

5 Community Opinion Surveys

INTRODUCTION

How strongly Washington County residents feel about the importance of preserving farmland and open space may help local policy makers decide which, if any, preservation tools to implement in their communities. Over the last five years, a number of community opinion surveys have been carried out in Washington County by a variety of entities. While surveys are by no means the only way, or necessarily the best way, to gauge public opinion, they are a legitimate tool that can provide a measure of insight into the opinions of residents. In the near future, a number of additional public input activities will be undertaken as part of Washington County's multi-jurisdictional comprehensive planning effort. These new efforts will provide a broader base of results for analysis. Until then, the surveys that have been conducted provide the best available data. This data is summarized in this chapter.

TYPES OF SURVEYS

Countywide

Since 2002, Washington County's Planning and Parks Department has overseen three major survey efforts that included questions related to farmland and open space preservation. One of the surveys was completed as part of the County's recent park and open space planning effort and was conducted by the Center for Urban Initiatives and Research at UW-Milwaukee. The survey was a telephone survey that relied on professionally accepted methods for obtaining random samples. The other two surveys were part of a larger study on economic development in Washington County. These surveys included questions about farmland and open space preservation. This multi-version survey, developed in unison by research centers at UW-Oshkosh and UW-Milwaukee, was targeted at multiple audiences. One survey involved a random telephone sample of local residents. The other was created exclusively for local government officials within Washington County, and utilized a direct mailing to 418 identified municipal and County elected/appointed officials. In 2001, the Ozaukee Washington Land Trust (OWLT) hired the research center at UW-River Falls to conduct a countywide survey on open space preservation.

Local

At least four municipalities within Washington County have conducted community opinion surveys since 2003. They are the Towns of Farmington, Richfield, and Wayne, and the Village of Newburg. All of these surveys were mailed out to local households within the respective town or village boundaries. The Newburg, Richfield, and Wayne surveys were part of a larger planning process and therefore contained a variety of questions in addition to those about farmland and open space preservation. The Farmington survey was much smaller and focused exclusively on land use/preservation issues. Of these four surveys, one was prepared by a planning firm, one by UW-Extension, and the other two by local government officials and/or citizens.

RESULTS

Sample Size

Together, the eight surveys reached approximately 8,000 households in Washington County. There was a response rate of about 47 percent on the surveys that were mailed out.

Categories

While all eight surveys contained their own unique set of preservation related questions, it is possible to put most of the questions into categories to help evaluate the results. (Where a significant difference in the wording of a question appears within a category, the unique wording is included in the table.) The remainder of this chapter presents the survey results in the context of these broad categories.

Category 1: How important is rural character?	Very Important	Important	Not Important	Not Sure
Town of Farmington	60%	27%	10%	3%
County Economic Development survey for residents	60%	33%	5%	1%
County Economic Development survey for elected and appointed officials	59%	31%	9%	1%

The results for Category 1 were extremely consistent across three different audiences.

Category 2: How important is farmland?	Very Important	Important	Neutral	Not Important	Not Sure/ No Response
OWLT Survey	55%	34%	--	4%	4%
Town of Richfield	44%	33%	17%	6%	--
County Economic Development survey for residents	69%	24%	--	6%	1%
County Economic Development survey for elected and appointed officials	57%	30%	--	13%	1%

Results were relatively consistent, with the exception of the Town of Richfield, where more residents tended to be neutral on this issue. This was likely due to the decreased presence of farming in Richfield.

Category 3: How important is the preservation of natural resources?	Very Important	Important	Neutral	Not Important	Not Sure/ No Response
County Economic Development survey for residents	80%	17%	--	1%	2%
County Economic Development survey for elected and appointed officials	65%	25%	--	10%	1%
How important are woodlands?					
OWLT Survey	65%	28%	3%	2%	2%
Town of Richfield	59%	33%	6%	2%	--
How important are wetlands?					
OWLT Survey	60%	31%	2%	3%	4%
Town of Richfield	52%	31%	12%	5%	--
How important is wildlife habitat?					
OWLT Survey	68%	26%	2%	2%	2%
Town of Richfield	54%	34%	9%	3%	--

The majority of respondents from all surveys indicate that preserving natural resources is very important.

