



Cottage for Community Project Report

2023



Summary



This report summarizes and analyzes the results of over one hundred qualitative interviews undertaken by a team of humanities interns for President Lincoln's Cottage (PLC) in the summer of 2023 in the Petworth neighborhood of Washington, DC.

The goal of this project is to understand the cultural landscape of Petworth so PLC can better understand the neighborhood in which it is immersed and develop programming in partnership and accordance with the culture, needs, desires, and values of Petworth that align with PLC's mission.

Petworth is a diverse, rapidly changing neighborhood. "The Petworth neighborhood of Washington, DC was a historically Black neighborhood; Central American and Ethiopian immigrants began to settle here in the 1980s, and gentrification has brought many white residents in the last decade. 25.96% of the population is foreign-born, 38% is African American, and 29% is Hispanic or Latinx. Source: 2020 American Community Survey, U.S. Census Bureau.)" Due to its diversity, the cultural ties, values, desires, and needs of Petworth residents are disparate, and themes observed are without an overwhelming majority – no individual theme is reflected in even half of the interviews. The most agreed upon sentiment from respondents is observation of Petworth's gentrification.

While we did not collect demographic data from respondents, some demographic information can

be gleaned from interview context. Many white residents are cognizant of their role in Petworth's gentrification, but not necessarily regretful. Some of these white residents expressed that Petworth's ethnic and cultural diversity as qualities of Petworth they appreciate most. Some Black residents, most of whom are longtime residents of Petworth, expressed sentiments of feeling left behind and preyed upon by real estate developers and agents as Petworth has changed and property values have increased. The concerns of Black residents who expressed them are not limited to Petworth but see Petworth's change as indicative of the Black history of "Chocolate City" being erased. While some of Petworth's white residents view Petworth's ethnic and cultural diversity positively, some Black residents expressed that they feel racially segregated from the rest of Petworth. Though there is racial division in Petworth, enjoyment of the Petworth Community Library (DC Public Libraries) and frustration about rats in the neighborhood seem to transcend racial division. Some suggest that youth activities may be a way to bridge this gap while fulfilling the neighborhood need for activities that entertain and enrich its youth population.

Themes

- 43%** of respondents identified gentrification as an issue.
- 37%** of respondents identified the farmers' market as a key feature of Petworth.
- 31%** of respondents identified Petworth's restaurants as a key feature of the neighborhood.
- 30%** of respondents identified Petworth Neighborhood Library as a key feature of the neighborhood.

Cultural Assets and Resources

Respondents have strong ties to several centers of community and cultural production within Petworth that would be worthy locations for PLC to do outreach. Petworth's farmers' market is the most valued location according to respondents. Restaurants follow the farmers' market in significance. Respondents view Petworth's restaurants not only as something they enjoy about their neighborhood and a strong component of its sense of place, but also view Petworth's restaurants as a main attraction for visitors. Petworth's library is viewed very favorably as a community asset with events and resources available to all. One respondent said, "The brightest spot in the whole neighborhood is the library." Another said, "People associate bookstores and libraries as safe places and that's true." Upshur Street is a significant community meeting place that one respondent called the "social block of the neighborhood." See Figure 1 on page 3.



