

Vilas County Community Connections Survey

Introduction

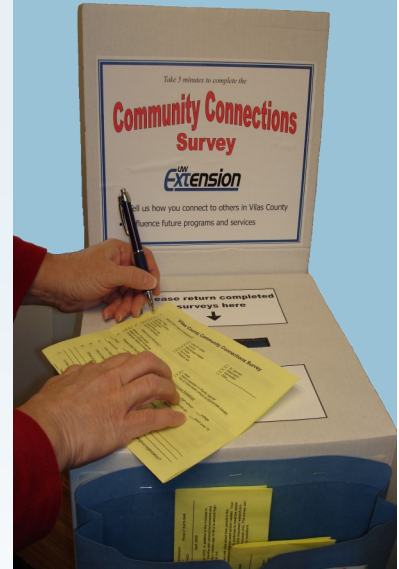
As part of its role to assist Vilas County in assessing needs and conditions in the community, the UW-Extension staff designed and conducted a county-wide Community Connections Survey in 2009. “A sense of community” was consistently a priority expressed by residents over the past several years through a variety of UW-Extension’s community-based interactions. Staff conducted this survey to provide a baseline of qualitative information for decision-makers across the county.

Community Connection Survey Responders

A total of 425 (2% of the county population) completed the survey. Survey responses by municipality compare closely to percent of county population. A majority (94%) were Caucasian and six percent (6%) were American Indian. Seasonal residents were the minority (7%) and year-around residents were the majority (93%). Length of residency was from a couple of months to over 80 years with the median length of residency 15 years.

Connections to Family and Neighbors

To get a sense of connectedness, we asked about family and neighbors. Almost half (48%) of respondents have family or extended family who live in Vilas County. A majority (80%) said they know their neighbors’ first names; one of seven (14%) said they know “some” of their neighbors’ names; and one of 15 (6%) indicated they do not know their neighbors’ names. When asked if they have someone close by they would go to for assistance on short notice, such as starting a car, feeding a pet, or watching a child, a majority (89%) said they did. Yet, one of ten (11%) did not have someone available to assist on short notice.



Length of Time Living in Vilas County	Percentage of Survey Respondents
Less than 1 year	2%
1-10 years	34%
11-20 years	15%
21-30 years	16%
31-40 years	12%
41-50 years	6%
50+ years	7%

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Why do a Community Connections Survey?

When UW-Extension sought community input to identify issues a “sense of community” was consistently a priority. Vilas County citizens value the volunteerism, connectedness, and synergy of collaborative community efforts.

Simultaneously Vilas County citizens realize that Vilas County residents have different values and come from different backgrounds that don’t always come together. One stakeholder described it as, “a melting pot that doesn’t melt well,” which leaves people feeling isolated and disconnected as well as having the potential to contribute to conflict.

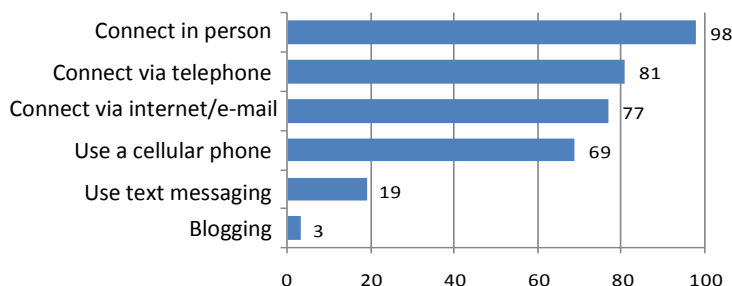
Individuals and families in Vilas County experience the stress of limited financial resources. Simultaneously, government is being financially squeezed which affects the programs and services it is able to provide. In-migration to the county brings new residents that often have “expectations that are not realistic.” With these pressures, county extension committee members felt rebuilding a sense of community could help individuals, families, and communities meet their needs and goals.

Extension committee members want to increase the level of connection that county residents have to their community. Towards that end, Extension staff designed a public input program to identify the level of community connection that currently exists. Baseline information will be used as a starting point as well as a benchmark to evaluate “community connections” progress over time.

How People Connect with Each Other

Respondents regularly connect with others. Almost all (98%) connect in person; three of five (81%) connect via telephone; three fourths (77%) connect via Internet/E-mail; two-thirds (69%) use a cellular phone; one of five (19%) use text messaging, and a few (3%) do blogging or social networking (Facebook, MySpace).

How People Connect (Percentage)



When asked how often they share a meal with someone other than those in their household, almost two of five (37%) do so weekly and one-fourth (23%) do so occasionally, less than monthly. One in twelve (8%) rarely or never share a meal and one in eleven (9%) shares a meal only on special occasions or holidays with someone other than those in their household. Only one of 16 respondents (6%) shares a meal with someone other than those in their household daily. One respondent commented that senior meal sites make social connections easier for elders than younger people.

Shopping is a social experience for many respondents. Almost two-thirds (64%) shop with another person. Almost three-fourths (70%) run into people they know when they shop.