Category 4: What type of residential development would you prefer?	Conservation Subdivisions	Conventional Subdivisions	Scattered Development / No Subdivisions	Not Sure
Town of Richfield	53%	21%	23%	--
Town of Wayne	50%	14%	35%	--
Village of Newburg	68%	16%		12%

The Town of Richfield has several conservation subdivisions, while the Town of Wayne does not have any – yet, the support among residents in the two towns was almost identical. In the Village of Newburg, the survey asked whether residents supported conservation subdivisions or did not support them, but the survey failed to give non-supporting respondents a choice between conventional subdivisions and no subdivisions, so the preference of the 16 percent of non-supporters is unclear.

Category 5: <i>Should the County or local municipality buy land or development rights to preserve farmland and/or open space?</i>	Yes	No	Neutral	Not Sure/ No Response
<i>Would you like to see Washington County buy lands such as woodlands and wetlands to protect wildlife and preserve natural habitats for public enjoyment?</i>				
Co. Park System telephone survey	85%	14%	--	1%
Should a land conservation fund be created?				
OWLT Survey	56%	16%	--	28%
Do you favor purchase of development rights as a land management tool?				
Town of Wayne	31%	29%	34%	--

Support for preserving farmland and open space was generally strong when no financial impacts were included.

Category 6: <i>I am willing to pay for preservation. (An example followed of the impact on a typical property tax bill.)</i>	Yes	No	Not Sure/ No Response
Town of Farmington	29%	45%	26%
Town of Richfield	63%	37%	--
Town of Wayne	52%	48%	--
Similar question but without tax example			
OWLT Survey	49%	23%	28%
Village of Newburg	50%	29%	13%

Support remained fairly strong for preserving farmland and open space even when specific financial impacts were included in the question, except in the Town of Farmington (See Appendix L for Town of Richfield specific financial impacts).

OTHER INDIVIDUAL QUESTIONS OF RELEVANCE

OWLT Survey: Would you be willing to have a home on a “less than 1 acre lot” that has open space and/or natural features as a part of the neighborhood?

Yes: 61%

No: 29%

Not Sure/No Response: 10%

Town of Wayne: Which of the following do you like best about the Town?

[305 respondents]

Rural and Open Environment 75% Low Taxes 7.5%
 Good road access to other areas 7% Compatibility of farming & new residences 7.5%
 Adequate level of public services 1% Other 2%

Town of Wayne: If you actively farm your property, what is your current future plan?

[64 responses]

A family member will continue farming: 28%
 Sell the property for continued farming/agricultural use: 14%
 Sell the property for development: 9%
 Unsure at this time: 48%

County Economic Development Survey: Do you agree that Washington County and the local community you represent should be protecting agriculture from *residential* development?

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Didn't Know /No Answer
Elected Officials	41%	31%	18%	8%	2%
Residents	35%	43%	14%	3%	5%
Local Community	40%	25%	17%	13%	5%

SUMMARY

This chapter presents data compiled from seven community opinion surveys undertaken in Washington County since 2001. The key findings are as follows:

- The majority of responses from the County Economic Survey indicated that rural character is very important to their community.
- Surveys that asked how important is farmland in their community, the majority of responses indicated very important except the Town of Richfield survey which still had the highest percentage of respondents indicating very important.
- The majority of survey respondents responding to the question regarding the importance of preserving natural resources indicated that it is very important.
- The Towns of Richfield and Wayne and the Village of Newburg included a question asking what type of development is preferred. The majority of responses indicated conservation development is the preferred choice.
- The Washington County Parks System telephone survey indicated that a large majority of survey respondents (85 percent) indicated that Washington County should purchase land such as woodlands and wetlands to protect wildlife and preserve natural habitats for public enjoyment.
- A majority of residents stated that rural character, farmland, and preservation of natural resources were very important to their community. When asked if the County or local municipality should buy land or development rights to preserve farmland and/or open space, responses were mixed.