



GROVE CITY COLLEGE

COMMON GOOD PROJECT

SERVING OUR NEIGHBORS WITH SOCIAL INNOVATION

CONVENING REPORT

FALL 2024

OUR STORY BEGINS IN THE FALL OF 2023...

New Program Launched

E+I continues to survey student and extended community needs and interest as well as monitor the landscape of entrepreneurship + innovation in the market to ensure that our programming continues to be innovative and relevant. Based on the needs of our community, we created a new program.

Introducing...



GROVE CITY COLLEGE COMMON GOOD PROJECT

SERVING OUR NEIGHBORS WITH SOCIAL INNOVATION

The Common Good Project represents the unique opportunity for students to come alongside the Center for E+I with the goal of addressing the social issues facing Grove City and its residents. As part of the program, student interns were hired to complete a needs analysis of the Grove City area and to analyze the information uncovered and explore potential solutions.

The Common Good Project was made possible thanks to a generous grant made by the Grove City Foundation, an affiliate of the Community Foundation of Western PA and Eastern OH.



As part of the launch of the Common Good Project, E+I hosted and led a Community Convening to bring together several stakeholders from across Grove City, PA. During the convening, participants actively applied design-thinking methods to identify issues plaguing the area and then dig deeper to explore the root causes of those issues. During the spring semester, the Common Good Project student interns performed secondary research and talked to more community stakeholders to gather data.

For more information, please visit <https://gccentrepreneurship.com/common-good-project/>





Rural America is at an inflection point. Once seen as the beating heartbeat of the United States, many rural communities are now scrambling, due to shifts within the country's economy, to find a replacement for the activity and economic viability that was once brought by the now-shuttered factory, or even factories, that breathed life into the community.

Having young citizens leave these communities in search of a better way of life became commonplace. Indeed, the percentage of Americans living in rural communities declined from 30% in 1960 to 17% in 2021. As people trickled out, so did the services and employment opportunities that became unnecessary as the population dwindled. As a true sign of the times, there is only one local dedicated maternity ward, located in Farrell, to serve all of Mercer County because not enough local people were having babies.

The result of this slow bleed-out has been communities that are seeing vast jumps in social issues at the same time that services are being rolled back, creating a breeding ground where problems multiply year after year. Social service agencies are strapped both financially and also when it comes to finding enough quality personnel to satisfy the increased demand for their services. Employers of all stripes have a difficult time finding potential employees who can pass a drug test. The disintegration of the traditional family unit has created a lack of responsibility in young fathers to care for their children. After becoming aware of a **26-year-old grandmother**, a local agency estimates that Mercer County has children who now represent the **5th generation of poverty** in their families.

Despite all these hardships, there is, in fact, hope. Americans are increasingly opening their eyes to the need to address social problems in their communities. Social entrepreneurs who exhibit a desire to attack these issues directly are gaining momentum while, at the same time, foundations are providing much-needed funding through program and mission-related investments. Private citizens are stepping in to help neighbors where government programming is unable to reach.

This backdrop, both good and bad, reflects the current situation in Grove City. Core problems such as addiction, employer's demands for a ready workforce, a high cost of housing, and a breakdown of the traditional family are being addressed by a dedicated citizenry for which failure is not an option. As that group ages, an opportunity emerges for a new generation to accept the torch and build upon the foundation of great work that the previous generation has laid.

The Center for Entrepreneurship + Innovation founded the Common Good Project at Grove City College to provide local social innovation efforts with the guidance and resources to succeed. It is the project's goal to strengthen the Grove City community by helping first to identify social problems as defined by the community and then by working with the community to imagine potential solutions and strategies to address the identified problems **without being prescriptive**. The ultimate vision is to work shoulder-to-shoulder to strengthen the community in the interest of the common good.

Phase I – Research and Convening the Community

To make it to any destination, the first question always needs to be: **where are we right now?**

Demographic information from the U.S. Census¹ displays that Grove City is performing better in most major categories than other communities in Mercer County:

- While Mercer County’s population decreased by 6.97% between 2010 and 2023, Grove City only saw a decrease of 6.28%. In fact, Grove City’s 7,799 residents represent only a 6.8% decrease from its peak of 8,368 in 1960 whereas, Mercer County’s population decreased by 14.91% during that same timeframe.
- Median Home Value of owner-occupied housing units in Grove City was \$156,500 (Mercer County is \$146,100)
- 13.5% of residents are under the age of 18 (Mercer County is 18.7%)
- 14% of residents are over 65 years old (Mercer County is 23.3%)
- Median Household Income is \$58,900 (Mercer County is \$57,353)
- 11.1% of Grove City residents live in poverty (12.5% for Mercer County)

