



TAMAQUA COMMUNITY REPORT

Social Capital & Rural Economic Development Project

This report is the result of a survey sent to the Tamaqua community. This survey is part of larger project facilitated by Penn State University to develop policies and educational programs to help Pennsylvania communities strengthen their local capacity for economic development. These individual community reports highlight the most relevant and significant information from this project for each area, and were developed for local communities to use as they make community decisions. The report is divided into six sections: social networks and divisions, highlighting how community members interact and their feelings about any perceived divisions in the area; trust and reciprocity, or how individuals identify with their fellow community members; impact and outlook, describing how people perceive the community as a whole; local industries and institutions, exploring the perception of the local economy; community involvement, length of residency, and commute time, explaining the responders' connection to and history with the community; and finally open ended comments, which highlight more general thoughts about the community.

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, charitable organizations, their church, co-workers, and their neighbors. On average, survey respondents turn to one to two groups for help. In comparison with the other communities surveyed, Tamaqua ranked highest in terms of the percentage of residents who reported that they would seek help from no one, just over 14 percent.

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, or age. In comparison with the other communities surveyed, Tamaqua reported the highest overall social division score. Tamaqua also reported the highest individual social division scores for all categories with the exception of race/ethnicity, in which it came in second highest. In several instances, Tamaqua was highest by a wide margin. This may be attributed to religious and racial diversity, encouraged historically by coal companies in order to drive down labor prices and prevent labor organization. It may also be due to the low cost of living as compared to nearby cities such as Reading and Philadelphia, which draws new ethnic groups to the community.

Trust and Reciprocity

When asked how they feel about their fellow community members, Tamaqua residents indicated their trust for people in the community, neighborhood, workplace, and church was relatively low compared to the other communities surveyed, and in fact they indicated they trust one another only to a small extent. Of all the communities surveyed, Tamaqua had the lowest level of average local trust by a small fraction. Nearly half disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that people in Tamaqua share the same values. A total of 40 percent of respondents reported that they agreed or strongly agreed that residents tend to look out for their own welfare. However, nearly 70 percent of respondents in Tamaqua agreed or strongly agreed there is support for community events and festivals.

Impact and Outlook

Approximately 58 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that people like themselves can have an impact in making Tamaqua a better place to live and just over 64 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that people in Tamaqua can have an impact on decisions that affect the area. However, in comparison with the other communities surveyed, these responses represent the lowest for both categories.

Additionally, only about one-third of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their household would be better off in the future than it is today. And nearly forty-two percent of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that the community would be better off in the future than it is today, as indicated in Figure 1. Scores for Tamaqua fell well below scores for the other communities in the study.

Figure 1: Responses to "Thinking about the future, I believe that Tamaqua will be better off than today."



Local Industries and Institutions

Most residents feel that industries like coal, timber, railroads, natural gas, oil, agriculture, manufacturing, and tourism only have a small positive impact on the local economy, and that they treat residents somewhat fairly. Of all the communities surveyed, Tamaqua ranked second lowest for both measures. The industries viewed by the smallest percentage of people as having a positive impact on the local area are railroads, natural gas, and oil. Whereas the industries with the largest positive impact are agriculture, manufacturing, and coal. Respondents were also divided regarding the fairness with which the coal industry has treated residents over the years. A total of 47.7 percent reported that the coal industry is moderately to very fair while 34.6 percent reported that it is not fair at all.

When asked about the impact of local institutions and organizations, survey respondents indicated that the police department, the fire department, public schools, local or regional daily papers, local government, small businesses, big businesses, unions, and religious organizations have a small positive impact on the local economy. Respondents also indicated they trust these groups of people or organizations to a moderate extent. Tamaqua ranked second lowest for both measures of all the communities surveyed.

Community Involvement, Length of Residency, and Commute Time

On average, respondents participate in approximately two to three voluntary organizations. For this measure, Tamaqua ranked second lowest when compared to the other communities. On average, survey respondents have lived in the community for almost 38 years, which fell within the mid-upper range of all communities surveyed. They have an average commute time of nearly 26 minutes, which is also in the upper range of time amongst all of the communities surveyed.

Open-Ended Comments

Some respondents conveyed pride in their 'small town' heritage. For example, one resident described a good relationship between the police and local businesses, asserting: "Small towns like ours are individual communities with hearts. Alone, we can't do much, but together everybody can help." However despite these positive comments, a large majority of respondents felt

strongly that there is "nothing worse" than life in Tamaqua and moreover that the community is "doomed."

Explanations for the low quality of life in Tamaqua were varied. The most popular reason cited by respondents was the lack of industry and employment opportunities in the area. Those jobs that are available have both lower incomes and fewer benefits than were received in the past. At the same time, respondents tended to agree with the sentiment that "[e]veryone is paying more and more for

services and receiving less." For this reason, taxes were a central complaint. People perceived taxes as being too high given the town's economic decline. In fact, as one respondent put it, the "only people making a good income are employed by the school district, boro, police department which we are paying for out of those high tax dollars." It is these people who ultimately make local decisions, according to a respondent who wrote that, although there are some local businesses that have worked to improve the area, "there are 'cliques' that exist and if you're not part of it, your opinion doesn't count." These include members of the school board and local police officers.

Respondents also expressed resentment toward those collecting welfare. Most commonly, welfare was associated with recent Latino immigrants. According to one respondent, "they say our assistance programs are very easy to get approved making this a prime place to live." Latino immigrants were also associated directly or indirectly with the growing drug problem. One person claimed: "I have known drug dealers three doors up who the police just ignore...they are completely ignorant."

In addition, respondents expressed concern about environmental pollution, rising cancer rates, and declining property maintenance. Many noted that they were senior citizens who would move and retire elsewhere if they had the opportunity. Although there was a general sense that respondents felt abandoned by industry, and government, only one person made an indirect reference to Tamaqua's former domination by coal: "We could only attract scumbag employers when the economy was doing well, and now that's gone south that's all we'll ever get."

For More Information:

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