

Appendix C

Otsego County Quality of Life Assessment
Youth Voice
Spring Break 2012

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By Jim Akans, Weekly Choice
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Area youth a dynamic component in Otsego County “Quality of Life” study



Taking some precious time from their much welcome spring break retreat, these 12 students gathered at the Otsego County Community Foundation office last Wednesday to explore ways to involve teens in bringing their opinions and ideas into the Otsego County Quality of Life survey that is currently underway. Clockwise from left; Savannah Sullivan, Geoff Wind, Ellen Burns, Bri Morris, Mikayla Waun, Sammie Campbell, Danielle Rola, Ty Coonrod, Riley Elliott, Ashley Reaume, Brittany Blunt, and William Oldenburg. Photo by Jim Akans.

Ah, spring break! At a time when students in Northern Michigan typically head off to warmer climates, or perhaps to social media on the internet, play video games, watch a lot of TV, or maybe...attend a day long discussions about the quality of life in Otsego County?

That is the option 12 area students chose to dedicate part of their spring break retreat to this past Wednesday, gathering at the Otsego County Community Foundation office for a day long interactive discussion about how to involve teens in bringing their opinions and ideas into the Otsego County Quality of Life survey that is currently underway.

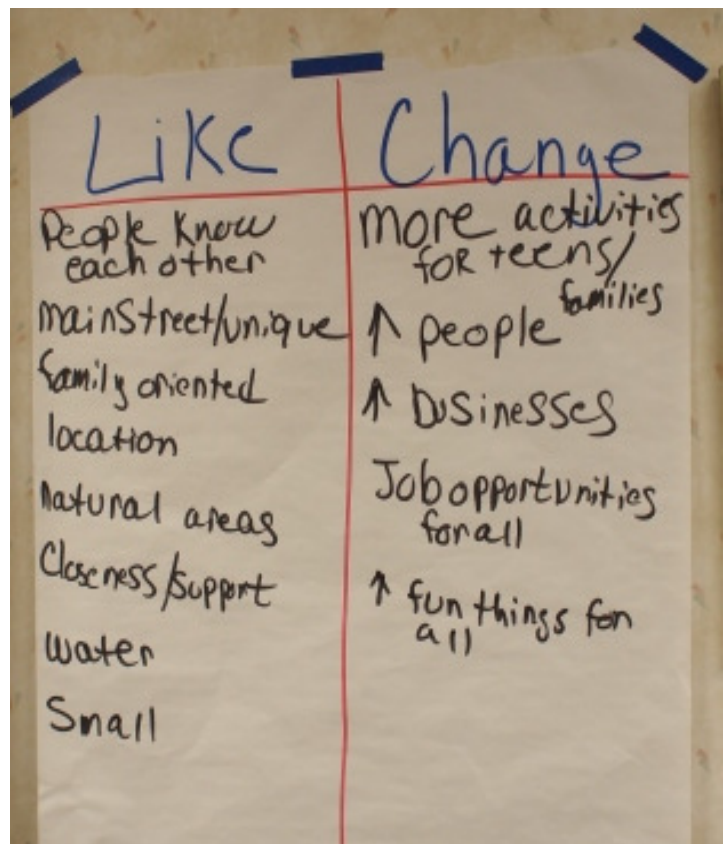
Bri Morris, a participant in last Wednesday's "brainstorming session" stated, "I became part of this youth panel because I feel it is important to be involved in this community. This is great way to do that. Teens need to have their voices heard."

Morris's sentiments were echoed around the table. As the Quality of Life survey moves from previous stages that included mail-in and online surveys and into the next phase involving interactive focus groups, survey organizers felt that input from area teens is a vital and dynamic component in not only evaluating current strengths and shortcomings regarding life in the county, but also an essential link in preparing for the future.

This initial session was led by Dana Bensinger and Bethany Prykucki, and the goal was to identify what this group of students like about life in the community, what they would like to see change, and how to get other area teens involved in participating in the survey. Ideas for bringing other teens voices into the survey included utilizing Facebook, teen activities, creating an "idea wall," and establishing a link on the website for teen input.

Among the "Likes" conveyed during the session were that people in this smaller sized community get to know one another, the uniqueness of Main Street areas, the family-oriented spirit, the abundant recreational opportunities offered, and the beautiful natural environment. Areas the group would like to see change in the community included seeing more activities for teens and families, increased job opportunities, and greater recreational options.

In many ways, this initial feedback reflects results from the mail-in and recently completed online Quality of Life survey. Among the preliminary data from the online survey was an overwhelming response that the quality of life here is "good" or "very good" (nearly 90-percent), a strong sense of "belonging" in the county (over 78-percent), a general feeling of safety living here (approximately 98-percent),



and over 50-percent of respondents stated they live here because of the area's natural and scenic beauty.

Primary concerns from the preliminary online survey were financial (with nearly 40-percent of respondents stating they had "just enough" or "not enough" money to live on), youth bullying (81-percent), and recycling (with over 98-percent of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that recycling is good for the environment).

In addition to efforts to bring input from area youth into the Quality of Life study, a series of interactive focus groups are planned in the coming months to provide in-depth feedback into issues and factors affecting the current and future of life in the county. This extensive survey and assessment has been developed and is under implementation in Otsego County to help assess the quality of life residents in the county experience in 12 key areas. Administered through the Northeast Michigan Council for Governments (NEMCOG), and implemented through the cooperation and participation of several area agencies and organizations including the MSU Extension, County of Otsego, Otsego County Township Officers Association, District Health Department, Otsego County Community Foundation and the Otsego County United Way, the goal is to reveal these quality of life findings in a report anticipated to be released in early 2013.

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For more information, check out Youth Voice
at our web site <http://www.otsego.org/qol/>