Building upon the above, according to the Washington Post, in the United States “(a) whopping **81% of rural counties** had more deaths than births between 2019 and 2023”.²

Speaking specifically about Pennsylvania, the article goes on to mention that **two-thirds of the Commonwealth’s 67 counties have seen a drop in population during** “recent years”. The Center for Rural Pennsylvania provided an estimate that Pennsylvania’s rural counties will see another decline in population of 6% by 2050. Rural counties such as Warren will experience declines in the double-digits. The Pennsylvania Department of Education provided an estimate that the agency expects there to be **60,000 fewer public school students** by the 2027-2028 school year.

Beyond population, a recent study conducted by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation out of the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute (Datasets available here: <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/health-data/pennsylvania/mercer?year=2023>) found that **Mercer County ranks 58th out of Pennsylvania’s 67 counties when it comes to health and wellness**. Though the community should be very proud to have a strong local hospital in AHN Grove City, this statistic is problematic since most other social services that are available to assist Grove

¹ Bureau, US Census. “City and Town Population Totals: 2020-2021.” *Census.gov*, 2021, www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/popest/2020s-total-cities-and-towns.html.

² Craig, Tim. ““Too Many Old People”: A Rural Pa. Town Reckons with Population Loss.” *Washington Post*, 23 June 2024, www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2024/06/23/rural-america-shrinking-population-pennsylvania/.

City residents are located in different parts of Mercer County. Vulnerable citizens are expected to travel, at best, to Mercer or farther to the Shenango Valley or points south for treatment.

Furthermore, Grove City joins both Sharon and Greenville as playing hosts to Mercer County's **food deserts**, which the USDA defines³ as the portions of a community that are low-income and do not have reasonable access to grocery stores containing fresh fruits and vegetables. The local food pantry does its best to plug this hole as they report serving an astonishing **665 families** from the borough and surrounding area.

Looped into this is the fact that the Mercer County Food Bank reports having seen a **117% increase** in demand for their services, is currently feeding 11,135 people, and is looking for ways to reach another 4,000. Considering a population of approximately 110,000, that means **over 10% of Mercer County residents are receiving assistance around food insecurity, with another 3.6% needing and not getting help.**

All the above begs the question, "What should the level of concern for Grove City's residents be?"

It depends on whether one looks at the glass as being half-full. What the numbers display is that, even during a time when large employers such as Cooper-Bessemer have left Grove City, the borough's residents should be proud of the fact that the loss of this industry did not have the same effect on the community as the similar occurrences in other parts of the county.

With this insight, the question could be better framed as, "What does Grove City have that other communities in Mercer County do not?"

And at the same time, what can be done to improve the lives of Grove City's residents?

It was with these two lines of inquiry in mind that the Common Good Project team forged ahead to Phase II.

³ Dutko, Paula, et al. "Characteristics and Influential Factors of Food Deserts." United States Department of Agriculture, Aug. 2012.

Phase II – A Deeper Dive – Convening and Meeting with Community Leaders

After taking a bird's eye view of Grove City, it was time to take a deeper dive and ask local leaders directly about the issues that they were seeing in the community.

In November 2023, 34 leaders within Grove City were invited to an in-person working session (aka Convening 2023). The leaders were polled prior to the session surrounding the following questions:

- **What do you think are the best opportunities/assets of Grove City?**
- **What do you think are the areas of potential growth or potential untapped opportunities for Grove City?**
- **What do you think are the biggest challenges facing Grove City?**

Nineteen individuals took the time to provide in-depth responses to the questions above, with those responses being used to frame the activities of the working session.





VISUALIZE THE VOTE ACTIVITY: RANKING THE ISSUES

Assuming that the biggest challenges identified by the polling data would equate to those that pose the largest threats, we used the working session to focus on those challenges mentioned by the leaders in the survey.

The eighteen leaders who attended the working session were faced with ranking the following social issues that were identified through the previous survey and are listed below (in no particular order):

- **Housing Costs/Absentee Landlords**
- **Aging Population/Older Tax Base**
- **Poverty/Food Insecurity/Health**
- **Lack of Transportation**
- **Creating/Protecting Jobs**
- **Lack of Alternatives for Retail and Recreation**
- **Aging Infrastructure/Blight**
- **Declining Community Values**



Everyone in attendance then had the opportunity to place three votes based on the perceived level of importance. A **Pink** Post-It note was worth three points, a **Blue** Post-It note was worth two points, and a **Yellow** Post-It note was worth one point.



