Sponsors

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Coalition of Communities of Color
Intel
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Tualatin Soil and Water Conservation District
Vision Action Network
Washington County
Westside Economic Alliance
Research Purpose

- Assess values and beliefs about quality of life in Washington County
- Explore perceptions of Washington County performance on economic mobility and livability indicators
Methodology

- Two focus groups with Washington County residents led by professional moderator
- 2-hour discussion
- 10 women, 10 men
- 9 white, 10 persons of color, 1 both
- 3 HS diploma, 5 some college, 11 college degree, 1 post-grad
- Mix of ages, employment, income levels, length of time in county
Project Scope

- Present study is part of a larger project to understand how Washington County is “growing up” economically and socially
- Project includes quantitative survey and supplementary focus group conducted by Coalition of Communities of Color
- Other studies reported separately
- Results largely consistent
Participants like living in the county but feel pressured by the impacts of growth on quality of life indicators such as housing, traffic, and education

- Housing costs and drive times are forcing major life decisions that people might not otherwise make
- Confidence in the school system is shaky
Residents appreciate the county’s diversity and want that to continue growing

- They feel good about the accessibility of shops, grocery stores, restaurants, and outdoor or athletic recreation.
- They feel less access to cultural activities and venues, music, theater, and family entertainment.
  - Orientation for these activities is to Portland.
Feelings of county identity and community are mixed

- Individual personalities and levels of involvement vary
- The size of the county, with multiple urban centers and long drive times, hampers a county-centered sense of community and identity
- Some remarked upon a shallowness or lack of genuine caring in fellow residents—hints of disengagement possibly reflected in lower than average voting and volunteering percentages
Direction of County on Important Issues
Most participants feel livability has stayed the same or gotten worse. A few say livability has improved.
Those who say livability is worse focus on growth, traffic, and housing costs

“The population has increased at a rate not relative to the resources….Too many people, not enough schools, streets, etc., to accommodate.”

“Housing costs have gone up a lot. Traffic is worse.”

“Traffic has become intolerable. Housing costs are unrealistic.”
Those who say livability is better mention jobs, income, and increasing diversity

“Able to purchase a home and secure a better paying job. Able to secure a shorter commute and improve work/life balance.”

“More ethnic additions to the community.”
Long-time residents talk about major changes from the county’s old farming character to a more urban identity

“I can remember coming to Washington County 30 years ago before the Intels, before the Nike, when it was farmland. I mean, there were two-lane roads. They were families. They were working people, and they had farms. They shared with their neighbors. And when you come out here [now], and you see the change, you get to 185th and Cornell, and you go across the street, and now we’re in Hillsboro. But this Hillsboro is totally developed from the Hillsboro of 20 years ago.”
Perceptions of Traffic and Housing
Traffic congestion plays into work choices, whether to visit friends and family, whether to participate in community and cultural events, and other life decisions.

“It’s like everything is narrowed down. It’s going to take you two hours to get anywhere. If I want to go visit my grandkids in Sandy, it’s an all-day event to spend three hours with them because it’s going to take me that long to get back and forth through traffic.”

“That was part of our reason for retiring early. My wife’s office was out near the airport, and we live in Tigard. The commute was just getting worse and worse, and we finally decided to cash it in.”
Participants were surprised that Washington County scored lower than average for commute times

“So, it’s very surprising that this commute time is one of the best in the nation. I don't get that whatsoever, because I feel like commute times are just increasing as the years ago by, as people keep moving in.”
Housing costs exert similar impact on life choices. For many, living in the county is not sustainable.

You're always just on the edge of being able to afford what you're living in. Maybe you get a little bit of increase in income, and the rent goes up and you're still square one.

I think of my nieces or nephews and my younger sister. I don't think they will ever be able to afford a house, at least not in this area.

Our plan is, after [living here] three generations, we’re out of here because we can’t afford it.
Other impacts include shared housing and income segregation

My son, who works at a popular place, even with him, he is like, "Dad, I might have to crash at the house." Those type of things are the reality today that, as we continue to still have this influx of people coming from all over the country to come to Portland, it’s just getting very hard for families.

