Tacoma Mall Regional Growth Center: Neighborhood Livability Needs Assessment

Executive Summary

Introduction
In support of City’s Tacoma Mall Subarea Planning initiative, Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department has hosted three focus group community conversations. The Health Department retained a local community outreach consultant, NW Sound Consulting, to employ non-traditional means of community outreach, such as door-to-door outreach to individual homes, townhouse and apartment units, and local business owners, to invite local residents to join in the community conversations.

Purpose
Health starts where we live, work and play. The Health Department partners with the City to hear the voices of the local residents as to what they need in their neighborhood in order to enjoy a happier and healthier life. The purpose of these community conversations is to identify local needs, concerns and aspirations to improve neighborhood livability.

Three focus groups were held on July 8, Aug 4 and Aug 6, 2015 at three convenient locations with easy access to populations living in different parts of the Tacoma Mall area.

Major Needs Assessment Findings
The following five recurring themes were what we heard from community members:

- **Neighborhood Safety** – Partly attributed to the high residential vacancies, limited places for youth to go, and limited access to needed resources.
- **Parking, Speeding and Traffic** – This safety issue is exacerbated as a result of poor signage (speed, children, disabled, etc.) in the community. This is a safety and injury threat to children playing in or near the streets, in lack of parks facilities. The current limited number and the poor condition of on-street parking have challenged property and human safety.
- **Walkability and Alternative Transportation** – Disjointed, incomplete, poorly maintained, non ADA- compliant and the lack of sidewalks make walking and navigating with strollers very difficult. While shuttle services provide great support, the overall level of bus service was inadequate to connect with employment centers.
- **Parks and Public Amenities for Youth and Children** – There’s a lack of safe places for children and youth to recreate. The Lincoln Heights area west of S. Steeles St., which creates a barrier to safely access Lincoln Heights Park, has no play structure for children. The lack of appropriate places for youth and young adults to gather and recreate has created multiple problems in the community.
- **Access to Healthy Food** – Besides Marlene’s (which is almost unaffordable to local residents), there’s no easy access to affordable healthy food options where people can walk, bike or bus to. There are no food banks or other food sources within reasonable walking distance.

Other concerns include property encroachment, lack of neighborhood cohesion given gated areas, compatibility between various types of housing, and fast turn-over of apartment residents.
**Recommendations**

1. **Improve neighborhood safety**—Work with local community organizations, such as Safe Streets and local churches, property managers, and local law enforcement to explore public safety measures.

2. **Traffic calming and mobility improvements**—Consider traffic calming strategies, add signs, improve infrastructure for mobility; such as complete streets or sidewalks, connect sidewalks with essential public services, and improve on-street parking.

3. **Work with Pierce Transit to improve bus level of service to connect people from home to work.**

4. **Create active places for youth and young adults**—Work with Metro Parks, Boys and Girls Club, churches, or the private sector to create recreation facilities in this area; such as swimming pool, basketball court, skate park (suggested site off of Tyler St. to cap “contaminated soil”). Partner with public and non-profit agencies to bring in role models for youth.

5. **Increase affordable food access**—Incentivize the provision of a full-service grocery store in the area, food banks, an all-season farmer’s market, better management and care of the community garden.

6. **Maintain affordability**—Ensure sufficient affordable and adequate housing for families of different incomes, and consider housing diversification and intensification, such as cluster housing, etc.

7. **Create public places to foster a sense of neighborhood**—Create vibrant public spaces for people to gather. Make public sidewalks a place-making opportunity.

8. **Create complete neighborhoods by adding needed facilities and services**—Provide personal/neighborhood services, parks and amenities within reasonable walking distance, such as medical clinics, community services, salons, coffee shops, playgrounds, trails, dog parks and street trees.

9. **Continue to work closely with the community and create effective means of communication between the community and public agencies.** Continuously communicate with community members as to how their needs are being addressed.