Significant Petworth Locations

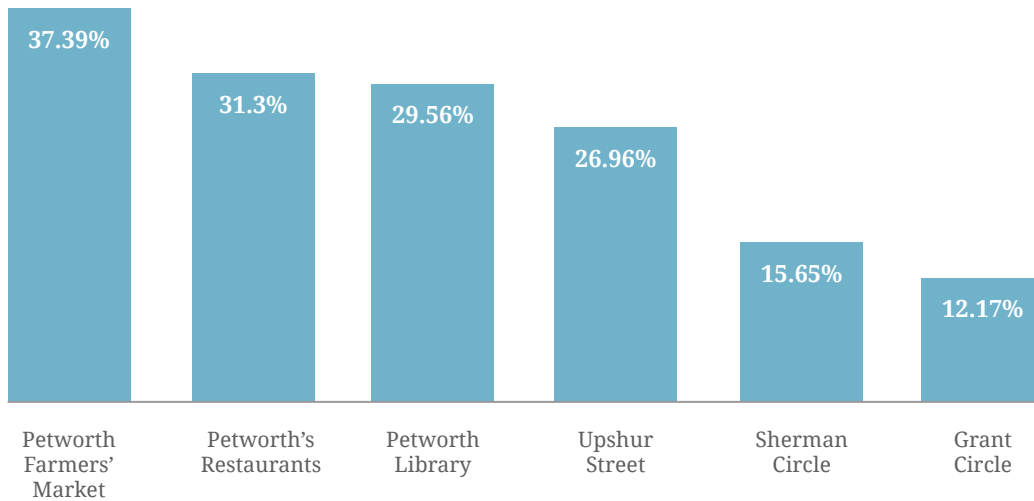


Figure 1. Percentage of respondents citing significant locations in Petworth

Petworth offers many cultural events throughout the year in which respondents are invested and cite as a significant source of Petworth's sense of place. Porch Fest is the most popular event in Petworth by a wide margin. Respondents cite the camaraderie cultivated at this event by the sharing of space, music, and Petworth's most notable architectural feature: porches. One respondent said Porch Fest is an event "where people [can] be connected with

each other in a more fluid and accessible way." However, one respondent is upset that his property is trespassed upon during Porch Fest, and another is unimpressed by Porch Fest, having moved to Petworth from a place where festivals are more elaborate. This difference in opinion, like many in Petworth, is divided racially. Many respondents referenced Fourth of July as evocative of childhood nostalgia. See Figure 2 below.

Cultural Events in Petworth

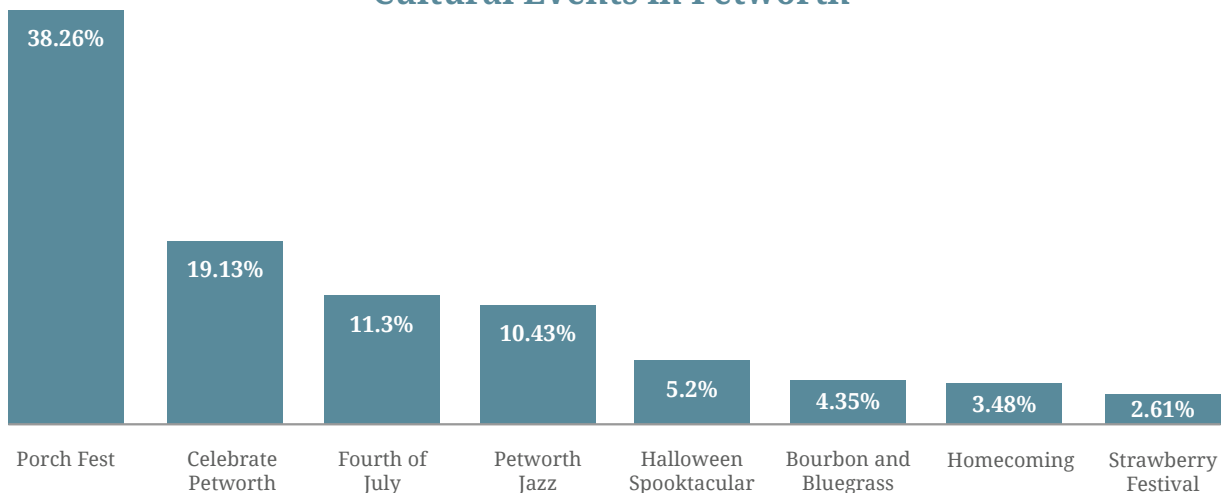


Figure 2. Percentage of respondents citing significant cultural events in Petworth

Community Needs and Controversies

19% of respondents identified youth activities as a need. Many of these respondents specifically identified activities for older youth as a need as younger children seem to have many events and activities available to them. It was mentioned by some who identified this need that programming created in partnership with youths is likely to be more successful. One respondent noted that youth activities may be one way to bring racially segregated communities in Petworth together. A significant number (16.52%) of respondents are interested in volunteer work, which may present opportunities for PLC to collaborate with other entities. 9.57% of respondents indicated a need for activities focused on the aging/retired/senior population of Petworth.



