



TAMAQUA COMMUNITY REPORT - 2016

Social Capital & Rural Economic Development Project

In 2011, Penn State University surveyed Tamaqua residents about their perceptions of various aspects of local life. This spring, we replicated that survey. In this brief report, we describe the findings from the latest survey and compare them to our previous study. The report is divided into five sections: social networks and divisions, highlighting how community members interact with one another and their feelings about any perceived divisions in the area; trust and reciprocity, or how individuals identify with their fellow community members; citizen impact on the community and outlook for the future; views about local industries and institutions and perceptions of the community as a whole; and finally community involvement, length of residency, and commute time, explaining the responders' connection to and history with the community. Finally, we summarize the open-ended comments that some respondents made at the end of the survey.

Social Networks and Divisions

Not surprisingly, when respondents were asked who they would rely on in an emergency, the most popular response was family. This was followed by friends, their church, charitable organizations, co-workers, and their neighbors. The majority of respondents would turn to one or two groups at a time like this, which mirrors findings from 2011. When asked about their perceptions of divisions within the community, respondents indicated that there are moderate divisions due to religion, race/ethnicity, social class, level of education, political affiliation, and age. In particular, about half of all respondents indicated that Tamaqua was divided due to social class, level of education and race/ethnicity to a moderate or large extent. This was also the case in 2011 and may be attributed to religious and ethnic diversity, encouraged historically by coal companies in order to drive down labor prices and prevent labor organization. It may also be due to recent in-migration by ethnic groups such as Latinos who are drawn to the community because of the low cost of living compared to urban areas.

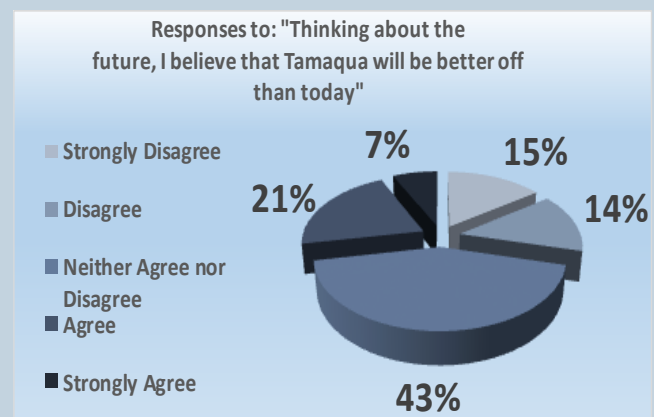
Trust and Reciprocity

When asked about how they feel about their fellow community members, respondents indicated that there is little trust amongst Tamaqua residents. Over half

of all respondents said that they could trust the people in Tamaqua to only a small extent or not at all. In addition, trust across race/ethnicities is low. While 55 percent of respondents indicated that they can trust people of the same race/ethnicity to a moderate or large extent, only 26 percent indicated that they could trust people of a different race/ethnicity to the same extent. These findings have not changed since 2011. Although trust across race/ethnicities is low, trust among Tamaqua community members who are in the same social networks is high. For example, among those who go to the same church, just under 60 percent of people said that they can trust fellow church members to a moderate or large extent. Nearly 35 percent of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that people in Tamaqua share the same values. In the survey completed in 2011, close to 50 percent of respondents answered the same way. A total of 27 percent of respondents reported that they agreed or strongly agreed that residents tend to look out for their own welfare, compared to 35 percent in 2011. In both surveys, nearly 70 percent of respondents in Tamaqua agreed or strongly agreed there is support for community events and festivals.

Citizen Impact and Outlook for the Future

Approximately 64 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that people like themselves can have an impact in making Tamaqua a better place to live. This figure is up from 2011, when 58 percent agreed with this statement. Just over 68 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that people in Tamaqua can



have an impact on decisions that affect the area. This figure is also up slightly from 2011. Additionally, only 28 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their household would be better off in the future than it is today. This figure is down slightly from 2011, but whether the decline represents a change in local conditions or a sluggish national economy is unclear. In 2011, about 40 percent of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that the community would be better off in the future than it is today. In 2016, only 29 percent felt this way, suggesting that perceptions about the community's future have improved over the past five years.