10. **Build community capacity to sustain continuous discussions throughout the planning process.**

11. **Work with Safe Streets and the Neighborhood Council to identify key local leaders to serve as the bridge between City Hall and the local residents.**

12. **Expand the stakeholders’ committee to include:**
   - Two to three key local residents representing various quadrants of the Mall
   - Law enforcement
   - Support agencies, such as local churches and medical services
   - Food Systems Opportunities (Food Banks, Grocery Stores)
   - Boys and Girls Clubs
   - Safe Streets

13. **Engage the wider community to further discuss naming opportunities for distinct neighborhoods within the Mall area.** Consider the history and heritage of the area to provide a continuous sense of identity. Some suggestions for further exploration include:
   - Vintage Park or Vintage Paradise
   - South Tacoma Crest
   - Village Gardens
   - Old Cascadia

14. **Continue to work closely with the Health Department to address the social determinants of health.**

15. **Partner closely with City’s Equity and Human Rights Office to address the determinants of equity.**
I. Introduction: Livability and Health

There is a strong relationship between human health and built environments. “As cities continue to grow, we need to design our buildings, neighborhoods, and commons to promote human health.”¹ As cities and jurisdictions become increasingly aware of this direct relationship, policy-makers are increasingly enhancing their planning processes to account for human health in ways that have not been traditionally explored.

Healthy People 2020 states, “Humans interact with the environment constantly. These interactions affect quality of life, years of healthy life lived, and health disparities.”² (Health disparities are preventable and unnatural burdens among populations in terms of disease, and other challenges.)³
II. Description of Area: Tacoma Mall Regional Growth Center

The Tacoma Mall Regional Growth Center ("Tacoma Mall Community" or "the Community") encompasses 485 acres of property situated in the south-western portion of the City of Tacoma. More than 50% of the area is used for commercial purposes, although roughly a quarter of the area is home to very diverse populations.¹

Geographic Area - For planning purposes, the Tacoma Mall Community is divided into smaller segments. These segments are as follows:

- **Lincoln Heights** – North of 38th street, this area is largely comprised of single-unit homes, with some businesses around the parameter. These include the Pierce County Annex, the Tacoma Police Department, Titus-Will Ford, and others.

- **Madison** – Madison comprises a large portion of the homes in the Community. Multiple types of housing are present, to include duplexes, apartments, town-homes, single-unit homes, etc. Very few businesses are in this area with the exception of small businesses located on Pine Street, 47th street, and on Union.

- **Oakland-Madrona** – A small portion of Oakland-Madrona resides in the planning area. This area is located south of South Tacoma Way and is largely occupied by commercial businesses.

- **Tacoma Mall** – The Tacoma Mall is a large shopping complex, which includes multiple commercial properties in the area.

Most work on this project focused on the Madison and Lincoln Heights districts.

**Age of Residents (based upon 2010 Data)** – Of the roughly 3,800 residents in the area, the majority are between 18-34 years of age, about 45% of the population. This age group is followed by children and youth, who make up just over a quarter of the community, and those between 35 and 64 years of age, who also comprised roughly a quarter of the population as of 2010. At the time of data collection, those 65 and older made up the smallest portion of the population, although this number may have significantly changed in the past five years.⁴
Ethnic & Racial Demographics of the Community – The Tacoma Mall Community is very diverse, particularly when compared to City and State population dynamics. In the Community, 42% of the population self-identifies as “White,” a quantity significantly lower than 64.9%, which make up the representation of this population in the City of Tacoma collectively.\(^5\) (It is notable that this population makes up roughly 77.3% of residents in Washington State). Other populations in the Tacoma Mall Community include a large African American community (25%); a large Hispanic community (21%); populations self-identifying as “Other” or two-or-more races (20%); Asian (8%); Native American (2%); and Pacific Islander populations (2%).\(^4\)

Businesses in the Area – There are roughly 390 businesses in the area. Of these, the majority are commercial retail. Most of the businesses in the area could be described as “small businesses” with 50% employing between five and twenty-four employees, and 35% with four employees or less.\(^4\)
III. Purpose, Outreach Design, and Method

The City of Tacoma ("City") and its planning staff are working to create, support, and sustain healthy and thriving communities. As such, the City put forth the following overview statement associated with working in the Tacoma Mall Community:

"In keeping with the City’s vision of creating healthy, sustainable, thriving communities, the City of Tacoma is working with local neighborhoods to identify areas of opportunity for growth and improvement. The Tacoma Mall Regional Growth Center has been selected as an area of focus to improve livability and long-term growth opportunities. As such, the City is working cooperatively with a number of partners to create a community that supports the health and wellbeing of all community members."6