Community Desires



Figure 3. Percentage of respondents expressing a need for activities in the community



Several respondents identified Georgia Avenue and Kennedy Street as areas of Petworth that are often overlooked by the DC government and by Petworth residents, and as centers of criminal activity. One respondent, a business owner, moved her business from Georgia Avenue to Upshur Street because she felt unsafe on Georgia Avenue. Several others mentioned avoiding Georgia Avenue at night or entirely.

Tied to gentrification, several respondents expressed concerns about housing rapidly becoming more expensive and seeing an increase in housing insecurity and unhoused persons.

Many respondents mention the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on Petworth and the difficulties in rediscovering a sense of community, lack of attendance at churches, and difficulty for businesses attempting to recover. Additionally, there are several sites of ambivalence/conflict within the opinions of the respondents (see Figure 4 below).

Sites of Differing Opinions

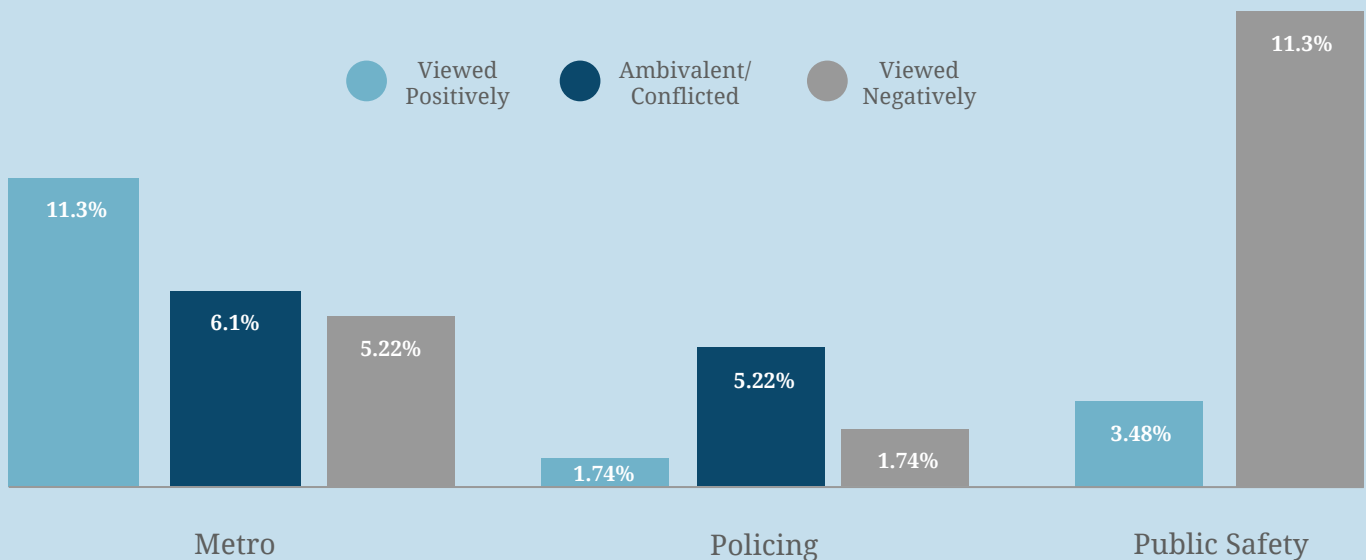


Figure 4. Percentage of respondents' views on Metro, policing, and public safety

Likely tied to gentrification, respondents are concerned about the aging, senior, and retired population of Petworth largely comprised of long-term Black residents. Additionally, respondents identified race/racial segregation as an issue. One respondent said of gentrification, “The people who move into the neighborhood are socially aware enough to know that the neighborhood is changing and they’re a part of that. But they are also excited to be in Petworth and they’re dealing with those conflicting values,” and “It just feels like the neighborhood is in such flux and chaos that kind of creates a destabilized tense atmosphere.” 9% of respondents are concerned about resources and activities for the aging, senior, and retired population of Petworth, particularly long-term Black residents. 6-10% of respondents identified race/racial segregation as an issue.