The results of the **Visualize the Vote** activity were as follows:

Issue	Pink (3)	Blue (2)	Yellow (1)	Total
Housing Costs/Absentee Landlords	6	5	5	33
Aging Population/Older Tax Base	9	3	0	33
Creating/Protecting Jobs	2	4	9	23
Poverty/Food Insecurity/Health	3	4	2	19
Lack of Transportation	1	2	2	9
Lack of Alternatives for Retail and Recreation	0	3	2	8
Aging Infrastructure/Blight	0	0	1	1
Declining Community Values	0	0	0	0

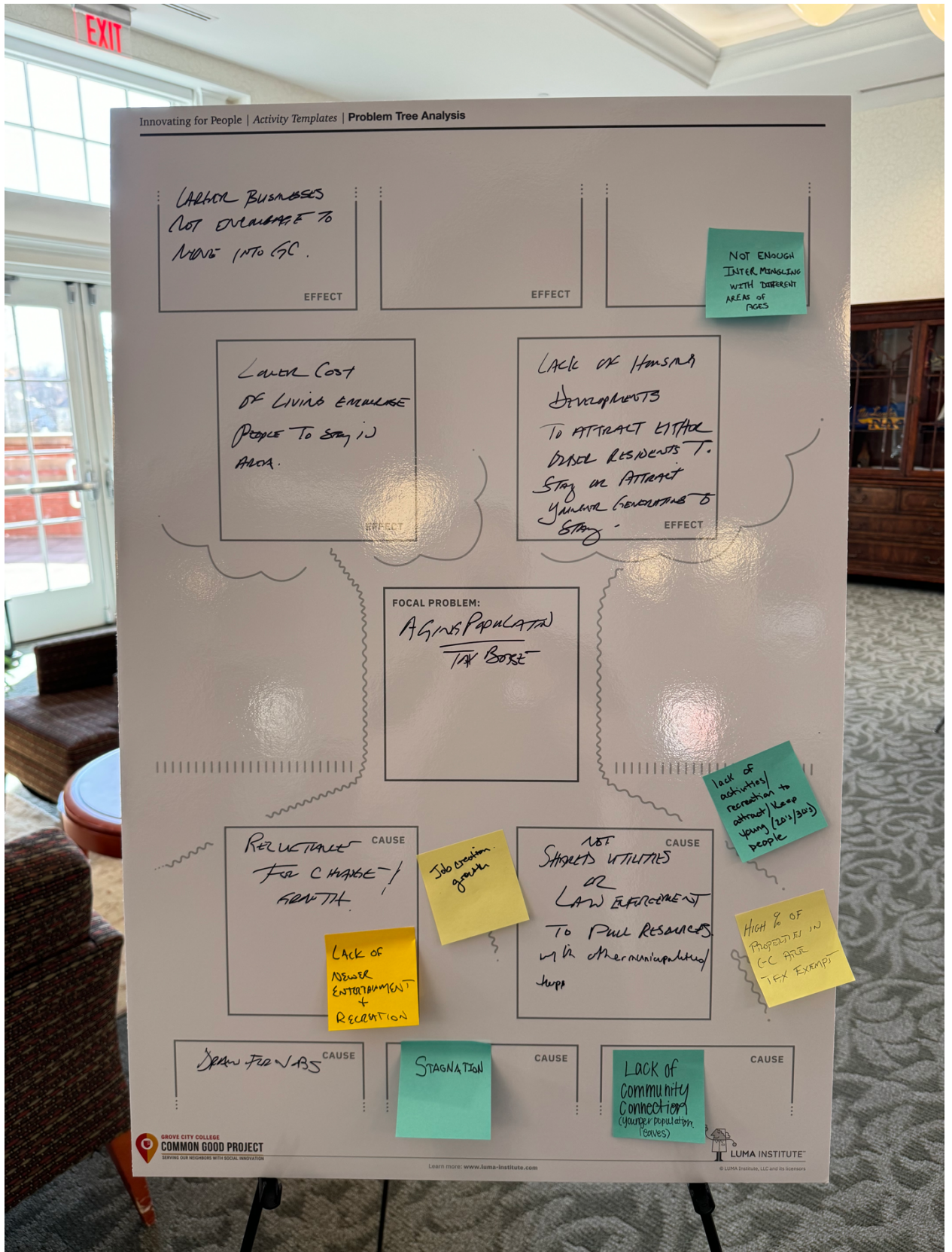
Problem Tree Analysis

Once the voting was concluded, the attendees had the opportunity to join groups to begin the process of discussing the root causes and resulting effects of the top four identified issues, reinforcing the line of thinking it would take to bring the correct solutions to the table. The discussion groups created Problem Trees which can be found on the following pages.

