

Needs Assessment Results of Lincoln County, Nevada

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COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

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Summary

A needs assessment survey conducted in Lincoln County identified jobs and stable income as the strongest need for the community, families and youth. The survey showed economic development is considered essential to spur jobs for the community. Residents feel there is a need for maintaining health, increasing efficiency of local governments, keeping a small town feeling, maintaining available and free open spaces, and increasing services. The county has a high quality of life, low stress, and individual and family support. The financial quality of life is weak in the county and many low income residents struggle for necessities. There is concern on how to have growth and economic development without the positive lifestyle deteriorating.

Introduction

Lincoln County is located in east-central Nevada north of Clark County. There are six major towns in Lincoln County - Caliente, Pioche, Alamo, Hiko, Panaca and Rachel. The environment ranges from the hot desert in the south to transitional desert mountains and higher mountains in the north. There are five state parks in Lincoln County and numerous archeological and historic sights. Tourism studies have indicated that Lincoln County has great tourism potential because of its beautiful parks and scenic routes for those traveling south for the winter and close proximity to a large city population¹.

Lincoln County has had little growth in population and economic development in the past 20 years. The county had a population of 3822 people in 2004². In 2000, the county had 32% and 30% of the employment provided by the service industry and government jobs respectively, resulting in an estimated 80% of the county's earnings being generated from these two sectors³. The county has a rich history in mining and agriculture. Agriculture now provides only 7% of the employment in the county and less than 3% of income. Ranching has shown limited returns historically⁴. Net farm income has fluctuated over the last 3 years but does not show a trend of increasing. The average income per operator is below \$26,000 per year⁴. The only major returns to ranchers in the county have been to those who have sold their

property to developers seeking water rights. The future of those properties is uncertain.

Between 1990 and 2000, the total real earnings in the county decreased 28% while employment decreased 16%. In 2001, the income per job was \$29,634 and per capita income was \$23,460, which was only 83% and 78% of the state averages³. The county tax base is slowly deteriorating with the majority of expenditures being made outside of the county resulting in fewer jobs and county services³.

With anticipated rapid changes resulting from housing developments expanding into Lincoln County from Clark County and the building of a power plant, the county will be facing large increases in population, tax base, economic development and potential changes in lifestyle.

An understanding of the profile of the county will outline the attributes as well as the needs of Lincoln County. Information compiled will be useful for key decision makers in Lincoln County to identify areas of need for current residents while dealing with rapid new developments. The information will also assist Cooperative Extension and other agencies in developing programs that address the needs of the county.

Needs Assessment Process

A survey and then one-on-one discussions with key individuals were used as tools to collect the opinions of county residents on a full range of issues and to identify the needs in Lincoln County. Information was collected on the type of educational programs desired; the form of program delivery (publications, classes, etc.); community needs, issues or concerns; individual or family concerns; youth concerns; and quality of life.

The survey was developed by the Southern Area, University of Nevada Cooperative Extension (UNCE) office and approved by the Cooperative Extension statistician. The survey consisted of 28 multi-segment questions which required answers ranging from the selection of relevant points in a list to the selection of importance from major to none or written comments. The survey was mailed to all of the post office boxes in Lincoln County in the spring of 2004. A total of 2126 surveys were delivered to all post office boxes resulting in overlap to individuals having both residential and business addresses. The overlap resulted in a lower response rate of 358 surveys returned and a 17% reply rate for the unsolicited mail survey. Returned surveys represented 358 households and 875 people which equals 23% of the population in Lincoln County. Information collected in the survey was used to help identify the type of individual that should be hired to fill the extension educator position in Lincoln County.

Information from the survey was compiled and analyzed by the newly hired extension educator, Holly Rask. Additional information was gathered from one-on-one discussions with key individuals, and past reports^{5, 6} in the county. The key individuals interviewed one-on-one consisted of the county commissioners, leading agriculture

producers, and residents active in tourism and economic development.

