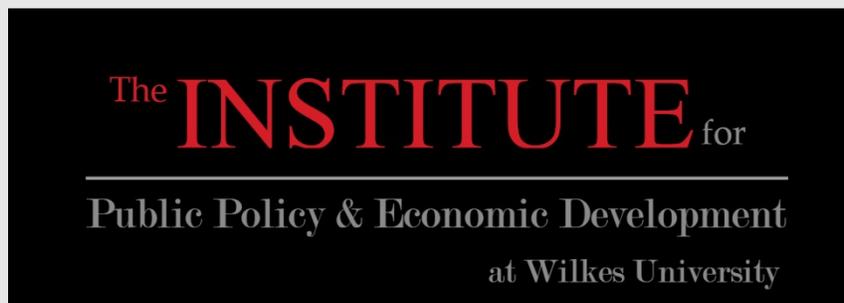


2015



A partnership among Keystone College, King's College, Luzerne County Community College, Marywood University, Misericordia University, Penn State Wilkes-Barre, The Commonwealth Medical College, University of Scranton & Wilkes University

[SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY]

The Institute's Planning, Land Use, Transportation, and Infrastructure (PLuTI) task force conducted a survey on sustainable community attributes, initiatives, and interest among the municipalities in northeastern Pennsylvania.

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Introduction

In May 2014, The Institute for Public Policy and Economic Development's Planning, Land Use, Transportation, and Infrastructure Task Force (PLuTI) published a primer on sustainable communities.

As a follow up to last year's research, a survey was conducted of local governments to ascertain local officials' attitudes toward sustainable practices and policies at the local government level.

Research Methods

A survey instrument was developed to assess respondents' attitudes toward sustainability concepts and to gather self-reported data from municipalities on their performance in several sustainability indicators. Respondents were asked a total of 19 questions, which included contact information for potential follow-up study by the task force.

The survey was completed online by respondents, and distributed by e-mail. An attempt was made to deliver an email invitation to a staff member from each municipality within Lackawanna and Luzerne counties (116 total municipalities). Email addresses were not available for a few municipalities, so approximately 114 total survey invitations were sent. Because the survey respondents represent a non-random sample of recipients who opted to participate, results are not generalizable to all municipalities within the region.

For questions with discrete answer choices, frequency tables were prepared. The responses to open-ended questions were summarized and analyzed qualitatively. The results were then analyzed, looking for common trends and themes to determine areas of improvement and attitudes towards the concept of sustainable communities and possible efforts to implement sustainable practices and policies at the local level.

Several of the questions have a high "skip" level, therefore both number and percentage of responses are reported. There were 14 townships, eight boroughs, and three cities that responded to the survey. There was a higher concentration of Luzerne County municipalities as compare to Lackawanna County municipalities – approximately 3:1. A copy of the survey is located in the appendix of this document.

Survey Results

Respondents were asked what it means to them to have a sustainable community. By far, the most common response for what it means to have a sustainable community is the *ability to provide quality public services* (50 percent of respondents). The ability to have *a stable tax base* (without raising or lowering taxes over time) was the second most common response (over 40 percent of respondents). Additionally, a quarter of respondents responded that having a safe

community, the ability to plan and invest in future projects, and increased business opportunities within the municipality are all examples of what it means to have a sustainable community.

Next, respondents were asked a series of questions to compare various attributes in their community to that of other municipalities in northeastern Pennsylvania. The attributes included transportation, housing, economy, assets, green initiatives/environment, intergovernmental cooperation, health and safety, and quality of life.

Transportation choices were defined as the availability and quality of different modes of transportation. The majority of respondents (69.2percent) ranked their transportation as being about the same to other municipalities in Northeastern Pennsylvania. Only one municipality (7.7 percent) ranked themselves as being better, and only three (23.1 percent) ranked themselves as being worse. Approximately half of the respondents skipped this question.

Respondents were asked to compare the housing market, specifically, the diversity and affordability of housing stock. Half of the respondents ranked their municipality as being better than other Northeastern Pennsylvania municipalities in terms of the housing market. Only one municipality ranked their housing market as being worse (8.3 percent); the rest (41.7 percent) responded as being about the same. Here too, approximately half skipped this question.