Three of five (58%) reported participating in local events in the community during the past year. Festivals (42 people) were the most popular event and included such festivals as Cranberry Fest, County Fair, Pow-Wows, Klondike Days, and Pond Hockey. Fund raisers (e.g. Relay for Life, Angel on My Shoulder, Race for a Cure, and United Way) were the second most popular event (39 people) followed by art events (24 people) such as Art Expressions, performing arts programs, POPS River Revival, concerts, and theater performances. Environmental awareness events (clean boat-clean water, roadside clean-up), fitness events (Journeys Marathon, Bike & Hike), parades, garden events, health fairs, and elections were also mentioned as ways people participated in their community.

Clubs and Organizations

Over half (58%) belong to a club/organization while two of five (42%) do not belong to a club/organization.

The most frequently (13%) mentioned club/organization was church (57). Half (50%) report attending religious services; one in five (20%) attend “sometimes;” and one-third (31%) do not attend religious services.

The second most frequently (13%) mentioned club or organization was sport and fitness groups (56).

One of ten (10%) belong to a service club (45). Service clubs are the number one choice for those who join only one or two organizations.

People belonging to four or more clubs/organizations are most likely to participate in elected or appointed governmental positions (25).

Table 1. Belonging to Clubs and Organizations	Belong to				Totals
	1	2	3	4	
Church	6	18	13	20	57
Sport/fitness	8	13	16	19	56
Service club (Lions, Rotary, etc.)	10	15	8	12	45
Wildlife (fish & game, trout unlimited, etc.)	4	8	2	30	44
Lake/property association	2	5	6	26	39
Government (town, county, tribal)	3	6	1	25	35
Chamber of Commerce	4	11	4	16	35
Snowmobile club	7	8	6	14	35
Library		6	6	20	32
Education (PTA, Discovery Center, etc.)	2		11	19	32
Social (woman’s club, Red Hat, Yakkers, etc.)		4	5	22	31
Veterans	3	11	4	8	26
Senior Citizen (Prime Timers, Easy Eagles, etc.)		4	3	17	24
Youth (4-H, scouts, etc.)	2	1	7	8	18
Fire/ambulance	6	5	2	5	18
Craft (carvers, knitters, quilters, corvette, etc.)	3			12	15
Historical		2	3	10	15
Medical (relay for life, hospital auxiliary)		2	4	8	14
Professional Association	1	5	6	2	14
Garden (master gardener, green thumb)		4		7	11
Food Pantry	2	1	3	4	10
Fine arts (art league, performing arts, etc.)			1	6	7
Political Party	1	1		5	7
Land trust		1		5	6
Restorative Justice				4	4
Animals (Humane society)		1	1	2	4
Disability (fishing has no boundaries, etc.)	3		1		4
Museum		1		2	3
Public radio			1	2	3
Weight loss		1		1	2
Housing			1		1

The Community Connections Survey is a team effort of UW-Extension Staff

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Volunteerism and Charitable Giving

Three-fourths (78%) indicated they had raised or given money for a charitable purpose (other than a religious organization) in the past year.

Two-thirds (67%) volunteered time for a charitable cause or organization in the past year. Respondents gave 14,575 hours of volunteer time this past year which has a value of \$250,836.*

* Independent Sector. (2007). *Dollar value of a volunteer hour*. Retrieved from http://www.independentsector.org/programs/research/volunteer_time.html

According to Arden Brummel**, Volunteer Calgary, volunteering is not about money. "It reduces volunteerism to hours worked instead of contribution made. It ignores the value of volunteers in creating a vibrant civil society—dynamic, engaged and self-reliant." He goes on to point out that you can add up volunteer hours, but warns not to be blinded by the numbers. The value of volunteering is deeper, more fulfilling and more important to a healthy and vibrant community than money can ever measure.

** Brummel, A. (2001). *The value of volunteering*. Retrieved from <http://www.energizeinc.com/art/atimevalue.html>

Connection to Government

One of thirteen (8%) respondents said they currently hold elected office. Over half (56%) had attended a local government meeting (such as school board, town board, city council, county board) in the past year.

Respondents were asked if they know who elected officials are and if they have made contact with them.

Elected position	Don't know who this is	Know who it is; have NOT made contact	Know who it is; have made contact
Town Chair or Mayor	19%	49%	32%
Town Board Member or City Council Member	22%	41%	36%
County Board Supervisor	38%	43%	19%
State Representative	20%	53%	26%
State Senator	17%	59%	24%
US Representative	22%	60%	19%
US Senator	18%	62%	20%
Governor	10%	76%	14%

Over half (53%) of respondents had not contacted human service agencies within the county. One fourth (24%) had used public health services; one of five (21%) had contacted social services; one of six (17%) had contacted the Commission on Aging; and one of ten (11%) had contacted veteran's services.



Vilas County Board members fill out the Community Connections Survey

Suggestions to Improve Community Connections

Half (50% or 211 people) offered suggestions on how to improve community connections within Vilas County.