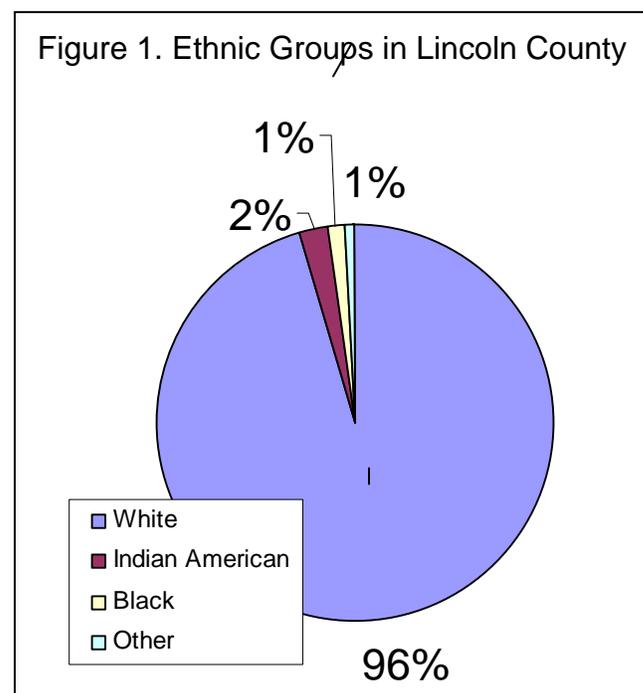
Results and Conclusions

Profile of Lincoln County residents responding to the survey

The respondents were from locations throughout the county and matched population distributions. The respondents of the survey were representative of a rural population. The age distribution was concentrated (66%) in the 39 to 68 year old range. The income was mostly found in and spread evenly over the \$15,000 to \$75,000 range. There were no children living at home for 71% of respondents. Eighty-two percent of respondents own their home. The survey was completed by 51% males and 49% females.

As shown in Figure 1, the ethnicity of the respondents was 96% white, 2% American Indian, 1% black and 1% other.

Most of the respondents to the survey have experience living in places other than



Lincoln County. Only 5.4% of the respondents lived only in Lincoln County. The rest lived outside of the county at some point, and 45.1% had lived in a metropolitan area. Of the respondents, 21% have lived in Lincoln County for 5 or less years; 19%, 6-10 years; 9%, 11-15 years; 8%, 21-25 years; 8%, 26-30 years; 9%, 31-40 years; 5%, 41-50 years; and 13%, for 51-83 years. Discussions with key individuals indicated that many residents leave the county as youth but returned to live in Lincoln County for the friendly, quiet, family environment when an opportunity allowed it. A few young families returned when work could be found and several people returned after retirement.

Activities enjoyed by residents in the county are: 60% gardening, 60% reading, 37% church activities, 34% music, 32% fishing, 31% four-wheeling, 30% cooking, 29% exercise, 26% volunteering; 23% hunting, 21% sewing, and 13% horseback riding. Organization involvement is 39% in church related clubs, 16% in youth clubs, 8% service clubs and 32% are not involved in organizations.

Information sources, uses and desires

The survey found that 73% of respondents felt they knew where to obtain information. The majority indicated their local information on community issues and problems was gathered first from friends and then the local newspaper. Respondents indicated that they obtain information or assistance from the following sources:

- Friends -73%
- Internet search-56%
- Relatives-53%
- Physician-50%
- Library-36%
- BLM-30%
- Minister-23%
- Fish and game-23%
- Health department-19%

- Community college-18%
- UNCE-17%
- County road department-16%
- Animal control and welfare-13%
- County parks and recreation-12%
- Natural Resources Conservation Service-10%
- Farm service-8%
- Family service-8%
- University-7%
- County economic development department-7%
- Use no one-4%

Discussions with key service workers in the county indicated the most success in working with the county results from working with key leaders and individuals. The response of people gaining their information predominantly from friends and family indicates that the one-on-one with key individual approach likely will be the most successful method for Lincoln County.

Since UNCE provides outreach for the University of Nevada, Reno, and research-based education to citizens throughout the state, it is important to assess the knowledge of Cooperative Extension and its programs. The recognition of UNCE as a resource is lower than desired with 17% of respondents using UNCE as an information source and 54% indicating past use of extension products/materials. The participation of survey respondents or their children in 4-H at 51% is high considering 71% of the respondents did not have children at home. It appears that 4-H and other activities may not be recognized as UNCE activities. In one-on-one discussions with key individuals, all of the respondents indicated that they did not have a good understanding of what UNCE does. Information on what UNCE does in the county must be distributed.

