

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## IDEAS TO ACTION LEADERSHIP FORUM: **SUSTAINABLE TOURISM**

Communities across the nation are seeking new, collaborative methods for addressing complex challenges. In September 2021, Thrive Asheville convened a group of 34 community leaders to participate in the inaugural Ideas to Action Leadership Forum, an approach to finding common ground on divisive issues. Thrive's first effort to enhance shared learning across lines of difference focused on sustainable tourism, with these specific goals: (1) build relationships across lines of difference; (2) learn about tourism in Asheville and innovative approaches to sustainable tourism here and elsewhere; (3) develop a common ground action agenda based on what was learned. This cohort of participants included community leaders who represented local government, advocates for arts, culture, and the environment, and local hotels, restaurateurs, and other businesses that engage directly in the tourism economy. The cohort met six times, and each meeting included relationship-building experiences, presentations of data and information by subject experts, and an opportunity to apply innovative ideas to the local context.

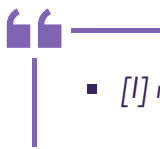
The final Ideas to Action (I2A) session took place in May of 2022. At this time, 30 cohort members were actively engaged in the group's collective work. In an effort to understand the impact of this work, Thrive Asheville hired a consultant to: design a survey; administer the survey to cohort members; and conduct one-on-one interviews with a subset of the group. **The survey** was completed by 26 of the 30 cohort members (an 87% response rate). This analysis revealed the following takeaways:

- Cohort members widely approved of the three action items that emerged from the collective I2A work, with female and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) participants reporting stronger approval and more active engagement in the I2A process than white/male participants.
- An overwhelming majority of members from this past I2A Leadership Forum believed that their participation was a valuable use of time.
- When asked about the valuable parts of their experience, cohort members consistently referenced the opportunity to connect and develop relationships with community members who held different perspectives and resided in different sectors (see Fig. 1). Cohort members also believed that shared learning experiences were valuable aspects of their participation.
- Cohort members were less likely to believe that their peers understood their perspective on tourism (though a majority still expressed some level of agreement).
- A majority of survey participants believed that progress was made among the cohort in six assessed areas, with an overwhelming majority believing that there was a greater openness to sharing information/resources with one another after the sessions.
- Cohort members were less likely to believe that conditions had improved in the areas of finding common ground and establishing a greater level of trust among the cohort (though a slim majority still expressed some level of agreement).

**At the final I2A session, cohort participants approved three action items:**

- Supporting BIPOC-owned tourism sector business incubation (100% approval).
- Conducting a natural and cultural asset inventory (88% approval).
- Exploring the formation of a destination stewardship council (84% approval)

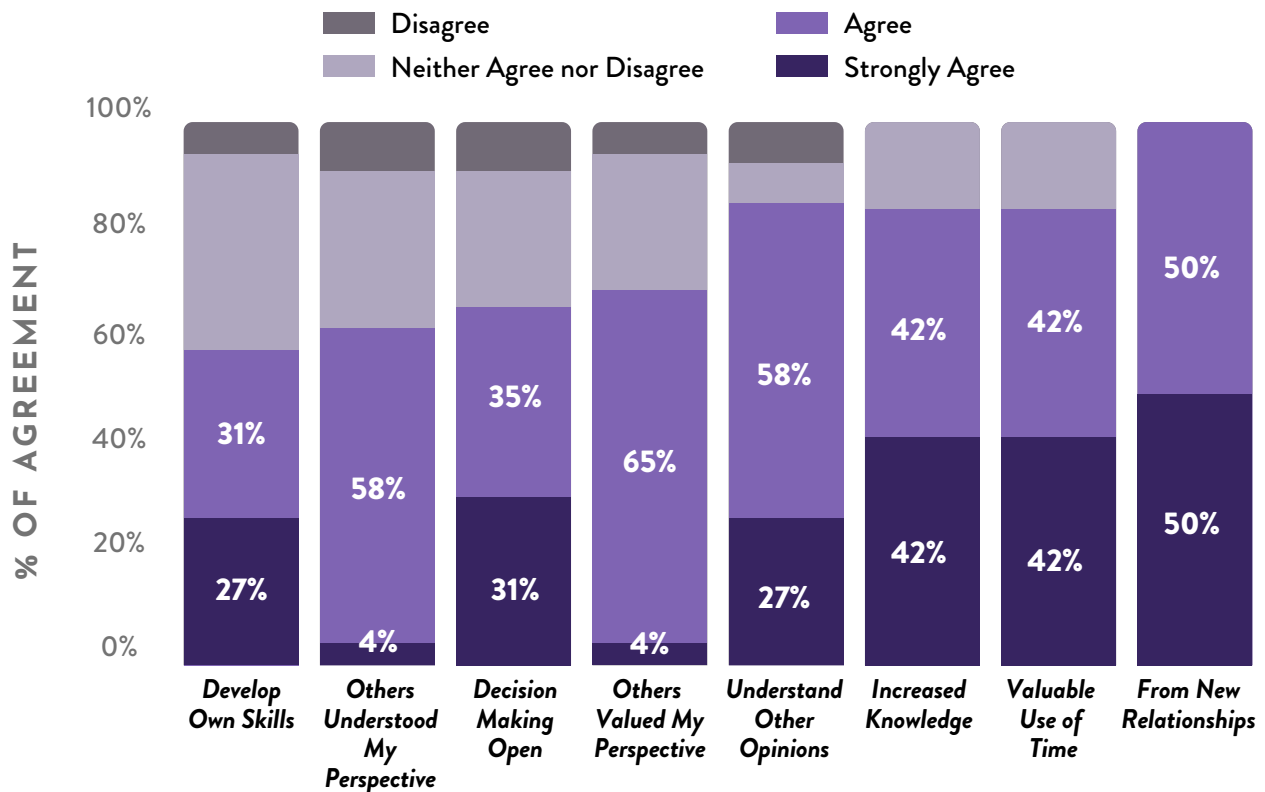
**When asked to provide feedback on the I2A process, participants provided the following thoughts:**



- *[I] met a whole community that has a different impression of our industry... I learned a lot.*
- *[The I2A Leadership Forum] introduced me to people I haven't come into contact with.*
- *[My participation] has forced or encouraged me to think differently, or more. It helps me to do my job better.*
- *We didn't meet that often to have consistent trust building... I felt like we came so far... but there were still some trust issues.*



## PARTICIPANT PERCEPTION OF BENEFITS TO ENGAGING IN IDEAS TO ACTION SESSIONS\*



\*Question stem: To what extent do you agree with the following statements... ([survey link](#) to full questions)

## CONCLUSIONS

Based on this analysis, Thrive Asheville and the I2A cohort made progress during this inaugural iteration of the [Ideas to Action Leadership Forum](#). As a result of their participation, participants built relationships and learned more about their own opinions, and opposing perspectives, on sustainable tourism. A strong majority of participants supported three actions that were explored during the Forum, and specific members of the group agreed to continue to work together to further the implementation of these actions.

Additionally, this analysis shows that more work must be done to build trust and understanding among participants with opposing views. Participants had differing perspectives on how time constrained the dialogue - some noting that the time commitment may have limited the diversity of participants, and others believing that the time allotted was not sufficient to achieve the goal of authentic trust building. In future iterations of the [Ideas to Action Leadership Forum](#), program designers should consider whether pursuing all of the original programmatic goals are realistic given the time pressures that leaders face.

Given the importance of addressing complex community challenges through collaborative efforts, Thrive Asheville can use this feedback to empower participants as they collectively seek to build a community where all members can thrive.