The next attribute, economic standing was explained to mean financial strength, availability of jobs, and level of economic activity as compared to other municipalities in Northeastern Pennsylvania Over half (53.8 percent) of municipalities ranked their economic standing as being better than other Northeastern Pennsylvanian municipalities in terms of economic standing. Only one municipality (7.7 percent) ranked themselves as being worse, while the rest were about the same (38.5).

Municipalities were asked to compare use of existing assets such as reuse of buildings, public places and spaces and other resources. The majority of municipalities (53.8 percent) ranked their use of existing assets as being about the same, while the remaining (46.2 percent) ranked their use of existing assets as being better. No municipality ranked their use of existing assets as being worse.

The next question dealt with the municipality's environmental or "green" initiatives to other municipalities in Northeastern Pennsylvania. There was only a slight difference between the municipalities that ranked themselves as being About the Same (46.2 percent) and Better (38.5

percent) compared to other municipalities’ environmental or green initiatives. Two municipalities (15.4 percent) ranked themselves as being worse.

Another attribute was intergovernmental collaboration and coordination, most municipalities reported themselves as having better intergovernmental collaboration and cooperation (46.2 percent) while 30.8 percent ranked themselves as being about the same, and 23.1 percent ranked themselves as being worse than other municipalities.

The majority of respondents ranked their municipality’s health and safety as being Better (76.9 percent) than other municipalities, while the remaining (23.1 percent) ranked themselves as being about the same. No municipalities ranked themselves as being worse.

The majority of respondents ranked their municipalities as having a better (61.5 percent) quality of life compared to other municipalities, while the remaining (38.5 percent) ranked their municipalities as being about the same. No municipalities ranked themselves as being worse than others are.

| Community Attributes | Better | | About the Same | | Worse | |
|---------------------------------|-----------|---------|----------------|---------|-----------|---------|
| | Responses | Percent | Responses | Percent | Responses | Percent |
| Transportation | 1 | 8% | 9 | 69% | 3 | 23% |
| Housing | 6 | 50% | 5 | 42% | 1 | 8% |
| Economic Standing | 7 | 54% | 5 | 39% | 1 | 8% |
| Existing Assets | 6 | 46% | 7 | 54% | -- | -- |
| Environment/Green Initiatives | 5 | 39% | 6 | 46% | 2 | 15% |
| Intergovernmental Collaboration | 6 | 46% | 4 | 31% | 3 | 23% |
| Health and Safety | 10 | 77% | 3 | 23% | -- | -- |
| Quality of Life | 8 | 62% | 5 | 39% | -- | -- |

Municipalities were asked a series of questions about sustainability using a common definition, *“A socially, economically, and environmentally health and resilient population within a given region that preserves the needs of this generation and future generations.”*

The highest number of municipalities (45.5 percent) ranked themselves at a five on this scale. 27.3 percent of municipalities ranked themselves at a three, while 18.2 percent ranked themselves at a five. Only one municipality ranked themselves as a two (9.1 percent), and no municipalities ranked themselves a one in terms of sustainability.

| Level of Sustainability | | |
|-------------------------|----|------|
| 5 - Most Sustainable | 2 | 18% |
| 4 | 5 | 46% |
| 3 | 3 | 27% |
| 2 | 1 | 9% |
| 1 - Least Sustainable | -- | -- |
| Total | 11 | 100% |

Respondents were asked to identify any practices or policies that their municipality implemented to increase sustainability. The most common practices or policies currently implemented by municipalities include recycling or improved recycling efforts, improving and revitalizing infrastructure, and an increase in the number of public safety officials or services. All were reported at the same frequency.

Municipalities were asked if they thought sustainability is a useful and meaningful concept that could help improve the quality of life in your community or your region. Most municipalities (81.8 percent or nine) responded yes to this question. Only two municipalities (18.2 percent) responded Not Sure. No municipalities responded no. A total of 56 percent (or 14 respondents) skipped this question.