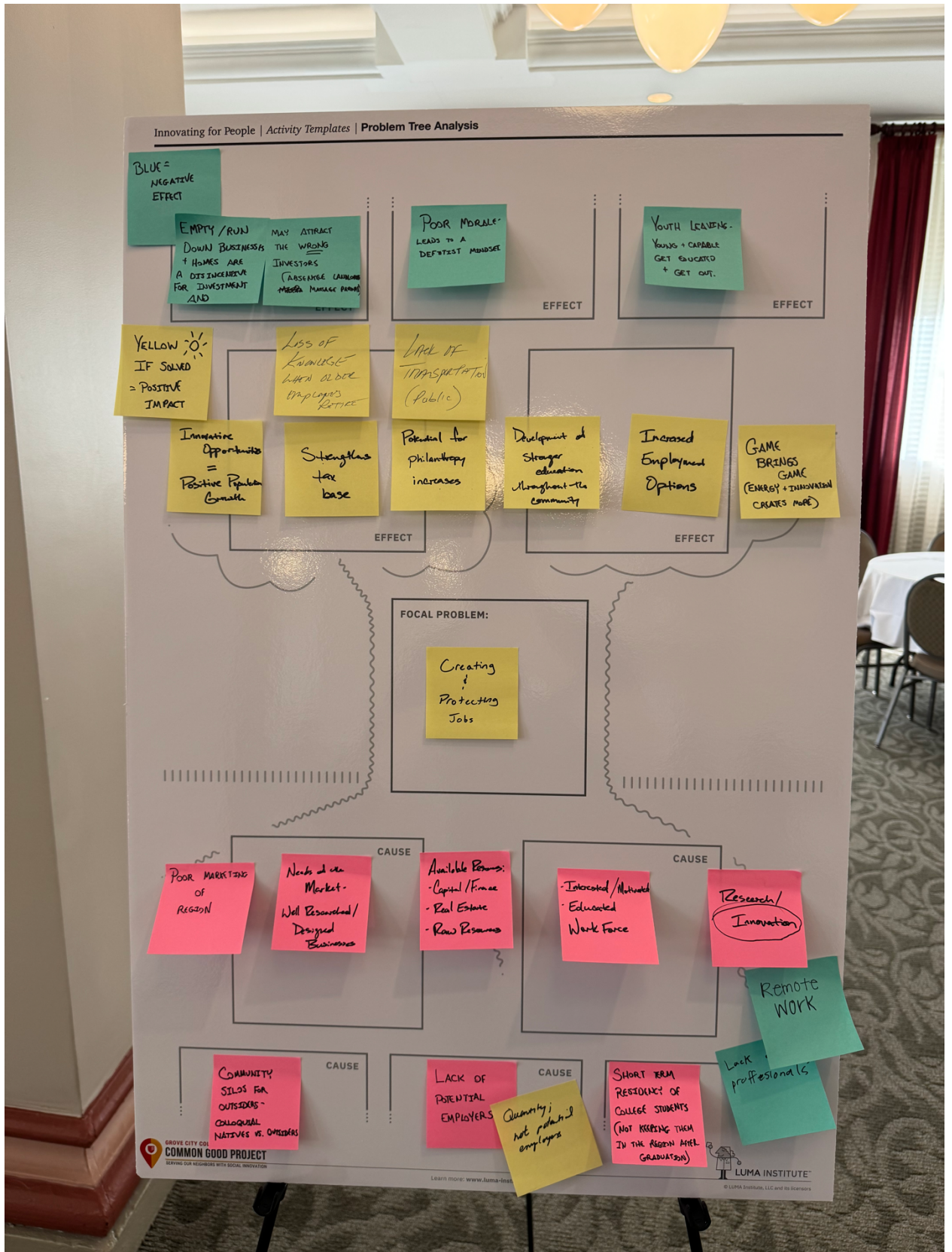
1. Housing Costs/Absentee Landlords



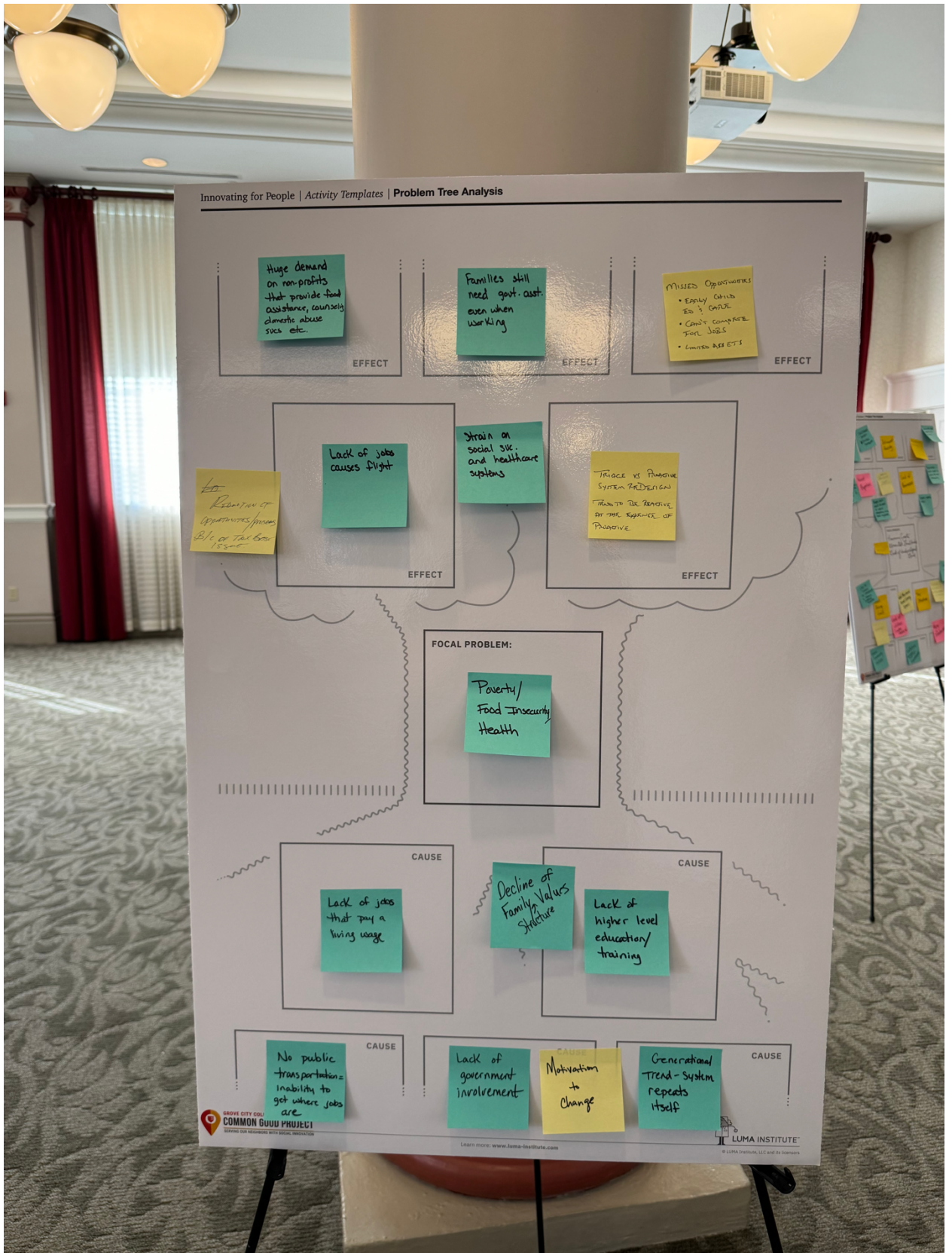
2. Aging Population/Older Tax Base



3. Creating/Protecting Jobs



4. Poverty/Food Insecurity/Health



Walk through the Grove

The final activity was for participants to partner up and walk through the display of Problem Trees to review other groups' work, discuss with one another, and add their own observations and thoughts to the displays.



The event ended by breaking bread together and continuing the engaging discussions.

Phase III – Primary Interviews

Primary interviews were completed to dig deeper into the issues that were deemed to be most important at the Common Good Project Convening 2023.

Eight local leaders were selected based on their level of expertise and either a personal or professional relationship with the issues at hand. These leaders unanimously confirmed that the issues of housing costs/absentee landlords and an aging population/tax base pose great threats to the future of Grove City.