Communication

Many comments (49) suggested improving communication—between agencies, governmental bodies, organizations, media, and neighbors.

Specific ideas for government to better communicate included these suggestions:

- Elected officials to speak to service groups about what is happening.
- Developing a mailing to residents with contact information and a yearly summary.
- Develop more volunteer committees to make recommendations to boards.
- Rotate county board meetings throughout the county.
- Hold late afternoon or evening meetings to allow those who work all day to participate.
- Broadcast meetings via Internet or cable TV channel.

Respondents had comments to improve local media. They wondered if there could be a column listing the current week’s events, better coverage on local issues, and more county-wide news coverage. Respondents suggested a public-sponsored TV channel promoting local community events.

Comments for county departments, organizations, and agencies included having announcements in the tax bills and developing/ sending resource directories to send to all residents. Recognizing that not everyone subscribes to a newspaper, it was suggested that there be an email newsletter or postal mail newsletter of pertinent issues for all residents.

Concerns also noted the “east-west” regions of the county. Suggestions were for county departments to hold office hours in locations other than Eagle River; hold programs in locations other than Eagle River; develop events to connect the west and east regions of the county; and coordinate events between communities that are not contiguous to one another.

Survey was conducted during this time period.

APRIL 2009

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
			1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26	27	28	29	30		

MAY 2009

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
					1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30
31						

JUNE 2009

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
	1	2	3	4	5	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30				

JULY 2009

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
			1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26	27	28	29	30	31	

Community Connections Support Families

Empowering families to connect with their communities and educating communities to encourage family participation has important repercussions. Research indicates that children and families prosper in connected, supportive communities and suffer in the absence of community support. When families lack vital community support networks, they often also fail to contribute to the larger health of the community around them. The degree to which families are engaged, in turn affects how the community prioritizes and responds to and supports families (Janowitz, 1991).

People and their relationships with one another are what count in developing a strong sense of community (Braham & Bowling, 2003). Families are the basic building block of communities. When communities offer support, resources and opportunities, families can be better strengthened and have the means to raise children into healthy, productive adults. "Children and families do better when their community has strong institutions and when residents are connected to neighbors and community organizations" (National Human Services Assembly, 2005). Families need supportive communities to provide social ties, enhance health, teach values, and develop assets in children and youth. When living in a supportive community, a family can grow to its full potential and provide the best environment for children to grow into healthy, caring adults.

Respondents commented that events cater to older segments of the population, which is understandable due to the demographic make-up of the area. Yet, adults in the 20-35 age range and youth have needs for events and programs targeted to them. One respondent commented, "...don't forget about the younger market...you need us around!"

Respondents indicated they would like websites that would give information about agencies, organizations, clubs, and volunteer opportunities.

Broadband Internet Service

Broadband Internet service or "high speed" Internet was a specific area to improve mentioned by 38 respondents.

Transportation Services

Transportation was mentioned as an area to improve by 20 people. Suggestions included a shuttle for the physically challenged, transport for seniors "who shouldn't be driving to Dr. appointments in Rhinelander," and for attending worship services.

Recreation Infrastructure

A number (5) of respondents want to have the bike trails in the county connect for one entire network throughout the county. Two people mentioned the need for a convention/community center.

Volunteering

Respondents (5) indicated an interest in volunteering. Yet, getting connected to volunteer opportunities can be difficult. Several suggested a volunteer coordination or placement service would be helpful

Business

Tourism is an important part of the local economy. Several (6) seasonal resident respondents commented:

- "As a summer resident, I would suggest that local residents appreciate what we bring to the community."
- "Store owners need to be friendlier if we are to shop here. Some are but some aren't."

Another commented that it "cheapens the atmosphere of up North" when tourists are treated poorly.

Inclusion

Several (8) comments addressed the concern about inclusion. Some addressed racial issues: "Take down the walls of racism and realize everyone's money spends the same," and another suggested, "No more hatred." Others addressed the new versus old residents: "Accept new people; do not exclude people because they were not born here," and "Outreach to new residents."

Challenges of Getting Connected

Thirteen respondents thought no improvements were needed. One wrote, “There is no need for improvement. We all choose the level of connectedness we are comfortable with.” Another said, “Nothing at this point—our community has so many events/ activities at so many different times—there is ample opportunity to be involved in any number of things to help others and to get to know others.”

On the other hand, two of five (42%) respondents do not participate in community events. The reasons for not participating in the community included: being short on time (37%), not interested (32%), and the expense was too much (6%). Some comments pointed to other reasons such as being a new resident, not knowing how to join, and that nobody asked them to participate. Also, some commented that their own health or a family member’s health problems prevented them from attending community events.

The survey asked if safety concerns hindered their connecting with others in the community. One of ten (10%) indicate weather is a hindrance. A few people indicated that traffic (2%), crimes against people (2%), crimes against property (2%), and animals (2%) hindered them from connecting with others. An assortment of “other” responses (4%) indicated concerns such as lack of time from trying to make a living, people who seem like they want to be left alone, lack of “commonality,” and not driving.

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