Summary & Conclusions

Most respondents of the survey had a broad interpretation of sustainability. Fiscal sustainability and managing taxes and cost of living was a major concern for the respondents. To respondents, this seems to mean cultivating a large enough tax base to keep property taxes manageable while providing necessary public services and infrastructure. The majority of the municipalities reported that being able to provide quality public services to the community without substantially raising or lowering the taxes of the existing population are a crucial part of having a sustainable community. These services would include not only recreational amenities such as parks and natural areas, but businesses and public safety.

For the sustainability indicators, municipalities generally scored themselves as about the same or better than other municipalities in the region. Of the eight sustainability indicators, respondents generally ranked themselves worst on transportation choices and best on health and safety and overall quality of life. Municipalities' level of intergovernmental collaboration was also ranked lower overall than most other indicators.

Respondents generally had a positive view of their sustainability. Most responded with either a four or five when asked to rate their sustainability on a five-point scale, indicating that they believe their municipalities to meet the provided definition of sustainability. A large majority of respondents agreed that sustainability is a useful concept to improve quality of life in their communities or their region.

Many of the municipalities report efforts of increased recycling programs and attempts to bring in new businesses as part of their ongoing efforts to achieve sustainability. However, strategies to promote sustainability and the amount of resources devoted to them vary significantly between municipalities. With so many different sustainability initiatives being considered or pursued at the local level, there is room for more regional collaboration and coordination of sustainability efforts.

Several of the respondents expressed interest in participating in a pilot program.

Next Steps

There appears to be interest in learning more about sustainable practices. The Institute applied for a grant through Livability Solutions' EPA-supported Building Blocks for Sustainable Communities Program in order to obtain a technical assistance grant to provide workshops to our local community. Though the initial grant failed, The Institute will continue to identify resources to provide training for communities. Once a training program is established, The Institute will work with municipalities to establish a pilot program.

In the meantime, The Institute is developing a community toolkit. This toolkit will be accessible at www.institutepa.org. The toolkit will contain various topics on sustainability and smart growth. Each topic will contain specific initiatives, best practices, case studies, and a resource section.

Appendix

Qualitative Responses

Original responses for Question 2: For you, what does it mean to have a sustainable community?

- Financial abilities for the future for projects in the community as well as goals for the future of the community.
- A good tax base, affordable housing, many employment options, and efficient public services (e.g. police & fire protection).
- Providing the same services the residents have received, and expected, in the past years without eliminating or reducing those services, and without increasing taxes.
- Effectively planning for future growth. Provide affordable housing, infrastructure, and economic development initiatives.
- A community with 21st Century infrastructure that can provide all necessary public services at a cost the stakeholders can afford. Community or municipal services include clean and safe neighborhoods and in the City's case a vibrant downtown business center.
- NECESSARY SERVICES PROVIDED, LOW TAXES AND LOW BUDGET.
- To best use the resources we have, and recycle effectively
- Great quality of life, healthy tax base, solid infrastructure, thriving businesses
- To be able to provide services at affordable costs
- To live in a community that has a vision and future that will make it a pleasant place to raise a family, work, and enjoy life.
- One that can maintain the roads, park, garage, municipal building, and equipment adequately without having to raise taxes.
- A community that provides a safe and comfortable environment for its residents.

| Common Theme | Responses |
|---|------------------|
| Not raising or lowering taxes | 5 |
| Providing quality public services | 6 |
| Safe community | 3 |
| Increased business/economic development | 3 |
| Future projects/growth | 3 |

Original responses for question 12: Are there any practices or policies that your municipality has implemented to increase sustainability? Please list and briefly describe all that apply.