Outreach Design – A list of recommendations was provided to the City for consideration. The recommendations included holding discussions (or focus groups) in combination with community (group and individual) interviews, informational sessions, and surveys. These options were mindful of the populations in the area and effective methods of outreach, while being malleable enough to meet the needs of the community and City objectives. Of these recommendations, the City elected to make use of focus groups as their primary source of community feedback. The focus groups were to be conducted as follows:

- Three focus groups in various locations in the area
- Invite community members with the aim of having 50 participants
- Focus primarily on residential community
- Take advantage of “Night Out” on August 4th, 2015

Based upon these parameters, focus groups were cooperatively designed to identify local needs and aspirations in order to improve neighborhood livability.

Three Focus Group Dates/Times – Three focus groups were scheduled as follows:

- July 8th from 2-3 PM to reach older adult populations.
- August 4th from 7-8PM to reach younger populations, those working during the day, and to take advantage of “Night Out” as requested.
- August 6th from 6-7PM to reach populations working during the day
Location of Focus Groups – Focus groups were scheduled in locations within the Community, and were intended to provide access to residential populations based upon the data received:

- **Vintage at Tacoma** (July 8th) - *Retirement Community – populations 55 and older*: The “Vintage at Tacoma” is located at 4023 South Lawrence Street, in the Madison section of the area. The Vintage at Tacoma is a large, multi-unit housing complex (apartments) serving older adults age 55+. This location features a number of meeting spaces and is wheelchair accessible.

- **Madison School Complex** (August 4th) – *Young and Middle Aged Residents, Households with Children, Working Adults (Outside Home)* – The Madison Complex is a Tacoma Public Schools Facility located centrally in community. This location features a large meeting space, and is easily accessible for those with varying needs.

- **Westmall Terrace Apartments** (August 6th) – *Young and Middle Aged Adults, Multi-Unit Housing Residents, Day Workers* – Westmall Terrace Apartments is a large multi-unit housing complex managed by Dobler Property Management. This location featured a comfortable meeting space, accommodating those with various needs.

Outreach Method(s) – The outreach methods use to invite participation at the focus groups were as follows:

- **Flyer & Informational Brochure** – Flyers and posters were developed as invitations to participate in focus groups. In addition, an informational brochure was developed for property owners explaining the project, process, and requesting that they make information be made available to tenants, residents, and local patrons as appropriate.

- **Door-to-Door Outreach** – Individual homes, apartment complexes, and businesses received multiple visits from outreach. This outreach was ongoing until August 6th, 2015.

- **Email Outreach** – Invitations were forwarded to community lists by City staff on multiple occasions leading up to each focus group.

Questions Developed for Focus Groups – To identify issues, needs and aspirations, focus group conversations were facilitated around the following questions:

- Do you live or work in the community? If so, for how long? Why did you choose this community to live and/or work in?
- If you live here, what are some things about this community that you (your family) enjoy? If you work here (only), how do you travel to and from the community?
- What types of things do you believe would help to improve the quality of life for you and your family?
- Would you plan to raise children and/or retire in this neighborhood and if so, what would you need in order to ensure that you (your family) could do so comfortably?
- If you were given a chance to name your neighborhood, what would you call it?
- Which three city-wide strategic priorities are the most meaningful to you and your family?
Focus Group Engagement Method – Due to the unique dynamics at each focus group, while questions remained the same, methods for obtaining responses evolved to meet participant needs. As such, the following methods were employed during focus groups:

- Vintage – A relatively small meeting, answers to questions were posed to each individual in the group in a “round robin” fashion by the Community Consultant and the information captured by City staff.

- Madison School Complex – This meeting had relatively large participation, so a round-robin style was substituted with asking participants to write their responses to questions on large sheets paper, which were posted around the room. (Assistance was provided as needed). In addition, open comments were captured from participants to ensure that individual thoughts could be shared.

- Westmall Terrace Apartments – During this focus group, questions were provided via individual hand-outs. The information provided was then “tallied” by City Staff, while participants openly aired their thoughts, concerns, and vision for the community. In addition, a sign language interpreter was provided as requested.