“It just feels like the neighborhood is in such flux and chaos that kind of creates a destabilized tense atmosphere.”

11% *of respondents identified public safety as an issue*

5.2% *of respondents expressed a desire for increased policing in Petworth*

4.3% *are ambivalent about increased policing*

11% of respondents identified public safety as an issue. One respondent and his children were witnesses to the homicide at Petworth Library in March 2023. Another said he has been robbed twice at gunpoint. Several respondents cited public cannabis and alcohol use as a cause for concern.

While 11% of respondents view the Metro favorably and are grateful for its presence, 5.2% view it negatively and 6.1% are ambivalent, citing the griminess of the area and its tendency to be an epicenter of crime as concerns.

9.6% of respondents identified rats as a significant problem in Petworth. This is largely correlated with inadequate waste management, though a few long-term resident respondents mentioned that this was not a problem until tunnels were dug for the Metro.

5.2% of respondents expressed a desire for increased policing in Petworth, while 4.3% are ambivalent about increased policing; though they desire an increase in a sense of safety and a reduction in violence and crime, they are concerned for the safety of people of color interacting with police.

Opportunities for Community Building

Many respondents expressed interest in youth activities. It was suggested that these activities be curated in partnership with young people who can speak to their own needs and interests. Partnering with local schools to form youth committees is one possibility for co-creation of programming in line with community desires and PLC's mission.

Petworth's population with ties to local history, namely the Black and Jewish residents, express and interest and desire in the celebration of their histories and cultural practices. One respondent said that Petworth used to be "hardcore Black" but now "it's not Chocolate City, it's more vanilla latte." The discontinuation of the Caribbean Festival on Georgia Avenue was cited by a few respondents as an example of Petworth's Black history and residents being left behind. Again, any programming pertaining to these groups would be most successful in collaboration with community members who can directly speak to their own needs and interests.

...any programming pertaining to these groups would be most successful in collaboration with community members who can directly speak to their own needs and interests.





Impressions of President Lincoln's Cottage

9.6% of respondents identified PLC as an asset to the neighborhood and feel more connected to local history due to its presence. PLC is viewed as a “draw to the neighborhood,” in one respondent’s words. One respondent says that most of the community events he participates in are at the Cottage because they promote “family, togetherness, and education.” Another respondent mentioned enjoyment that their daily commute is the same as Lincoln’s was.

There is some mystique surrounding PLC and the Old Soldiers’ Home, with many respondents citing the large fence as a physical representation of separation from the rest of the neighborhood. Several respondents were unaware that PLC and the Old Soldiers’ Home are separate entities. Many respondents expressed a desire for the ability to access the land of the Old Soldiers’ Home. While only one resident of the Old Soldiers’ Home was interviewed by the Cottage for Community team, she strongly expressed that to residents of the Old Soldiers’ Home, that separation is

desirable. She called the Old Soldiers’ Home a “sanctuary” and said that residents of the Old Soldiers’ Home have no need or desire to engage with the rest of Petworth.

Some respondents mentioned that they are interested in visiting PLC either for the first time or with increased frequency but have difficulty justifying the cost when there are many other museums in DC that are free to the public. One respondent suggested that Petworth residents get free or heavily discounted tickets to PLC. Another respondent communicated that he believed PLC undertook this study only because Petworth has shifted racially and that PLC did not show interest in Petworth residents while it had a majority population of Black residents.



The Cottage for Community Project has been made possible by a HumanitiesDC grant, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and an anonymous donor.

lincolncottage.org