On the issue of absentee landlords/housing costs, points made by interviewees around this subject include:

- While the Borough has had great success in addressing infrastructure, there would be a benefit to hiring a third-party zoning consultant.
- Rentals that drag down property values directly impact the ability of the borough and school district to acquire enough tax revenue to keep services at current levels.
 - The knock-on effect is the residents do not invest in their own properties when there is a disaster next door.
 - 55% of the land in Grove City is not taxable (churches, GCC, schools). Half of the 45% taxable properties in Grove City are rentals.
- Surrounding communities such as Greenville and Slippery Rock require that rental properties be inspected on a regular basis. This type of policy would improve living conditions and hold some landlords accountable.
- A previous GCC study found that there was a considerable reduction in the quality of exteriors for properties that were not owner-occupied.
- A poor rental is a magnet for undesirable activity when it comes to drugs, addiction, and a criminal element coming to town that is not usually on the lease.
- Some of the first homes that visitors and potential residents see when entering Grove City are poorly kept rentals, giving those people a negative first impression of the community.
- When drugs and poverty are present, viewing fellow citizens as liabilities is part of the problem. When people are at low points in their lives, they do not demand more of the rental property in which they live. Viewing neighbors as assets, while focusing on turning around their circumstances, will effectively improve the properties as they demand a better living situation.

- Too many out-of-town landlords do not have “skin in the game” and do not embrace a community spirit.
- Need to do whatever it takes to keep Grove City from being known as a “slum lord town”.
- The majority of the rentals in Grove City could be considered as being owned by an absentee landlord.
- The lack of undeveloped land makes rezoning efforts difficult for quality rental construction and lower-cost homes.
- High home values and a lack of quality rentals serve as large barriers to entry for younger buyers and families.

Regarding the aging population/tax base, feedback included:

- Linked to the above, younger people starting their careers cannot find affordable, quality housing in Grove City.
- A dwindling tax base makes it harder to attract and keep up with salaried municipal positions being offered in other communities.
 - A lack of being able to compete could lead to a collapse in local services.
- The conservative low-tax ideology creates a problem since most state money is allocated to communities that show demand by increasing taxes.
- There is a lack of diverse industry locally. We need a wider array of jobs to attract people early in their careers.
- If young families leave, it decreases the number of students in the school district along with tax revenue, however, costs remain fixed.
- An erosion of community values, such as the existence of massage parlors, eats away at the small-town appeal that makes Grove City a desirable place to live.

We asked for opportunities for improvement, and that is what we received. Yet, it is also important to point out that every person interviewed loved living in Grove City and had absolutely no plans to move anywhere else. They were incredibly positive about their experiences while living and working in Grove City and were simply sharing their perspectives on how things could be improved around the two main areas of concern.

Phase IV – Surveying Parents and Guardians

While it was important to have so many local leaders involved with the convening and primary interviews, a concern was voiced that there was not a broad enough base of perspectives in the room.

As such, the Grove City Area School District (GCASD) was a tremendous help by sending the following survey electronically to every parent contact in the school district:

PARENT AND GUARDIAN SURVEY

DESCRIPTION:

The well-being of our students and their families has always been a top priority for the Grove City Area School District. With this in mind, the district is partnering with the Center for Entrepreneurship + Innovation at Grove City College to participate in the Common Good Project in order to gather data for a needs assessment for Grove City and the surrounding community with the support of the Grove City Foundation.

It should only take you about 5 minutes to complete the survey. Your answers to the questions will not only assist the project in identifying some of the strengths and weaknesses of our community but will also help to determine where future resources may be best deployed.

COMMON GOOD PROJECT (CGP) GCASD PARENT AND GUARDIAN SURVEY RESULTS

While ages were not collected as part of the survey, given that respondents had children under their care that range from attending grades 1 to 12, generally speaking, this is the target demographic that Grove City would like to attract and, just as importantly, retain as residents.

We received **172** unique responses to the CGP GCASD Parent and Guardian Survey. The responses also provide a glimpse of the children in these households and what they may be looking for in the future when deciding whether or not to remain in Grove City. The questions and the corresponding responses were as follows.

QUESTION ONE

What do you like best about living in Grove City and the surrounding area?

Answers	Number of Mentions
1. Family/Community/Small Town Feel/Walkability	114
2. Safety	48
3. School District	27
4. Nature/Recreation	25
5. Location/Proximity to other cities	22
6. Restaurants/small businesses	17
7. Kids activities (especially at the library)	13

Leaders in economic development believe that having residents who live in Grove City and potentially work elsewhere is vastly preferable to having people parachute in for the workday and then leave at 5pm. With this insight, there should be relief in reading comments that were made such as “I've lived in GC my entire life and can't ever imagine living anywhere else. I like the small-town close-knit family feel the town presents. **It was a safe place to grow up, and a safe place to raise my children.**” Knowing that this attitude is being instilled in the next generation of Grove City residents/taxpayers is vital to understanding the prospects for the Borough’s future.