Interest appears in programs for gardening, economic development, pest control, water quality, health and nutrition, and land resource maintenance, and planning. The UNCE programs that would be of interest were (Table 1): horticulture with about 30% willing to take a class and about 50% wanting printed material; community economic development with about 20% willing to take a class and 45% wanting printed material; agriculture relating to pest control and water quality and, to a lesser degree, management, all mostly as printed materials; health and nutrition, 18% as classes and 28% as printed materials; resource management, 20-30% as printed and some as classes; youth information on jobs, education, 18% as classes and 27% as printed; family some interest in health insurance and school readiness but little in parenting.

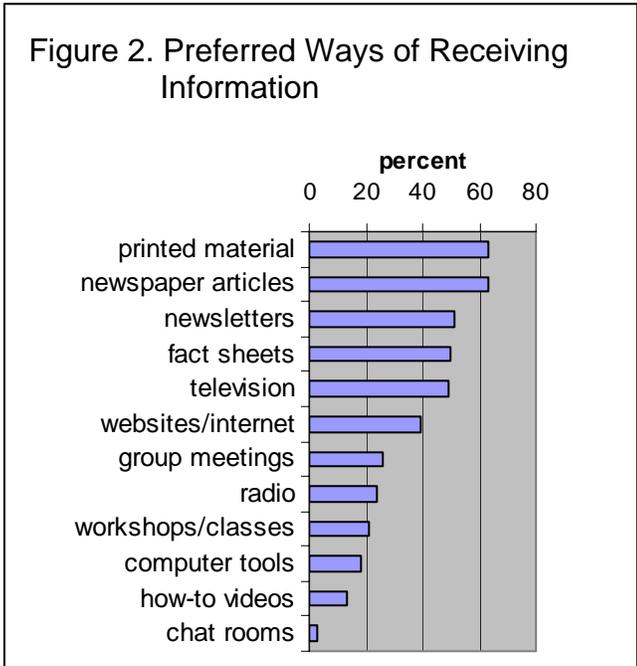
Programs	Attend class	Printed info	Do not want
Horticulture			
Trees & shrubs	32	53	15
Landscaping	37	48	15
Vegetable gardening	34	46	19
Lawn care	27	47	26
Master gardener	28	38	34
Community Economic Development			
Making a difference	22	51	26
Sustainable development	20	45	35
How local gov works	18	46	36
Strategic planning	18	45	37
Tourism development	22	40	38
Home business	26	33	41
Grant writing	23	30	47
Agriculture			
Noxious weed control	22	47	31
Water quality	13	55	32
Pesticide application	16	45	39
Irrigation technology	9	31	59
New crops	7	31	62
Management	9	20	71
Livestock sciences	7	22	71

Programs -continued	Attend class	Printed info	Do not want
Health and Nutrition			
Healthy eating habits	18	49	33
Physical fitness	19	43	38
Controlling high blood pressure	16	45	39
Weight loss	20	40	40
Stress management	18	41	41
Resource Management			
Wildlife habitat creation & maintenance	17	40	43
Management of conflicts	14	42	44
Watershed planning	8	40	52
Managing riparian areas	8	30	62
Range science	9	28	63
Youth			
How to start a business	22	29	49
Job skills	20	29	51
Making healthy choices	16	32	52
Life-skills	20	26	54
Career Selection	18	26	56
Study skills	15	29	56
College selection	18	25	57
4-H	16	25	59
Conflict resolution	13	27	60
Family			
Getting health insurance	14	34	51
School readiness in literacy	10	21	69
Preparing children for school	4	17	79
Learning about childcare	6	13	81
Single parent's info	4	12	84
New parent info	4	11	85

Survey results indicate that residents of Lincoln County prefer to receive information predominantly in print form (Figure 2). This is most likely due to the fact that television is received from large cities far from the county, and radio station reception varies greatly due to the mountains and unstable local stations. There is a local newspaper, *The Lincoln County Record*, which reaches a high percentage of the population. For activities that require visual connection, face-to-face group meetings and workshops

are more preferred. Computer resources were not highly chosen at this time, despite 56% indicating Internet usage as an information resource.