Participation – During this process, between 40 and 50 community members participated in the focus groups. Irrespective of the diverse methods of engagement, those attending participated enthusiastically and requested more opportunities to provide community input.
IV. Community Response: Recurrent Themes and Needs

Participants provided a wealth of feedback during the process, and a few recurrent themes were surfaced in the three meetings. These themes were largely related to safety, traffic & mobility, parks and public facilities for youth and children, open and green spaces, affordability, access to food and human-service resources, and a sustainable relationship between owner-occupied homes and externally managed properties.

Safety – Community members overwhelmingly stated that safety (personal and property) were of huge concern in the area. This issue was articulated multiple times during each meeting, and participants provided examples of current and historic challenges. They largely attributed these challenges to the high number of residential vacancies in the area, limited places for youth to gather for activities, and limited access to needed resources.

However, in addition to concerns, community members stated that they believed these issues could be addressed creatively by providing creative places and amenities for youth (teenagers and young adults), play areas for children, and other opportunities in the area. They also stated that this challenge could be addressed by increasing opportunities for working with multiple forms of law enforcement (Safe Streets, local Police, etc.), and addressing vacant properties.

Traffic (Speeding, Signage, & Parking) – Related to safety, residents were concerned about the speeds in which traffic moved through their community. They believed this problem to be exacerbated (at least in part) as a result of poor signage (for speed, children in the area, disabled populations, etc.) in the community. With limited infrastructure and children playing in or near the streets, they consistently stated that traffic must be addressed.

Residents also raised concerns regarding the limited parking available, and how current street-parking conditions are unsafe in terms of property and human safety.

Mobility (Walkability and Alternative Transportation) – Residents stated that sidewalks in the area were not conducive to walking as a form of basic transportation, as many sidewalks are incomplete, absent, or are in proximity to areas of traffic concern. Residents also stated that many sidewalks are not ADA compliant and are difficult to navigate with strollers and children due to sidewalk settling, damaged, or being incomplete.
Residents also stated that the level of bus service was inadequate for community need. The commented that they appreciated shuttle services, but that regular bus service needed to be increased and better connected to employment centers.

**Parks and Public Amenities for Youth and Children** – Residents stated that there were few places for their children and youth to play safely, and that many children play in the street. They stated that this is dangerous, but that there are very few options if children are to play. Too, residents overwhelmingly stated that there weren’t appropriate places for youth and young adults to gather, recreate, etc., and that this created multiple problems in the community. In this area, many recommendations were made including building a skate park off of Tyler (to also cap “contaminated soil”), building and supporting a community swimming pool, placing a basketball court in a shared space, and having a local “Boys and Girls Club” in the area.

**Access to Healthy Food** – Residents were very concerned about having limited access to healthy food options. While they conceded that “Marlene’s Market and Deli” is located near their community, they stated that costs at this store were too high to meet the needs of the residential community. Most community members travel outside of the community to obtain groceries and basic needs, and often to areas that have limited access by bus. In addition, community members were concerned about limited access to food banks and other food sources necessary to their community, and stated that the community would benefit from having a food-bank in the area.

**Other Opportunities and Concerns** – Community members also voiced the need to ensure that they living in the area remained affordable. As many residents were drawn to the area due to its affordability, they hoped that this would remain a priority in future planning.

Community members also discussed the need for well-planned green and open spaces. Community members stated that parks, trails, and other features would make the community more livable. They also articulated that these areas need to be well planned, as poor planning could lead to compromises in safety. (An example provided was ensuring that trees added to the area did not limit visibility for pedestrians moving through the area and traffic).

Finally, community members were both curious and concerned about the connectivity of their community and the relationships between owner-occupied homes and commercial properties. Much discussion took place regarding the gates around commercial properties, which seemed thought fragmented the community, while others found them to be a necessary safety feature. In addition, individual home owners were concerned about how the livability of the community would be impacted over time given the number of commercial properties and multi-unit complexes being added to the area. Concerns regarding multi-unit complexes also included safety concerns, vacant properties, off-site management, impacts to property values, etc. Home owners stressed the need for better communication and planning between these stakeholders.
V. Discussion

The Tacoma Mall Community is an energetic and diverse community, whose members see the potential for building a sustainable and thriving environment that is conducive to health. While many community members (who participated) were drawn to the area due to affordability, it was clearly communicated that the infrastructure was incomplete, and that, in its current state, make it difficult for members to envision raising a family or aging in place in this community.

