

# Community Heart & Soul®

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**Name of CHS Project/City, State:** Heart of Williamsport, Williamsport, PA

**Population:** 29,381

**Challenge:** Find missing voices and engage more people. Shift the narrative to positive aspects of the community with a focus on assets.

**Focus:** Engaging new community volunteers and adding new voices – especially as the county was launching a Comprehensive Plan update.

**Key Tool:** Storytelling and story sharing brought people together face-to-face to talk about positive elements of the community. This also bridged gaps by illuminating shared interests and beliefs across varied demographics.

## **Brief Description/Summary of Community:**

Williamsport is located between the west branch of the Susquehanna River and Bald Eagle Mountain in central Pennsylvania. Originally settled in the 1800's, Williamsport became known as the "Lumber Capital" of the world. The surrounding 300,000 acres are currently designated state game lands, making the area popular with outdoor enthusiasts.

As the cultural, financial, and commercial center of central Pennsylvania, Williamsport is renowned for sports, arts, and food. It is the birthplace and headquarters of Little League Baseball and the annual Little League World Series is held in South Williamsport in the late summer.

## **Heart of Williamsport "By the Numbers":**

- 944 – community responses and/or stories collected
- 321 – participants for community focus groups, round table discussions, summits, and community conversations
- 248 - action ideas generated, reflecting what matters most to residents
- 318 – people attended "From the Heart of Williamsport" movie premiere and community celebration at the Community Arts Center
- 2075 – volunteer hours logged for the project
- \$116,830 – value of leveraged match for this Community Heart & Soul project
- 3 – total number of teams when Little League Baseball started in Williamsport in 1939
- 180,000+ - number of Little League Baseball teams in over 80 countries today
- 469,964 – the record number of fans to attend a Little League Baseball World Series game

...big things can grow from locally grown, little ideas!

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## **Local Condition:**

When Williamsport launched their Comprehensive Plan update, most organizations continued to work in silos. A new generation of volunteers and leaders were needed to bridge divides and bring forward new ideas. As a result, there were many unheard voices and a feeling that things are always done the same way. Young people were leaving Williamsport because they did not feel invested in the community.

Through a partnership with Pennsylvania Humanities Council, the Heart of Williamsport, a Community Heart & Soul project, began in 2016. The project sought the collective wisdom of all citizens, including those whose voices are often missing, to bring people together to build a stronger, healthier, and more economically vibrant community.

The Heart of Williamsport mission is to collect stories from their diverse community, identify what matters most to residents, and share information to guide Williamsport's future. Using storytelling to connect the people of Williamsport, community members learn what residents like and want, along with the change they want to see. By collecting stories from residents and identifying what matters most, the community was able to develop vision statements to guide local decision making.

## **Volunteer and Community Response:**

- Citizens loved story sharing and story listening.
- New residents wanted to be involved and to make a difference.
- Younger residents began volunteering.
- Similarities with others were identified and talked about making differences seemed less important.

## **Heart & Soul Outcomes:**

- Residents started to remember what is 'right' with the city, felt pride again, and shifted the narrative from negative to positive.
- Young people ran for office and got elected, including:
  - Three new City Council members under the age of 40.
  - A young school board member who never previously ran for office.
  - The first African American Mayor, who was also under the age of 50.
- The City Council adopted the Heart & Soul Statements as guiding principles for decision-making.

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- Three organizations came together to work with a low-income neighborhood to plan, construct, and plant a community garden that helped residents get to know each other and work together as neighbors.
- A citizen-generated Action Plan was created with 248 project ideas for enhancing what matters most.