It is also not surprising to see safety and the school district ranked so highly on the list given that there were multiple mentions by Grove City leaders of the “Broken Window” theory. The analogy goes that if someone walks by a building and sees one of the windows is broken, they are more likely to throw a rock to break another one. Soon, there may be graffiti added to the walls and, eventually, the structure could be used for other dreadful activities. The argument is that this escalation could have been avoided altogether if the original broken window had simply been replaced. If Grove City has the reputation that proverbial speeders are continuously getting tickets, then criminals are less apt to see it as a location to break more severe laws. As a result, great care is taken to ensure Grove City’s schools have well-maintained landscaping and clean hallways. If students see that the school district respects them enough to provide a high-quality environment in which to learn, they are more likely to take their education seriously.

Family notwithstanding, the satisfaction that respondents voiced regarding what in many ways is an intangible feeling of living in Grove City is directly linked to safety and the quality of the school district. Ensuring that the police force and school district have proper levels of funding is paramount as these are the two most popular reasons cited as to why younger people enjoy living in Grove City.

Items 4, 6, and 7 appearing on the list of positives are a bit of a red herring. No doubt these are very important however, as we will see in responses to the other questions, there is a great desire to increase the number of available options in these categories. This, in essence, puts more pressure on the first three categories since none of them were listed with regularity as negatives to living in Grove City. This means that, given that most people want them to be improved, **the benefits at the bottom of the list will not make up for losing one or more of the top three.** That leaves us with Location/Proximity to other cities, something that is shared with other communities in which people may consider living.

QUESTION TWO

In what ways could the quality of life in the area be improved? Please be as specific as possible (e.g., events, programs, social services, business support, activities, etc.).

Answers	Number of Mentions
1. Additional activities/events for families	57
2. More recreation (especially indoor during bad weather)	46
3. More amenities and support for businesses (especially restaurants)	41
4. Activities/events for children	38
5. More youth activities	28
6. Accentuated/additional social services	17
7. Improve curb appeal/sidewalks/infrastructure	12
8. More welcoming/better communication for new community members	10
9. More childcare alternatives	9
10. Additional volunteer and job opportunities	9
11. Better transportation options	6
12. Additional medical care options	3
13. Affordable housing	3

Interestingly, the top four ways to improve living in Grove City were also mentioned as positives in being a resident. This strongly indicated that, should options be added/accentuated, this investment would reap large rewards since citizens are already utilizing and excited about current offerings.

Item 5 (more youth activities) was a real concern for parents. Having productive ways for older children who have more independence to spend their time is a challenge for any community and, though the YMCA is appreciated, parents indicated that other offerings are needed. Understanding which specific activities (outside of school sports) would be in demand is vitally important to retaining current residents and attracting more young families. This concept has recently been reinforced by the opening of the Baughman Family Community Center in Greenville, whose teen and youth programs are already running at capacity resulting in the enviable problem of having to fundraise to hire more staff to handle demand. While they did not already have an option like the YMCA in Greenville, parents indicated that they are looking for more options, especially for the time between the end of the school day and when they return home from work. This period has been referred to as the “Danger Zone” by Inspiring Minds’ founder Deryck Toles. Parents need peace of mind, while at the same time, it is essential that children spend that time in a productive way.

QUESTION THREE

What do you like least about living in Grove City and the surrounding area?

Answers	Number of Mentions
1. Shortage of activities for children and families	44
2. Lack of diversity/hard for newcomers	39
3. Poor Infrastructure/public policies	30
4. More restaurants/shopping/groceries	24
5. Few entertainment options for youth	16
6. Not enough culture	7
7. Lack of new businesses	7
8. Options around health care	5
9. Housing costs	5
10. Few high paying jobs	1

After seeing responses to the previous two questions, it should come as no surprise that a shortage of activities for families and children is what parents like the least about living in Grove City and the surrounding areas, thus reinforcing the theory that this area would be a great investment of time and treasure.

With 91% of Grove City residents being white, it is not surprising that several respondents pointed out that a lack of racial diversity exists. Yet, respondents often also mentioned diversity of thought as being a problem. Indeed, Grove City runs proudly conservative, and it is not surprising to see politics surface as an issue in this day and age.

A more addressable point that was observed as a trend in responses is the difficulty that newcomers appear to have while trying to plug into the community. The joke has been made that you finally live in Grove City when you “live in your own house” – meaning that, usually when meeting people around town after you move to the Borough you will be identified as living in the “Smith” or “Jones” house. The hope is that, if you hang in there long enough, then, one day, your family name will mean more than the person who owned your home before you!

Furthermore, it is extremely intimidating to be in a room where the majority of the people have known one another for decades. Finding solutions that help to accelerate a newcomer’s feeling of being part of the community, even if means forming a community with other newcomers, should be considered.