Figure 2. Preferred Ways of Receiving Information



Community needs, issues or concerns

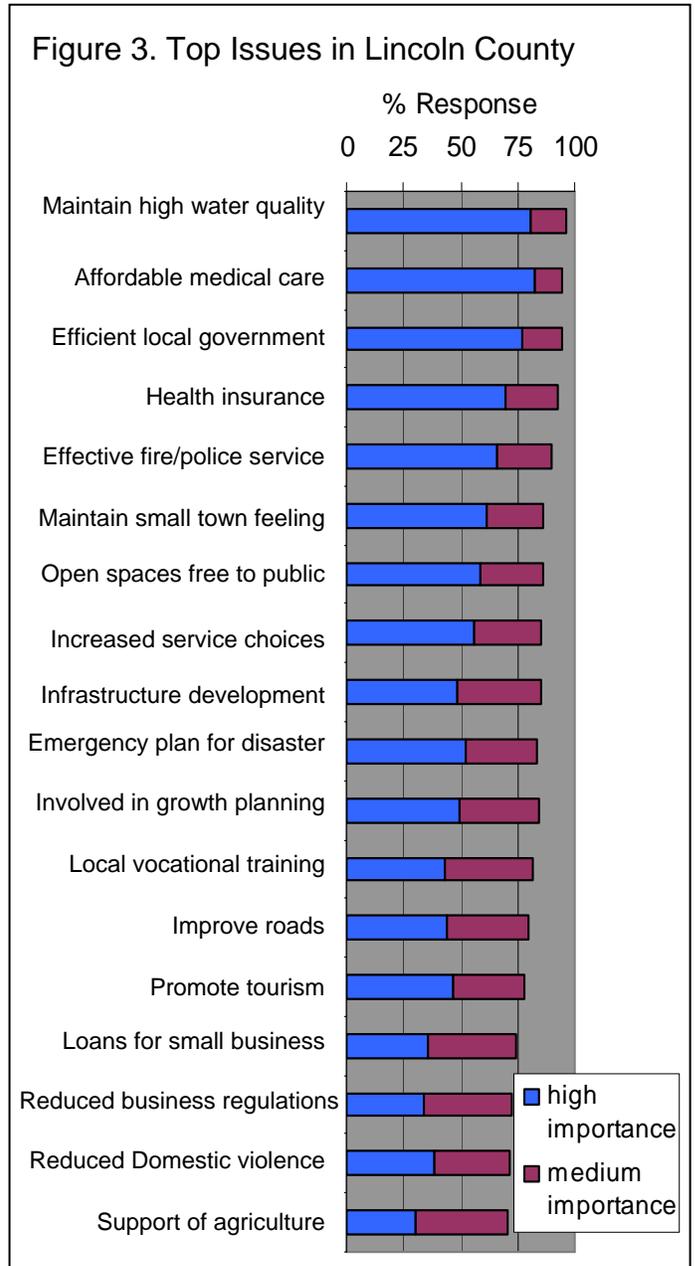
Survey results showed strong consensus from respondents that there are many important issues in Lincoln County that need to be addressed (Figure 3).

Health issues such as maintaining high water quality, affordable medical care and health insurance received 93% of the respondents' rating as a major or medium importance issue. Having an efficient local government also was rated 93% as major or medium in importance.

Keeping the small town feeling and open space that is free and open to the public was next in importance with 86% being major or medium in rating. In one-on-one conversations, it became apparent that there was a great amount of community pride and mention of the beautiful areas in Lincoln County. The small town feeling is cherished

to the extent that there is great fear of losing this environment from economic development or people moving into the current populated areas. Lincoln County residents place the great lifestyle as a higher priority over economic development despite knowing economic development is needed.

Figure 3. Top Issues in Lincoln County



The availability of services to Lincoln County residents was the next important issue receiving major or medium importance ratings were:

- Effective fire/police service - 90%
- Increased service choices (clothes, food, entertainment, repair) - 86%
- Infrastructure development (water, curbs, streets, etc) - 85%
- Emergency response plan for disaster - 84%
- Local vocational training - 81%
- Improved roads and traffic related infrastructure - 80%

Public and commercial services available in the county are limited due to the small population and the amount of funding needed to keep them operational. Local services will not increase unless there is more economic development and population growth to support it through taxes and usage.