All these [housing] developments are catering to the upper middle class. There is no middle class or lower middle class. I mean, the housing costs are atrocious.
Perceptions of Education
Rapid growth has affected school infrastructure, including service to lower income students

“The population density has really boomed in the past four years. My daughter’s school, we went from a class of 21 in her kindergarten year, and now she’s at 36 in her second grade class. Her school is getting overwhelmed. A lot of the schools offered free lunches and breakfast, and that program ended for I think 12 schools this year, and that’s big for low-income families who depended on that.”
Comments about the school systems were lukewarm to negative

“We’re actively looking for schools where our daughter is going to go to kindergarten, and so far we’re looking at private as our only option because of poor quality.”

“I think the educational system is outdated. Most of the kids that finish high school are not prepared on the educational level to transition to college unless they get into certain specialized programs that help them focus more.”
Some were surprised to learn county dropout rates were below the average of other counties

“Education is really important to me, and I know that’s something that Washington County is actively looking towards improving. But I was surprised to see that they are doing the best [on dropout rates].”
Perceptions of Crime and Public Safety
Participants feel relatively safe from crime in Washington County

“There is no place in Washington County that I feel unsafe.”

“I think Washington County, when you compare it to downtown or Southeast or Northeast, is probably one of the safest feeling.”
Homelessness is seen as a wider problem that affects the county, too, but not to the same degree as other locations.

“There is just homelessness everywhere, all over. In Washington County, I don’t see so much of that.”
Safety issues have more to do with road and crosswalk lighting than crime

“If there are any safety issues, it’s not enough lighting or not enough sidewalks on certain streets.”
Perceptions of Work and Income Opportunities
People feel there are jobs, but not many jobs that pay enough to support living in the county

“Depending on the industry you’re looking for, I mean, you can find a job. You’re not going to get paid a lot of money.”

“If you’re looking to pay down your student loans, save some money, that’s not likely.”
Some parents encourage their children to look elsewhere for a sustainable living

“So, we’re encouraging [our son] to look at colleges outside of Oregon so that [his chosen career] can be a living wage for him.”
Rules, permit requirements, and restrictions on teenage workers are hard for businesses to navigate, and many kids are busy with other activities.

“They make it too hard”

“Most of the kids, I mean, their schedules are so jam-packed with sports and all these other things.”
Perceptions of Diversity
Diversity, especially ethnic and economic diversity, was a prominent topic in the discussions

- Views differed on particulars, but participants endorsed the value and importance of diverse communities.
- Participants generally felt Washington County was performing well, but also that it could be doing better.
Blacks feel accepted but not really on the “inside” of their communities

“I think people in Beaverton are accepting. I have not come across people who have not been accepting of who we are as African Americans. I just haven’t had that experience here.”

“I’m still kind of on the outside, even though I’ve been living here for almost four years.”
The Hispanic influence is much more prevalent

“My daughter commented that these are the first Black kids that are going to her school, and another family who fosters a couple of little Black girls. And that makes me really sad, but the school is bilingual, literally bilingual. Every teacher has to speak Spanish and English.”
Residents are more tuned in than outsiders to the economic diversity of the county

—“There’s also that back and forth between Portlanders and people who live on the west side, because they think everybody over here is rich.”

— “So not true.”

—“They think who is rich?”

—“Us. They assume it’s like, you must be. And I’m like, ‘No, if you go down the street from me, that is not the case.’”
Some residents see pockets of wealth and poverty, but perceptions differ on the extent of segregation

- Participants thought income inequality and segregation in the county would be above average.

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Community Feeling and Identity
Feelings of community varied with personality and levels of involvement

- Some felt closely connected to their friends and neighbors while others felt residents were polite but superficial.
- The county’s voting and volunteer rates were comparatively lower than participants expected.

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The geographical extent of the county makes it difficult for some to regard it as a “community”

- Many are oriented toward Portland, especially for entertainment and cultural activities.

“I live in Tigard, and I'm ten miles from downtown Portland. So, if they talk about building an auditorium in Hillsboro, I don't care. That might be the county seat, but Portland is my neighbor. It’s very easy for me to get on I-5 and get to downtown Portland. It’s harder for me to get to downtown Beaverton.”
Final Thoughts
Housing and transportation carried through to the end as important themes

“Make sure that there is equal access and opportunities and infrastructure to accommodate the growth on every level, from employment to housing to traffic, all those issues we talked about.”
Diversity and the desire to belong to a caring community were enduring topics as well

“It would be awesome if we could live in a more diverse, greater community and have the people within that really support each other.”