Phase V – Begin Solution Ideation

The list below represents the ideas that were put forth regarding how to start addressing the two main issues identified at the convening. Based on the parent feedback the items in **bold** should take precedence as having the largest reach. *Please note that this is not an exhaustive list of ideas as it is just the beginning of the ideation process – more to come with your help!*

1. Short-Term Ideas

1. **Meet with local and regional social service agencies to discuss levels of support that would best assist them in reaching Grove City's most vulnerable citizens.**
2. **The creation of a "Small Bets" granting program, where groups could receive \$2,500 to \$5,000 to flesh out an idea that could improve community life, would kickstart innovation in partnership with the Grove City Foundation.**
3. Putting together a catalog for real estate developers that contains available properties and their benefits when it comes to infrastructure.
4. **Providing items to the police force that would make their jobs easier, assist officers in connecting with the community, and help improve morale.**
5. Re-zone properties to allow for more single and multi-family housing.
6. Expand the discussion to other municipalities around how best to offer quality rental units to families.

2. Medium-Term Ideas

1. **Provide funding for a permanent position with the borough whose sole purpose is to focus on improving community life.**
2. Allow for access to an arborist to help community members and neighborhoods have an overall strategy in planting the correct vegetation that will improve property values and assist the borough in other ways.
3. **Develop community-led programs to improve the sidewalks throughout neighborhoods.**
4. Begin a beautification campaign that will "nudge" business and property owners to improve different eyesores around the borough.
5. Discuss legislation with elected representatives at the state and federal levels that would limit a single or a small group of landlord's impact on a local housing market.
6. Design a campaign that would foster a feeling of empathy among Grove City residents for their fellow neighbor.

3. General Long-Term Ideas – further idea development is needed.
 1. Change code/laws to improve the condition of rental properties throughout the borough
 2. **When it comes to school taxes, create partnerships that will create a bigger pie instead of fighting over the same pot of money.**
 3. **Create strategies to increase the pay of municipal employees to ensure they are competitive with surrounding cities.**
 4. **Develop a concerted campaign that allows GC residents to understand the need to periodically increase school taxes so the district can remain competitive and keep costs low.**

Phase VI – Next Steps

The community pride displayed throughout this process is what sets Grove City apart from some other surrounding communities. The citizenry is loyal and willing to fight for the Borough's future. Where other small towns are having to cancel events due to a declining population and a lack of volunteers, the community pride in Grove City will serve the borough well as it endeavors to add more activities for families and other residents.

Kenneth Johnson, the University of New Hampshire demographer who pointed out the earlier statistic that 81% of rural counties had more deaths than births, provided a ray of hope for us in his assertion that rural communities that have proximity to major metropolitan regions have a better chance at survival.

Additionally, the US Department of Agriculture stated in a recent report that for the first time in years, rural populations rebounded by .25% between 2020 and 2022.⁴ Though it is too early to know if this will continue, Grove City's location is ideal to capitalize on this trend. Many rural communities are tucked far away from interstates while Grove City sits at the intersection of I-79 and I-80. Residents can be shopping in Cranberry in 30 minutes or on the Strip in Pittsburgh in around an hour.

As we turn to the next phase of the process, it is our assertion that Grove City residents and leaders should be very optimistic while exploring and deploying potential solutions to the community.

Final Thoughts

As a side note, on behalf of the Center for Entrepreneurship + Innovation at Grove City College, a large **thank you** must go out to the community for being willing to participate in convenings, surveys, and interviews and for your honesty while doing so. This is laying the groundwork to improve the lives of Grove City's citizens for generations.

We would also like to thank the Grove City Area School District and its visionary leadership team, the Grove City Foundation, an affiliate of the Community Foundation of Western PA & Eastern OH, for their generous financial support, the fearless students who served as E+I CGP interns and data collectors for the project, Dr. Constance Nichols, Dr. Peter Frank, and Kyle English, the Executive Director of the Community Foundation of Western PA & Eastern OH, for his work on bringing the community together (as well as coaching and advising our interns) to produce this report.

⁴ <https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/107838/eib-261.pdf>, Page 1



CATALYZING + EQUIPPING INNOVATIVE THINKERS + ENTREPRENEURS WHO SERVE THE COMMON GOOD

The Center for Entrepreneurship + Innovation (E+I) provides programs, competitions, and events that foster and support innovative thinkers and entrepreneurs from all disciplines, whether they are students, alumni, or community members, who are committed to blended impact as well as the creation of ventures that serve the common good.

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