- Developing uses of resources to continue to finance programs then leave our future generation with a larger debt
- Adopting the college town concept to encourage student population growth for the local colleges in our area. Improving the downtown area through the City Administration, working closely with the Chamber of Commerce [REDACTED].* The City has hired more police and firefighters this year. The City has received a grant to use for an adaptive reuse project pertaining to a vacant bank building downtown.
- Recycling- We have expanded our recycling program to include more items. This increases our receipts from the recycling center and in turn keeps the cost of recycling at a minimum.
- Increased public safety investments, infrastructure improvements and investment in municipal assets.
- recycling
- Implementing more user fee based programs rather than generally raising taxes
- Concentration on improving infrastructure, right-sizing budgets, creating social events that impact all ages, grass roots efforts to gain public thoughts and ideas to incorporate them into a plan
- We have been working in all aspects to improve the township, fire department, police, DPW, recycling, infrastructure, parks, and recreation. Funds are distributed to all areas of the township to improve the quality of life for the residents.

**identifying information redacted*

Introduction

The Institute for Public Policy and Economic Development at Wilkes University is a community-based research center based in Wilkes-Barre and Scranton, PA. The Institute houses the regional Planning, Land Use, Transportation, and Infrastructure Task Force. The Task Force has worked with The Institute to develop research on sustainable communities.

The purpose of this survey is to understand local practices and policies relating to sustainable communities. Please answer each question to the best of your ability. At the end of the survey, you may provide your contact information to be considered for a possible pilot program to enhance sustainable practices in government.

The survey should take less than 10 minutes to complete. All responses will be kept confidential and no statements will be directly attributed to you or your municipality. Clicking the "next" button on this page indicates your agreement to voluntarily participate in this survey.

If you have any questions or concerns, contact The Institute at 570.408.9850.

This survey is scheduled to end September 19, 2014.

1. Name of Municipality:

Sustainability Practices

2. For you, what does it mean to have a sustainable community?

Sustainability Indicators

3. How would you compare your municipality's transportation choices (availability and quality of different modes of transportation) to other municipalities in Northeastern Pennsylvania?

- Better About the Same Worse

4. How would you compare your municipality's housing market (diversity and affordability of housing stock) to other municipalities in Northeastern Pennsylvania?

- Better About the Same Worse

5. How would you compare your municipality's economic standing (financial strength, availability of jobs, level of economic activity, etc.) to other municipalities in Northeastern Pennsylvania?

- Better About the Same Worse

6. How would you compare your municipality's use of existing assets (reuse of buildings, spaces, or other resources) to other municipalities in Northeastern Pennsylvania?

- Better About the Same Worse

7. How would you compare your municipality's environmental or "green" initiatives to other municipalities in Northeastern Pennsylvania?

- Better About the Same Worse

8. How would you compare your municipality's intergovernmental collaboration and coordination to other municipalities in Northeastern Pennsylvania?

- Better About the Same Worse

9. How would you compare your municipality's health and safety to other municipalities in Northeastern Pennsylvania?

- Better About the Same Worse

10. How would you compare your municipality's overall quality of life to other municipalities in Northeastern Pennsylvania?

- Better About the Same Worse

Sustainability Definition

Consider the following definition of sustainability: “a socially, economically, and environmentally healthy and resilient population within a given region that preserve the needs of this generation and future generations.” In other words, sustainability focuses on providing the necessary needs of the present generation without compromising the needs of the future generations.

11. With this definition in mind, please rate how well you believe your municipality achieves sustainability where 1 is the least sustainable and 5 is the most sustainable.

- 1 - Least Sustainable
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5 - Most Sustainable

12. Are there any practices or policies that your municipality has implemented to increase sustainability? Please list and briefly describe all that apply.

13. Do you think that sustainability is a useful and meaningful concept that could help improve the quality of life in your community or your region?

- Yes
- No
- Not Sure

14. Would your municipality be interested in being a part of a potential pilot program that would support sustainable practices to your community? This program might include additional surveys, interviews, and assistance in identifying and/or implementing sustainable practices. If offered, the pilot program would be of no cost to your municipality.

- Yes
- No
- Not Sure

Contact Information

Please provide us with the following information if you would like to be contacted with more about the possible pilot program that would work with local governments to enhance sustainability. The pilot program, if offered, would be at no cost to your municipality.

15. Name of person who completed this survey:

16. Position at Municipality: (Example: mayor, supervisor, clerk, borough manager, etc.)

17. Phone Number:

18. Email Address:

19. Preferred method of contact:

Select one