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Community Connections Survey puts spotlight on changes in Vilas County

Note: This is the first in a series of four weekly releases covering the results of the Vilas County Community Connections Survey.

Vilas County's population grows at a rate of 550 people per year. Now at 22,545, the year-round population doubled between 1970 and 2007, according to Wisconsin Department of Administration population estimates. Twenty-two percent of the current county population moved here within the past 15 years. In addition to the increase in permanent residents, our county's population multiplies with second homeowners and tourists, reaching a peak population of more than 100,000 in the summer months. As our population continues to grow and diversify, it also continues to age. Our county's median age of 46.2 is second highest in the state. What does this mean for Vilas County?

The Vilas County UW-Extension office has long tracked the changes in the local population and economy, and used the data coupled with University research to assist the county in responding to the changing needs of the population. Recent input from Vilas County citizens and the County Board's Extension Education & Community Development Committee shows that Vilas County citizens value volunteerism, interconnectedness, and collaborative community efforts. At the same time, people have different values and come from different backgrounds. It is not always easy for people to connect to community efforts, which leaves some feeling isolated and disconnected. County Extension Committee members feel it is important for people to feel connected to the community and to their neighbors.

The Community Connections Survey was developed by the Vilas County UW-Extension to provide a baseline of information about how well people in Vilas County are connected to each other and groups in the community. The survey was conducted from April through July, 2009 and results were tabulated in the fall. The questions asked how people in the county view the notion of community, how they connect with their neighbors, and support services they use or think are

needed. A report on the survey results was presented to the Vilas County Board in January, 2010, and is available to the public by contacting the Vilas County Extension Office. Decision-makers throughout the county may find it helpful to know what community residents think of the various services, where they volunteer their time, and what their top concerns are.

Who Responded

Two percent of the county population completed the survey, with the number of responses comparing closely with the population distribution across the county. 94% of respondents identified themselves as Caucasian, while 6% identified themselves as American Indian. Seasonal residents comprised 7% of the response, while 93% were year-round residents. Length of residency in the county ranged from a few months to over 80 years, with the median length of residency at 15 years. Thirty-six percent of the respondents lived in the county 10 years or less; and 51% of the respondents lived here 20 years or less, indicating a much higher participation in the survey among those who have lived in the county a shorter time.

Community Suggestions

Half of the survey respondents offered a wide array of suggestions on how to improve community connections in Vilas County, ranging from general comments such as “more community events” to specific suggestions such as having community potlucks to brainstorm ideas. Among the comments related to family and neighbors were suggestions for “small groups to have links on the chamber of commerce web site” and “have a good old-fashioned block party.” Some suggested that there are not enough events that are “family-friendly” – that are alcohol-free and geared toward the entire family. Other suggestions focused on how local media can assist by listing upcoming events in one place with more advance notice, or creating a local community television station.

“We appreciate the time and thought that Vilas County Residents put into their suggestions,” remarked Gene Cizek, Chair of the Vilas County Extension Committee, “we hope this is the start of a community-wide conversation that can improve everyone’s quality of life here.”

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Next week: more on survey results and informal community connections