Of the three meetings, community members stated that safety was a major concern. Safety issues are complex, although community members believed that some of the infrastructure (such as poor traffic control and the absence of places for youth and children to interact in positive and creative ways) exacerbates challenges.

Community members envision a community that allows for activity for its diverse populations. They believe that sidewalks, parks, green spaces, and bus access are a few of the ways to create a sustainable community. Too, food options (for a diverse income base) are critical to this area, and accessibility must be addressed within the context of residential populations.

An interesting dilemma posed by community members is the relationship between local homeowners and property management companies. Complex layers of challenges as articulated by participants include the following:

- Concerns of externally managed properties encroaching upon individual/owner-occupied residences
- Concerns over connectivity of community given gated areas
- Concerns over property impacts for various types of homes
- Question of community “turn over” due to some externally managed properties coupled with limited amenities

It was clear that communities would like to build and sustain a positive community image, and hoped that this could be accomplished by improving infrastructure and building upon historic strengths.
VI. Recommendation(s)

It is highly recommended that the City continue to work closely with community members throughout this process to ensure that their expertise is gathered in terms of supporting the development of a healthy, livable community. Some examples are as follows:

- Continue to work closely with the community, creating methods of communication that are effective and clear between the community and agencies that participate in the process;
- Prioritize community concerns and provide responses to community members;
- Work closely with the Health Department to continually identify opportunities to address the social determinants of health;
- Consider assisting the community in sustaining their discussions through the development of a “forum” rooted in those participating in the focus group, but extended to other members of the community;
- Consider including critical stakeholders into discussions in cooperation with community. These include
  - Community Members
  - Law Enforcement
  - Support Agencies
  - Food Systems Opportunities (Food Banks, Grocery Stores)
  - Boys and Girls Clubs
  - Public Transit

Please note that these discussions must be carefully planned in order to ensure that the community remains engaged and their expertise valued.

Community Recommendations – Residents stated that there were a number of things that could be done to increase community health and livability in their community. These are summarized as follows:

- Name of Community
  - Paradise
  - Vintage Park
  - Vintage Paradise Park
  - South Tacoma Crest
  - Village Gardens
  - Tacoma Mall Neighborhood

- Increase General Safety
  - Cooperation between community and local law enforcement
  - Cooperation with Safe Streets and other similar organizations

- Traffic Calming and Mobility
  - Slow traffic in cross streets
  - Add signs based upon community use and impacts from outside businesses
  - Increase bus service
  - Create infrastructure for mobility
- Improve and complete sidewalks
- Create “connectivity” of sidewalks and infrastructure
- Address Parking Concerns
- Create Places for Youth and Young Adults
  - Swimming Pool, Basketball Court, Skate Park
  - Places that are Youth (teen) Specific
  - “Boys and Girls Club”
  - Frequently Bring in Role Models for Youth
- Increase Food Access
  - Full-Service Grocery Store(s) in Area
  - Food Banks in Area
  - Farmer’s Market in Area
  - Better care for community garden (vandalism prevention)
- Maintain Affordability
  - Affordable Housing
  - Low-Income Housing
  - Family
  - Housing Density (“Clusters”)
- Create Places General Community for Activity
  - Vibrant Public Spaces for People to Gather
  - Parks and Trails (Connectivity Essential)
  - Dog Parks
  - Green Spaces and Trees (that are balanced with safety needs)
- Amenities & Other Needs
  - Medical Clinics
  - Social & Community Services
  - Salons, Coffee Shops, etc.
VII. Acknowledgements

**Special Thanks.** Special thanks to the community members who participated in focus groups. Your time and expertise are invaluable to this process.

**Venues** – We appreciate the community-based spaces made available by local partners:

- Vintage at Tacoma – For providing space for the initial focus group and assisting in publicizing the discussion.
- Madison Head Start – For making arrangements to hold the second focus group, and for providing needed staff.
- Dobler Property Management – For making the Westmall Terrace Apartment available for the final focus group, providing staffing during after-hours to ensure community participation.

**Partners** – We would like to acknowledge local partners in supporting this work:

- Community Members and Residents
- Safe Streets
- Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department
- City of Tacoma Planning Department
- 3 Square Blocks
VIII. Footnotes


f. 6 City of Tacoma: Tacoma Mall Overview Statement. (2015)