Economic development issues were next in importance with medium and major importance ratings of:

- Community involvement in growth planning - 84%
- Promote tourism - 78%
- Loans for small businesses - 74%
- Reduced regulations for small businesses - 72%

One-to-one interviews indicated there is a strong need for economic development to provide quality jobs for residents.

Farming and ranching were traditionally economic drivers in the county. Creating community support for agriculture was rated as major or medium concern in 71% of surveys. Farming consists of alfalfa and cattle production in Lincoln County and has shown low returns. It is financially risky to rely on one crop and diversification is recommended.

Community support for social issues, reduced domestic violence, family counseling and support for single parents was rated as major to medium importance by 71% to 67% of responders.

Flash flood control was rated as a major or medium concern by 68% of the respondents. The survey was conducted at a time when reports had suggested that changes in vegetation on mountainsides and in outflow areas would greatly increase flood threats to some areas but there had not been too much impact. In January 2005, Caliente was flooded causing great damage. Rains in July filled the creek bed again. These occurrences indicate that the previous studies outlined legitimate concerns.

Of lower concern, with a rating of major and medium importance, were a recycling center (63%), developing hot springs (61%), dust control (60%), improved public transportation (57%), more parks (56%), create trails (48%), bike paths (47%) and an airport (40%).

Family/ Personal Problems in Lincoln County

Family and personal issues did not bring the same level of concern as that found for the community needs.

The top problems with a major or medium rating by respondents were concerns based around shortages of cash and the ability to earn it:

- Preparing youth for the work world - 84%
- Medical care - 81%
- Prices of goods and services - 81%
- Unemployment - 80%
- Money to live on - 75%
- Federal policy on local economy - 74%
- Unsightly properties at 72
- Emergency preparedness 68%
- Maintaining school quality 67%

Several topics were of moderate concern with the majority of surveys averaging a medium problem: drug and alcohol abuse, adequate water supply, availability of good family recreational activities, solid waste management, affordable housing, health insurance for children and an unattractive town.

Areas of medium or small problem were social issues including: services and increased percentage of seniors, quality of family life, child care, crime, domestic violence, environmental quality and status of nutrition.

There were issues that rated mainly (>50%) at small or no importance in the county. These were the serious social issues of child abuse and adult suicide/depression. Also of less concern were children being ready for kindergarten and the availability of bilingual education.

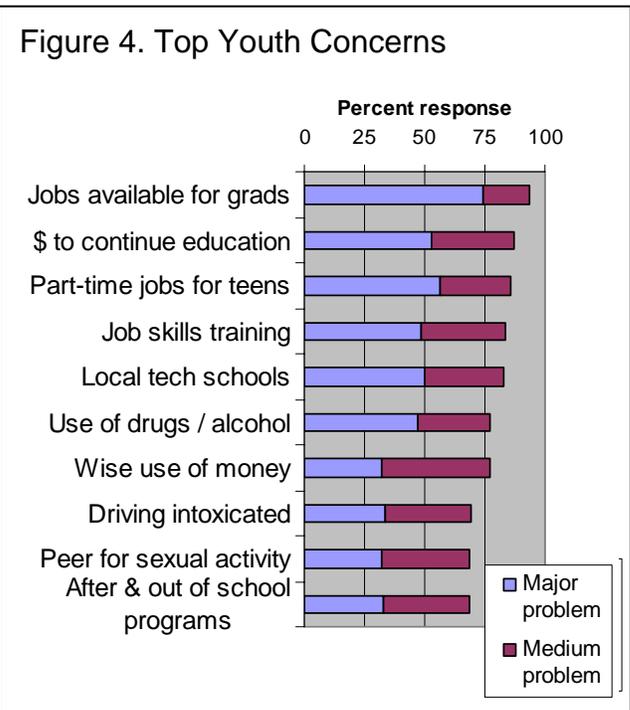
Social problems such as depression, child abuse, crime, domestic violence, and poor quality of family life are considered by many to be rampant in the United States. These issues receive ratings of concern in other rural counties of Nevada^{7,8}. Social issues are perceived as less of a problem in Lincoln County.

One-on-one discussions indicated the feelings of those surveyed are translated into practice. Children are allowed to roam freely to play in the towns, and houses and vehicles are often left unlocked. Local people go out of their way to help each other and strangers. Their lifestyle is one of comfort and ease knowing there are others looking out for you. This is unlike most populations in North America who live in fear of unknown potential dangers.

