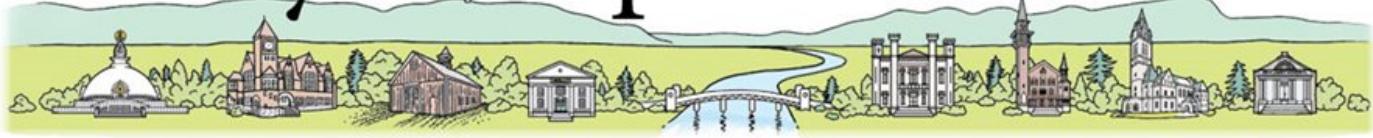


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Columnists Dennis Bidwell and Stan Schapiro: Connecting Northampton with conversations



Northampton City Hall GAZETTE FILE PHOTO

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Downtown Northampton has long been an attractive and vibrant place, the envy of many other cities and towns.

It continues to adapt and grow, attracting people, businesses and activities of all types. It is home to the arts, music and entertainment and a vibrant street and sidewalk culture.

Our downtown has also been the focus of disagreements over the years. Some people are concerned that they do not feel welcomed for a variety of reasons. Our local businesses operate close to the margin: they are dedicated to keeping downtown strong and attractive but they sometimes feel misunderstood and targeted. These disagreements reflect the polarization that characterizes much of the political debate in our country today.

Northampton Connects is a new organization dedicated to providing forums to encourage community conversations and mutual understanding among Northampton residents with varied experiences and points of view. On Tuesday, April 3, from 7-9 p.m., we will host our first event focused on the topic of how to ensure that downtown Northampton is safe, vibrant and welcoming for all.

A panel representing diverse points of view and backgrounds will take part in a dialogue on this topic. Following the panel, the audience will break into small groups to continue the discussion. The program will be held at the JFK Middle School, 100 Bridge Road in Florence, and is open to everyone. Those in need of rides are encouraged to contact us at NorthamptonConnects@gmail.com or through Facebook.

The panel will include individuals active in the immigrant rights movement, business owners, religious leaders, students and others who care about our downtown. The discussion will be facilitated by Paula Green, founder of the Karuna Center for Peacebuilding and organizer of the Hands Across the Hills project, which has brought together people from Leverett and eastern Kentucky to promote dialogue. The small group discussions will be moderated by trained facilitators.

These community dialogues are designed to help participants understand different perspectives and learn about others' view and experiences. They promote listening and searching for common ground, rather than trying to convince others to change their views. The aim is to encourage the understanding and common ground that can lead to mutually agreeable solutions to societal problems. In dialogue, all experiences and points of view are welcomed.

Northampton Connects grew out of a community meeting in Ward 2 last October, at a time that the City Council was in the midst of its debate about Police Chief Jody Kasper's proposal for additional municipal surveillance cameras in downtown. A large part of that community meeting was devoted to people's concern about the polarized nature of the camera debate and what could be done to encourage more respectful conversations about contentious topics.

As a city councilor, Dennis was challenged by several present to address the polarizing tone evident in some of the debate. Although we did not necessarily agree about the issue itself, the two of us started talking about creating a forum for such dialogue, and soon consulted with others to tap their expertise in creating community conversations.

In January, we convened a small planning group. This group has included individuals representing a broad range of perspectives and backgrounds.

We hope to create the opportunity for conversation that forums such as City Council meetings are not designed to provide. These forums encourage debate and taking positions for or against. They do not lend themselves to understanding varied viewpoints and experience, nor do they encourage mutually agreeable solutions.

We hope Northampton Connects can provide some of what other more formal settings are not able to provide by turning down the heat and dialing up the curiosity and a sense of understanding.

One way to understand downtown Northampton is to consider it as a web of interrelated human stories – merchants who have invested their life savings in their businesses and who look out for the friends they've made on the city's sidewalks; Northampton residents shopping and meeting their families and friends; visitors and tourists enjoying all our downtown has to offer; immigrants struggling with language challenges and deportation threats while trying to support a family by working multiple jobs; musicians who find their first audiences on the city's sidewalks; cops who juggle their roles as law enforcement officers with their desire to look out for street people whom they care for deeply.

The more of these stories one hears, the more it becomes clear that broad generalizations about people simply don't hold up. If there's one thing we hope comes out of the Northampton Connects project, it's that the varied faces of downtown Northampton be understood as unique human individuals whose stories connect them to the rest of the community.

Please join us on April 3, and please let us know what future community conversations might benefit our city.

Dennis Bidwell is Ward 2 City Councilor in Northampton. Stan Schapiro, of Northampton, is a clinical social worker and behavioral health consultant.