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Washington County residents register high satisfaction with life in county

Washington County residents report that they enjoy a higher quality of life than those in most counties across the nation, according to a survey recently completed by the county.

The results of the survey, conducted by mail and online in January and February, were presented to the Washington County Board of Commissioners June 21.

The positive rating for quality of life remained at about the same as the last time the county surveyed its residents in 2019. The survey was done by National Research Center (NRC)/Polco in conjunction with four other Minnesota counties, Dakota, Scott, Olmsted, and St. Louis. The survey was mailed to 3,000 homes in the county, with 500 residents in each of Washington County's five commissioner districts being invited to complete the survey. Of that number 22% of the surveys, or 648, were returned or completed online with a relatively equal number from each commissioner district.

The key finding in the survey was that Washington County residents reported that they enjoy a higher quality of life than those in most other counties across the nation. Because NRC/Polco works with counties and cities from all over the country, it is able to compare responses collected in Washington County with responses collected nationally.

Survey participants evaluated 12 aspects of living in their community. The top-rated dimensions of the community that make up the quality of the community are:

- outdoor recreational opportunities;
- ease of travel by car;
- overall image or reputation of the county;
- rural character and natural environment; and

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- overall feeling of safety.

Residents generally feel safe in the community, but have a growing concern about safety. The rating for an overall feeling of safety slipped from 72 on a 100-point scale to 66 between 2019 and 2022. Residents generally feel safe from violent crime, and in their own neighborhoods, but are concerned about being injured when walking or biking along county roads, about distracted drivers on county roads, and by identity theft.

Residents are moderately concerned about health and environmental issues in the county. While they are less concerned about overweight children and adults and heart disease than they were in the past, they are more concerned about loneliness. Top environmental concerns center on quality and quantity of the water supply and in lakes and streams; additional concerns are energy use, climate change, and quantity of useable water.

County services and government performance are satisfactory to residents. The county received high marks for informing residents, supporting the quality of life in the county, the value that the county services add to the quality of life, and for listening to residents.

County services rated above the national benchmarks of NRC/Polco are:

- county libraries;
- county parks and recreation;
- recycling and drop-off services;
- snow and ice removal;
- disaster preparedness; and
- services provided to older adults.

Seven in 10 respondents had visited a park or trail at least three times in the last year, which rose from six in 10 in the last survey. Those who have not visited a park note a lack of time to do so, the vehicle permit fee, and not knowing about the parks as barriers to a visit.

Residents noted that the protection and management of natural areas, off-road trails, programs for learning about nature and outdoor recreation, community events, and access to rental equipment were important services in Washington County Parks.

When asked about the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on them, residents cited the economic impact on the local economy as the most concerning effect for them.

Diversity initiatives of the county tended to be rated positively. Aspects of those initiatives important to residents are:

- treating all residents with respect;
- creating a community welcoming of all backgrounds and cultures; and
- providing opportunities for residents with different opinions to voice their concerns.

The survey was funded with \$25,000 from the state that the county received for its participation in the state standard measures program. Full results may be found on the Washington County website at www.co.washington.mn.us, by searching “resident survey.”