Youth Issues

The greatest concerns the community has for youth in the county are predominantly finding a solid career and future, and then alcohol, drugs and sex concerns (Figure 4). The top concerns, with the highest combined major and medium problem ratings were related to employment:

- Job availability for high school graduates, 94%
- Finances to continue education - 87%
- Local part-time jobs for teens - 86%
- Job skills training/preparation - 84%
- Local access to technical/ vocational school - 83%.



Concern on the wise use of money among youth rated 77% as major and medium. The UNCE office in Lincoln County did initiate a financial planning class for senior students in the Lincoln County High School in the spring of 2005 to help address this concern.

The next set of concerns was mostly related to the usual form of problems facing youth: use of drugs/alcohol 77%, driving under the

influence 70%, and peer pressure to be sexually active 68%. After-school and out-of-school programs were rated 69% as major or medium priority.

Of moderate concern for youth, with the majority of medium to small problem ratings, were local access to community college, family’s ability to pay bills, parental support to continue education, harassment from peers, appropriate adult models, quality of K-12 education, teen pregnancy and parental support of children.

There were a number of issues that were rated as low or very low problems among youth (Figure 5) which were based on child safety, emotional health and staying in school. One-on-one discussions indicated the residents of Lincoln County consider it a safe, happy environment for kids. Family is a high priority.

In written comments about the biggest problems facing youth in the county, the majority of comments came back on future jobs or education to get good jobs. The exploiting of alcohol, drugs and sex and the lack of good recreational activities were next in importance. One-on-one interviews mentioned the need for jobs in the county, mostly after education but also during high school, and the need for positive recreational activities. Many pointed out that there are no jobs available for young people who want to stay and live in the county, and that is the biggest reason to spur on economic development. It was also pointed out that there are no longer any recreational activities in the county outside of sports. The movie theaters have closed down, leaving no harmless hang outs for youth.

Perception of Quality of life

Respondents feel economic development is required for a better quality of life. But, respondents show uncertainty on the benefits of growth and are not strongly optimistic about change occurring in the county. There is a desire for change in improved economics but not for a change in lifestyle.

Survey respondents in Lincoln County believe the future is bright and economic development will improve life (Figure 6). The strongest agreement, 84%, was in economic growth being desirable with all things considered and then the pride in the quality of life in the community, 77%.

Respondents to the survey had less agreement on the areas of: will increased growth improve the quality of life, 70%; in 5 years things will be better, 60%; and limits on growth and development would do more harm than good, 59%. Surprisingly, there were only 46% in agreement with the future of the community looking bright.

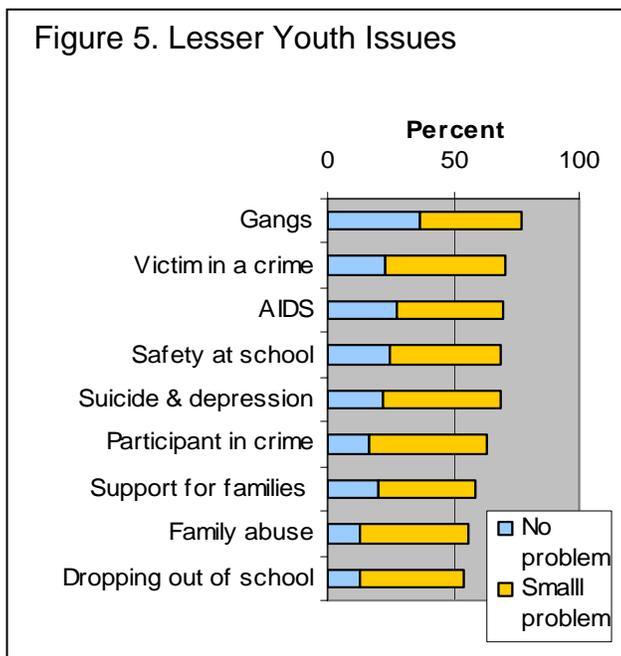
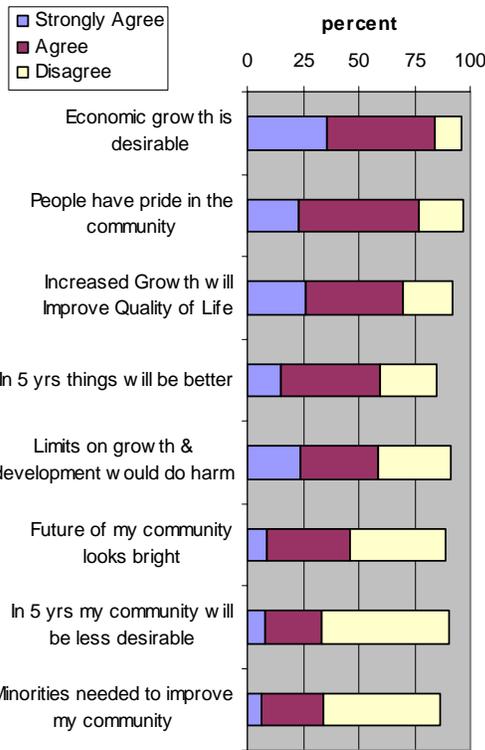


