

## What would the best possible COVID-19 outcome be for the Northwoods?

A Wisconsin Northwoods survey conducted by twelve community leaders. The group was convened by Brittany Beyer, GrowNorth and Myles Alexander, University of Wisconsin Extension – Oneida County.

### The Survey

Team members promoted the survey on their organization Facebook pages and via email. The press release went to media in all eight GrowNorth counties. Survey promotion began 29 April.

The survey got 683 views. There were 173 completed responses. Since the responses did not come from a random sample it is informative not scientific.

### Results

People yearned for what was familiar and for a very different future.

The quality of life changed. There was less activity outside the home and some people worked from home. For many respondents, life was slower and quieter. People sensed more gratitude, kindness and politeness. As neighbors helped each other they liked the sense of community. We learned some undervalued workers are essential workers.

Family and community are important to us. Many respondents enjoyed more time with family. Homeschooling was an opportunity for parents to spend more time with their children. It raised questions about the balance of children's home life with school and related activities. Parents that worked from home were challenged to attend to both work and their children. Work and school were problems for households without good broadband internet service and adequate computer devices.

Northwoods people care about their local businesses. Closure and limited operations killed some businesses and weakened others. Small businesses are part of our Northwoods character. That character makes all businesses attractive to tourists. Locals also enjoy the recreational opportunities of tourism businesses. They need our support and we need the fun they provide.

People see the need for a more diverse economy to have an economy that withstands shocks. High tech jobs are an attractive part of the mix. They want more manufacturing and agriculture. They want it to be environmentally sustainable and pay a living wage. People saw the benefits of flexible hours and the ability to work from home.

Broadband internet and cell phone service are required. Adults and children working at home all needed dependable, affordable broadband internet. Small, local businesses need good technology. People enjoy the convenience of online ordering from local businesses. Business benefits from access to customers beyond the Northwoods.

Tourism is a big part of the Northwoods economy. We need to support tourism even as we grow a more diverse economy. The Northwoods needs to maintain strong small town downtowns and rural

character. Rural is seclusion and a natural environment protected from too much development. A few comments pointed out tension with tourism. Visitors come to the Northwoods to use our natural environment and businesses. It is up to Northwoods residents to nurture the environment and local businesses.

A common definition of politics is the way that people make decisions. People want thoughtful decision making in their communities and local governments. They also want local governments to collaborate to solve problems and prepare for future crises. Online government meetings showed one way local politics can be more open. A few respondents thought government over reacted to COVID-19.

Video-conferencing also helped people connect within their communities. Adequate broadband internet and affordable computer technology offer more options for connected community.

Respondents want a more resilient future. Resilience is the ability to suffer less from external shocks and to bounce back fast. Part of resilience is a diverse, environmentally sustainable economy that provides well-paying jobs. Many responses were about the ways people helped strangers and neighbors. COVID-19 mutual aid recalls how neighbors helped each other in the past. At the same time, respondents celebrated the independence and self-reliance of Northwoods people. Information and knowledge are necessary to resilience. Libraries and education got several mentions.

## Conclusions

As they answered our questions people faced big challenges. It was early in the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States and Wisconsin's "Safe At Home" time. As people adapted to all the changes, it was hard to think about the future. With little guidance for such big changes, people had to figure things out on their own. That suggests we can figure out what changes we want and how to make those changes so they stick.

As people changed their lives, they reported ways to make the Northwoods even better. We summarized their insights in these 15 "can do" statements:

- We can figure out how to provide more access to affordable broadband
- Local small businesses and producers are critical to our economy and rural community life. We will patronize them.
- We will offer the knowledge and skill development small businesses need to plan and innovate.
- We will patronize small business that try new things.
- We will not judge small business innovations that fail.
- We will not begrudge small businesses their success.
- We can record what we learned during COVID-19 and decide what to continue.
- We will grow a more diverse Northwoods economy that supports living wage jobs.
- We invite visitors, seasonal residents and new residents to the Northwoods to share our natural amenities respectfully.

- It is important to slow down, make positive changes in our personal lives, and enjoy our access to nature.
- We will pay attention to people, especially the quiet people.
- We will consider others and care for them. Our goal is everyone has what they need to succeed.
- A community that works together succeeds together.
- We now have more social capital to invest in change.
- We can build on the momentum of COVID-19 community organizing and innovation.