



2011 - 2012 Progress Report

About two years ago, community organizations independently identified a need to find out what was important to the residents of Otsego County so they could align their strategic plans with current, high priority issues. This core group agreed to work together to conduct a county-wide Quality of Life Assessment to study and measure community needs and assets. Additional partners were invited to join the effort resulting in the Advisory Committee listed on the next page. The 36 volunteer committee members represent diverse interests, expertise, and community networks. Funding for the assessment was provided by the sponsors listed below.

This report provides a brief summary of the Otsego County Quality of Life Assessment conducted in 2011 and 2012. The main components include establishing a framework to define and describe the quality of life concept, reporting highlights from our public opinion survey, creating a report card showing progress being made by over 30 indicators, and recommending action steps for implementing the findings from our quality of life assessment.

Sponsored by:

Otsego County Board of Commissioners
Otsego County Community Foundation
Otsego County Township Officers Association
Otsego County United Way

The Otsego County Quality of Life Assessment operates under the umbrella of our regional planning agency Northeast Michigan Council of Governments (NEMCOG)

Otsego County Quality of Life Assessment Advisory Committee

- Jim Akans, Otsego County Historical Society
- Laurie Andrews, Otsego Human Service Network
- Erma Backenstose, Otsego County Commissioner
- Paul Beachnau, Gaylord Area Chamber of Commerce
- **Dana Bensinger**, Otsego County Community Foundation
- **Charlie Bono**, Gaylord Area Council for the Arts (GACA)
- **John Burt**, Otsego County Administrator
- Bradley J. Butcher, AIA; Wilcox Architectural Studio
- Mindy Czinder, Michigan Department of Humans Services
- Maureen Derenzy, Otsego County Library
- Ed Doss, Waters Business Group
- Rudi Edel, Retired Court Administrator/Magistrate
- Candi Edwards, Old Spud Warehouse
- Larry Edwards, Otsego Wildlife Legacy Society (OWLS)
- Bob Felt, Michigan Department of Transportation
- Paul Gunderson, Gaylord Herald Times
- John Jenkins, Mayor of Gaylord
- Marilyn Kaczanowski, Friendship Shelter
- Luann Mabarak, Kirtland Gaylord M-TEC
- **Lorraine Manary**, Otsego County United Way
- Kristy Mortham, HeadWaters Land Conservancy
- Bill O'Neill, Michigan Department of Natural Resource
- Christie Perdue, Otsego Memorial Hospital
- Bethany Prykucki, Michigan State University Extension
- Donna Quandt, Habitat For Humanity
- Jeff Ratcliffe, Otsego County Economic Alliance
- Diane Rekowski, NEMCOG
- **Mary Sanders**, Hayes Township Supervisor
- Randy Stults, Otsego County Planning Commission
- Jane Sundmacher, Health Department of Northwest Michigan
- Mike Tarbutton, Otsego County Parks and Recreation
- Sandy Tarbutton, Health Department of Northwest Michigan
- Dona Wishart, Otsego County Commission on Aging
- Cheryl Wojtas, Gaylord Community Schools Superintendent
- Alice Yeoman, Northern Homes Community Development

Phil Alexander, Project Manager

Members of the **Steering Committee** are noted with bold type. This subgroup provided overall leadership and made executive decisions when necessary throughout the course of this two year effort.

2011—2012 Accomplishments

- Collected and posted existing reports, statistics, and other data related to the quality of life in Otsego County to our web site. Background information is now easily and conveniently accessible for further study and research. By utilizing existing reference materials, we prevented the unnecessary need to "re-invent the wheel".
- Conducted a public opinion survey (first class mail) in November 2011 to obtain perceptions on the quality of life in Otsego County. Received a return rate of nearly 50% from the random sample of 1167 registered voters. Survey questions with responses are included in Appendix A.
- Conducted an on-line survey in early 2012 as a follow up to the mail survey. 178 people participated. This Internet-based survey allowed any county resident to participate and was designed to gain additional input related to the original public opinion survey. Survey questions with responses are included in Appendix B.
- Youth input session held during Spring Break 2012. This on-going effort provides high school students from the area an opportunity to express their ideas and opinions regarding the quality of life in Otsego County. See Appendix C for the list of participants and other details.
- Community Conversations were held in Elmira, Waters, Vanderbilt, Johannesburg, and Gaylord in May 2012. Approximately 50 people participated. See Appendix D for the summary of this effort.
- Hosted a Community Assessment Team (CAT) in September 2012 to gain the perspective of outside experts. The Team's report is available in Appendix E and focused on the following issues:
 - How can we improve our local economy by creating jobs that pay a family-living wage?
 - Are we adequately preparing our youth for an ever-changing world?
 - How can we create more awareness about the quality of life in Otsego County?
 - "Healthy Community" is a broad concept that is much more than absence of disease and availability of medical treatment. What are our major positive and negative attributes?
- Created a List of Indicators - commonly referred to as a Dashboard or Report Card - to provide a snapshot of more than 30 variables that can be tracked over time and show the direction of our county's progress.