Figure 6. Perception of Quality of Life in Lincoln



Only 34% of respondents agreed that minorities will be needed to improve the community. The lack of economic growth in the county has left many residents skeptical on the future growth potential. There are not enough jobs for locals, therefore, adding more people is viewed as not being an improvement.

In one-on-one interviews, key residents indicated that the pressing issue is for economic development for locals to get good paying jobs. There was also a response of not wanting a rush of people moving into the current communities. New residential developments on the south end of the county are desired for tax dollars coming into the county but not for competition in political power.

One-on-one discussions with the key residents showed there is a fear of losing the quiet, friendly lifestyle. Locals have chosen a simple, quiet pace of life over making larger incomes and consider quality of life to be linked with a quiet, caring existence rather than financial wealth and power. Respondents stated that the community needs just enough economic growth to support the current residents of Lincoln County. Huge growth and profits are not a priority. These beliefs build apprehension about any developments and change discussed for the county.

Future for Lincoln County

The residents of Lincoln County are proud of their quiet, friendly community. Quality of life evolves around family values and supporting each other. There is a relaxed, peaceful existence and no rat race. As a result, the community feels it has strong emotional health. The residents have chosen this great lifestyle and feel it is of highest priority to maintain.

It is recognized that Lincoln County needs economic development and can no longer slip lower in net incomes. Economic development could be approached based on assets of the county; agriculture history but with added diversity in adding new premium crops; tourism through marketing the assets of the county; and through enticing new business such as power production (traditional or alternative). It would be wise to capitalize on the large population just to the south.

The biggest questions are:

- How can Lincoln County achieve economic development for quality jobs while maintaining the peaceful, quiet family life?
- Will economic development come here?

- Will outsiders move in as part of the expansion from the Las Vegas area to overpopulate the quiet community?
- If outsiders move into the county, will the peaceful lifestyle be lost?
- Will current residents lose control of the community?

The County could consider developing a community plan that identifies:

1. What in Lincoln County is good and must be kept;
2. How the community can work toward economic development that provides jobs while keeping the peaceful lifestyle;
3. How to work with and capitalize on new developments as they move into the county;
4. How to get jobs and needed services for residents.

In the first point on what is good and must be kept, the following should be considered:

- The essential quality of life attributes that the county must maintain to keep the peaceful existence.
- The mentality and activities that keep family values in high priority.
- The positive characteristics of the county – open land, nature.

A community plan may allow the county to move into new developments with more comfort because there would be an understanding of priorities for needs and maintaining the good things in the county. The county could proactively approach change rather than having to react to issues.

Many groups could use data from this publication in planning county programs. University of Nevada Cooperative Extension (UNCE) could initiate and expand programs to address some of the county's needs. The development of community plans could be initiated by collecting ideas for the plan from key community residents in workshops and discussions. Economic development in the

county could be enhanced through facilitating specialty food and horticulture production and the development of marketing plans for tourism. The employment skills of youth could be enhanced by initiating a youth farmers market. This program will enhance the students' business and agriculture production skills and may lead to future entrepreneurial work in the county. UNCE will work with others to achieve the required economic development and deal with the developments in the county while aiming to keep the lifestyle desired by residents.

References

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