Local Industries and Institutions

When residents were asked to indicate which industries have had the biggest positive impact on the community, they listed coal mining, railroads, agriculture and manufacturing. The industries that were perceived to have little to no impact on the local economy were timber harvesting, natural gas extraction and oil extraction. These findings mirror the results from the 2011 survey. Respondents were unsure about tourism's impact on the local economy. About a third indicated that tourism had a somewhat positive impact on the economy, yet the same number of respondents indicated that tourism did not have any impact on the economy in Tamaqua. Approximately 42 percent of respondents reported that the coal industry is moderately to very fair to the community while only 15 percent reported that it was not fair at all. This is a marked shift from the earlier survey when these numbers were 48 percent and 35 percent respectively. A total of 67 percent of respondents reported that the agriculture industry is moderately to very fair to the community. When asked about the impact of local institutions and organizations, in both 2011 and 2016, survey respondents indicated that the police department, the fire department, public schools, local daily papers, local news channels, local government, small businesses, and religious organizations have a positive impact on the quality of life in the community. Respondents also indicated they trust these groups of people or organizations to a moderate extent. In contrast, a total of 40 percent of current respondents felt that the state government in Harrisburg had a somewhat negative or very negative impact on the quality of life in the community.

Community Involvement, Length of Residency, and Commute Time

On average, respondents participate in approximately two to three voluntary organizations. Approximately 50 percent of survey respondents have lived in the community for all their life and 33 percent have lived there for more than 20 years. They have an average commute time of 27 minutes. These figures are similar to the findings from 2011.

Open-Ended Comments

At the end of the survey, we left room for respondents to leave comments if they chose to do so. We received 50 comments. And while they were mixed, the comments were, on the whole, more positive than was the case in 2011. On the positive side, several respondents noted that in recent years there seems to be more

activity geared toward improving the community and creating a better quality of life. As one respondent remarked, "There is a lot beginning to happen to improve life in Tamaqua." Another respondent noted that people are becoming more involved in community development activities: "I am grateful for the citizens of Tamaqua who put their time and effort into making it a

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better place to live. I know I'd like to be more involved in the future – and that is what it takes – involvement! Most people who complain about the area have either never lived anywhere else and have no other place of comparison and/or are not involved in making it better. I've lived in many places and our town has a lot of room for improvement. But guess what – it is happening! Tamaqua has come a long way – and outsiders have told me they notice too." In a similar vein, another respondent remarked that "Tamaqua has become a much more vibrant community than many surrounding municipalities. Many positive things are happening in our community thanks to the efforts of local organizations and dedicated volunteers. We have good county and state officials that look out for our best interests. There is still potential to improve and develop our community even more. History, tourism, arts, culture and outdoor recreation and cultural assets are areas that offer the most opportunities for further benefits in this area. Tamaqua continues to be a leader in the region and admired by surrounding towns. Still, we have much more work to do."

The other most prominent positive comments focused on the character of the people in Tamaqua and the small town quality of life. As one person noted,

“People in Tamaqua are for the most part friendly and helping when there are any problems in the town.” Another explained that “Tamaqua is a wonderful place to live – not perfect but good. Living here all my life and returning to Tamaqua after a short time away, I’m never sorry to return. I like to walk in the hub of Schuylkill County – truly we’re not, but it’s a small town, maybe 8,500. Many commute to Lehigh Valley to work, but live here. Even though we have money from the city, it’s a good place to live. They have a good educational system and people never forget the family tree they have here. We are also lucky to have a LCCC (Lehigh County Community College) here for students before going to college.”

On the negative side, comments fell into four main categories: drug use and crime, lack of good jobs, declining property values, and lack of activities for senior citizens. The most blunt assessment of the drug situation was made by one respondent who wrote, “Drugs are taking over Tamaqua. That’s the number one problem I feel facing the people of Tamaqua.” Several respondents noted that they did not feel that local police are not doing enough to combat drug use and drug dealing. One respondent summarized the other comments on this topic by saying that “Tamaqua is infested with drugs and people on welfare due to low income housing. You do not know anyone in this town anymore. Police officers don’t care to help.” Another respondent suggested that the police force was simply too small to deal with the magnitude of the problem.

