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Community Assets and Quality of Life in Lyon County: Results of a Community Situational Analysis

Loretta Singletary
Extension Educator, Lyon County

Introduction

Lyon County is located in northwestern Nevada, approximately 80 miles southeast of Reno. It is 2,204 square miles in area with a population estimated at 40,000 (2002). Lyon County boasts an active and successful agricultural industry and a traditional quiet, rural lifestyle with bountiful outdoor recreational opportunities. With vast open spaces available for residential and commercial development, Lyon County currently is the fastest growing county in Nevada

In July 2003, University of Nevada Cooperative Extension conducted a community situational analysis in Lyon County. The purpose of the analysis was to identify issues that Cooperative Extension might address through research and education programs.

Conducting the Analysis

The following assessment featured a postal mail survey. Respondents were asked a series of questions to assess their subjective or perceived quality of life. These questions were developed using an eclectic mix of conceptual frameworks from rural sociology, rural economic development, community development and youth development literature (Theodori, 2001; Williams and Bloomquist, 1997; Putnam, 1993).

Each question asked participants to rate quality of life "assets" in their community. Each question used a five-point equal weighted Likert-type scale, where 1 equaled "poor" and 5 equaled "excellent."

In addition, each item included the choice "Don't Know."

Survey participants comprised a household sample of 400 voters randomly selected from the 2003 list of registered voters in Lyon County. Each randomly selected registered voter received by postal mail a seven-page booklet-type questionnaire and a self-addressed, stamped return envelope. A cover letter was included that explained the purpose of the survey, ensured confidentiality and thanked respondents for their input.

Results of the Analysis

Of the total 400 survey recipients, 169 returned completed questionnaires, resulting in a 42 percent response rate. An estimate of reliability of the 32 items was calculated and found to be high ($r = .932$) (Carmines & Zeller, 1979). This high score for instrument reliability indicates that the questions are consistent indicators for the items measured.

Descriptive statistics were calculated and provide a countywide ranking of community assets that indicate perceived quality of life in Lyon County. Ranked mean scores for each item outlining needs are shown in Table 1.

Survey results indicate that of the 32 assets provided in the survey, respondents rated none as "excellent." Respondents rated 3 assets as "good," however. These include: Availability of open space (4.17); Air quality (4.01); Scenic views (4.01).

Of the remaining 29 assets, respondents rated 12 assets as “okay,” 15 assets as “fair” and two assets as “poor.” The assets rated as “poor” included: Access to public transportation (1.95) and Availability of clothing and shoe stores (1.79).

Following these top three assets, the following five positively rated assets, rated as “okay,” included: Personal and family safety (3.92); Place to raise a family (3.92); Weather (3.64); Fire services (3.64) and; Retirement destination (3.52).

The five lowest rated assets rated as “fair” included: Job opportunities (2.10); Availability of repair services (2.25); Availability of grocery stores (2.26); Opportunities for music, theater and arts (2.30) and; Availability of good restaurants (2.31).

Conclusions

A postal mail survey conducted by University of Nevada Cooperative Extension produced several interesting findings regarding perceived community assets that indicate quality of life in Lyon County. The top three assets rated as “good” help to explain, at least in part, why Lyon County is currently the fastest growing county in Nevada. These highly rated assets suggest people are attracted to Lyon County to enjoy its high availability of open space, air quality and scenic views.

Also, several communities in Lyon County are within close commuting distance to larger metropolitan areas. Communities, for example, in western Lyon County are within 5 to 15 minutes driving distance to Carson City, while communities in northern Lyon County are within 30 minutes driving distance to Reno/Sparks and communities in southwestern Lyon County are within 30 minutes driving distance to Minden/Gardnerville. Carson City, Reno/Sparks, and Minden/Gardnerville increase the number and variety of job opportunities for many Lyon County residents. Finally most of these communities are also within easy driving distance to Lake Tahoe and its world class ski and boating resorts.

Further, the survey results suggest that assets rated positively, comparatively speaking, may also help to attract residents and businesses to Lyon County. For some individuals, personal and family safety, for example, is an important attribute that weighs more heavily in the decision to live somewhere rather than an availability of good restaurants.

It should be noted that job opportunities rated very low (2.10) or at the bottom of the list of assets rated as “fair.” This result suggests that Lyon County may benefit from strategic business development efforts that could improve the overall quality of life of Lyon County residents.

Ideas and Implications for Extension Programs

The results of this community situational analysis help to identify program opportunities and direction for University of Nevada Cooperative Extension over the short and long term. Short term program opportunities may address public issues relating to unprecedented population growth and residential development. It is likely that complex issues may arise related to the unintended loss of open space due to rapid residential development. Also, the ability to “keep up” with rapid growth may become another complex public issue. This includes the provision of adequate water supplies and the quality of water supplies as ready examples.

Extension programs may educate citizens and county leaders about these potential issues and/or provide research surrounding these issues. Although those bottom ranked assets, rated as fair and poor, provide areas for concern and possible programming, overall quality of life issues may be addressed more effectively by focusing on the unintended effects of rapid growth in Lyon County.

References

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Table 1. Ranked Mean Scores for Respondents' Ratings of Community Assets

Community Assets Indicating Perceived Quality of Life	N	Ranked Mean
Availability of open space	163	4.17
Air quality	168	4.01
Scenic views	167	4.01
Personal and family safety	163	3.92
Place to raise a family	166	3.92
Weather	168	3.64
Fire department services	163	3.64
Recreational opportunities	164	3.52
Retirement destination	153	3.46
Disaster response to floods, wildfire, etc.	113	3.46
Availability of affordable housing	159	3.42
Police department services	161	3.34
Sense of community	159	3.33
Cleanliness of open space (no trash dumping)	165	3.25
Opportunities to meet and make friends	163	3.14
Water quality	160	2.96
Computer and internet access	137	2.96
Appearance and cleanliness of community	165	2.93
Access to hospitals and medical clinics	164	2.79
Cellular telephone service	144	2.72
Organized activities for adults	145	2.63
Access to colleges and or vocational schools	151	2.62
Access to psychological counseling services	107	2.58
Prices of goods and services	160	2.48
Availability of child care for working parents	103	2.40
Availability of good restaurants	168	2.31
Opportunities for music, theater and arts	161	2.30
Availability of grocery stores	169	2.26
Availability of repair services	159	2.25
Job opportunities	153	2.10
Access to public transportation	152	1.95
Availability of clothing and shoe stores	169	1.79

Numeric Color Coded Rating: 1 = poor; 2 = fair; 3 = okay; 4 = good; 5 = excellent