushed everybody our way, all the addicts. And now nobody wants to do anything about it. Because they want the heartbeat to beat. But they don’t care about the veins.” —Tracy C.

On civic education:

“You have to get parents to understand the value that their kids represent. Why should they pay taxes? Why should they attend city council meetings? Why should they attend school board meetings? The city of Camden gets a lot of things pushed through because a majority of the people in the city don’t come out. It’s always a small group of people that really fight for policies and laws because people are uneducated about why they should be fighting for those things. Education is important, not just in the structure of the school sense, even just educating people period about how a city works and what parts of government affect other things. A lot of people probably don’t know what city council is for and what it does, not just our kids, but adults as well.”

—Rashaan H.

PUBLIC SAFETY

Two themes emerged in the conversations about public safety: a lack of transparency about criminal activity in the city and an apathy and disrespect on the part of law enforcement in certain neighborhoods.

Apathy in law enforcement:

“When I’m walking down my block to go to my job, you better believe I’m hyperaware of everything that’s going on around me. When you have drug houses that are wide open, when it’s so clear and blatant and in your face, I don’t understand how it hasn’t been addressed. Police know exactly where they are. There’s foot traffic and there’s even been bodies. Clearly the police know. There’s a process to the law. They can’t just go and arrest everybody. There’s no room in Camden jail. You must be extremely aggressive. But in the climate today, you can’t have a police force or a system that’s going to be aggressive in a city like Camden. So, the solution is very difficult. First you have to work with the people.” —Candida R.

“They were talking about the reveal of Black Lives Matter Boulevard. That sounds like something good and moving in the right direction. But at the same time they tried that with the peaceful protests of Metro but after the protest they were talking about misconduct with Metro. I don’t understand this whole thing where they’re trying to beautify and talk about the Black Lives Matter movement and at the same time doing away with MLK’s house when people were trying to fight for that to be a landmark. It seems like with certain things they do they’re just trying to be a spotlight for the rest of the world and the next day everything goes back to the way it is.” —Christine A.

Lack of transparency:

“The way they record the crime that’s going on is making it seem like Camden is safer. But in the last two days, the hospital received three gunshot victims and three stab victims. Yet we haven’t heard anything about it as residents. I know I didn’t. They’ve got residents thinking that it’s safer but they’re keeping it under the radar to give it the illusion that it’s safer.” —Tracy C.

“I’ve done so many stories about violence in Camden and what I discovered really was that the statistics that they are compelled to part with are the homicides. They don’t tell the media about all the shootings and stabbings. I learn about them from Facebook, from my friends. I did a report on how often shots are fired. It’s every few hours in Camden. It’s insane. They’re saving a lot more lives now. But a couple years ago when the murder rate was so low, the rate of people being shot was the same.” —April S.