In terms of jobs, most respondents noted that the jobs that are available tend not pay well and that it has been difficult to attract manufacturing and other industries that pay good wages. One respondent summarized several other responses with the following statement: “Manufacturers don’t want to come to this area for some reason. Manufacturers should be given an incentive to come here. We do have hard working people left in this town who would love to work locally instead of travelling out of town for higher paying jobs. My cousin drove to Bethlehem for 50 years before retiring. There are not too many well-paying jobs in the area. All small coal towns in Schuylkill County are struggling for life.” Another respondent noted that job growth in the community would spur other aspects of local economic development. As he put it, “I believe that many residents who make a decent salary work outside of the Tamaqua area, including me. I tend to do more business close to my place of employment. I think the same can be said of many who work outside the area. In order for the area to thrive again, I believe that better paying jobs need to come to the area. If people are working and making a decent living, they will spend more close to home and contribute to an economy that can only start growing from that point

forward.” Another respondent noted that job growth was necessary if the community hopes to retain its younger residents: “This is a nice small town. We need work here. The young people who go to college are not going to stay here. Nothing here for them. No work.”

When it comes to declining property values, the main concern seems to be that as the value of houses declines, it makes sense for them to be converted to rental units which many people associate with the rise in drug use. One respondent described the situation in terms of how it has affected his neighborhood: “I can tell you that my neighborhood and ones like it are not the same as they were 20 years ago. Housing is cheap as many residents are old and pass away and homes go up for taxes or sheriff’s sales. Most homes are rentals with absentee landlords and drug dealers have taken up residence in most of them.” Another respondent noted that “You buy a house here for \$5,000 and the slumlords love it. I anticipate property values to continue to plummet – there is trash, needles, loose dogs everywhere.”

The final set of most frequent negative comments focused on activities for seniors. One respondent noted that senior citizens comprise a large part of the population, but that there is no senior center. Another simply wrote: “No social activities for senior citizens. No help from borough council. Voters must wake up!”

Summary

While the residents of Tamaqua continue to voice mixed opinions about the quality of life in the community, overall their responses are more positive today than was the case in 2011. Specifically, respondents are more optimistic about the future of the community, are more likely to say that residents share the same values, and are less likely to say that residents look out for their own welfare. Improvements in outlook were most noticeable in the open ended comments respondents made at the end of the survey. Several individuals praised the actions that have been taken to improve the quality of life in recent years and noted that people in the community are friendly and willing to help their neighbors. This is a noticeable change from 2011, when very few positive comments were made about the community. Areas of concern that were mentioned in the open ended comments focused mainly on drugs and crime, lack of good jobs, declining property values, and lack of activities for seniors.

Comparisons between 2011 and 2016 Surveys

	2011	2016
Trust and Reciprocity		
disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that people in Tamaqua share the same values	50%	34%
agreed or strongly agreed that residents tend to look out for their own welfare	40%	27%
Tamaqua agreed or strongly agreed there is support for community events and festivals	70%	70%
Citizen Impact and Outlook for the Future		
agreed or strongly agreed that people like themselves can have an impact in making Tamaqua a better place to live	58%	64%
agreed or strongly agreed that people in Tamaqua can have an impact on decisions that affect the area	64%	68%
agreed or strongly agreed that their household would be better off in the future than it is today	30%	28%
disagreed or strongly disagreed that the community would be better off in the future than it is today	42%	33%
Local Industries and Institutions		
the coal industry is moderately to very fair	48%	42%
the coal industry is not fair at all	35%	15%
Community Involvement, Length of Residency, and Commute Time		
Average Commute Time	26 minutes	27 minutes

For More Information:

This report was compiled by Jeff Bridger, Ted Alter, Gretchen Seigworth, and Alexander Riviere in the Department of Agricultural Economics, Sociology, and Education at Penn State University. Funding for the Tamaqua Community Report (2011), under the Social Capital and Rural Economic Development Program, was provided by the United States Department of Agriculture National Research Initiative. Funding for the Tamaqua Community Report - 2016 is provided by Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences. If you have further questions, please contact Jeff Bridger at (814) 863-8631 or jcb8@psu.edu.



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