More information

(Including this report and Appendix A - E)

is a click away

www.otsego.org/qol



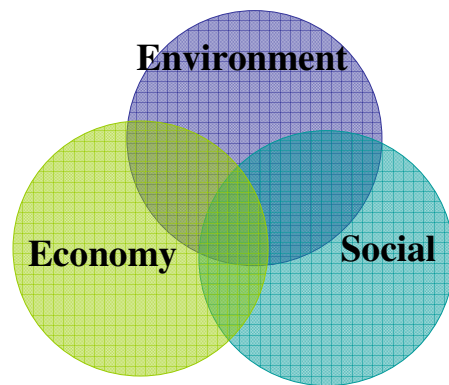
Background and Introduction

Let's begin with some basic questions. What is a quality of life assessment and why would we want to conduct one? A community assessment provides a critical look at the big picture, the positive and negative. The process helps identify our internal strengths and weaknesses as well as discover our potential external threats and opportunities. In contrast to a needs assessment, which focuses on problems and what our community lacks, we took an holistic approach for a more balanced view of both the positive and negative aspects of Otsego County.

Quality of life is an all-encompassing term that allows us to simultaneously explore the many factors that makes Otsego County a desirable place. It also points out how these elements are interconnected to create a synergistic relationship.

Our assessment was designed to evaluate the current quality of life in Otsego County and compare it to recent trends as well as desired future conditions. Measuring the gap between "what is" and "what is desired" will clearly point out collective actions we can take to preserve and continuously improve the quality of life in Otsego County.

For our purposes, the community is defined as the 526 square miles of Otsego County including the people of Elmira, Gaylord, Johannesburg, Vanderbilt, Waters, and the nine townships.



Our quality of life assessment focuses on the interrelationship of the local economy, environment, and social well-being.

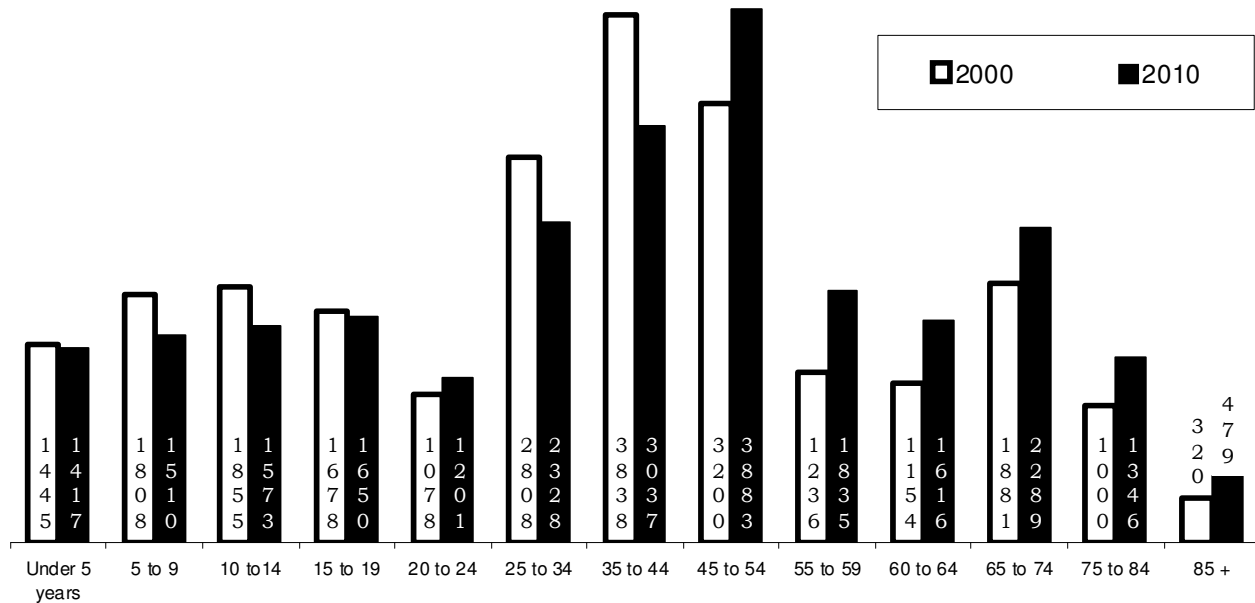
Here are the main reasons we conducted the quality of life assessment:

- Eliminate the need for several individual surveys by using a comprehensive process
- Identify community assets and needs
- Discover the perceptions that residents have about their quality of life
- Create a baseline for future comparisons and measure change over time
- Identify gaps and reduce overlap in services and program delivery
- Provide information and justification for grant applications
- Help local units of government, businesses, and nonprofit organizations make informed decisions based on public opinion and published studies
- Enhance on-going community development efforts such as Communities For A Lifetime, Otsego County Master Plan, Michigan Main Street Program, and Mobilizing for Action through Planning & Partnerships (MAPP)

Quality of Life is about people, their personal happiness, satisfaction, and interactions with the environment, economy, other people, and social institutions. To be sure we have a general understanding about the people of Otsego County, let's look at Census information which reveals data about our residents such as age, gender, race, and household characteristics.

An important fact obtained from the Census is that 4,052 of the 14,731 housing units (27.5%) were seasonal or second homes. These people are not included in the population figures illustrated below but they play an important part in the activities and character of the county.

Otsego County population by age groups



As shown in the graph above, our population increased by 863 between 2000 and 2010 for a total of 24,164 residents. Our 3.7% growth rate differed significantly from the State's decline of 0.6%. While bigger isn't necessarily better, growth does indicate people chose to move and/or stay here. It could be assumed this is due in part to the favorable quality of life conditions found in Otsego County compared to their other options.

Age groups that decreased in the past ten years include youth age 19 and younger as well as adults age 25 to 44. All other age groups increased. The impact of an aging population deserves additional study and action related to services for our senior citizens. Likewise, with the younger population decreasing, what should be done to improve the amenities to attract that age group? For details on what makes our community attractive to residents of all ages, see the [Communities For A Lifetime](#) assessment.

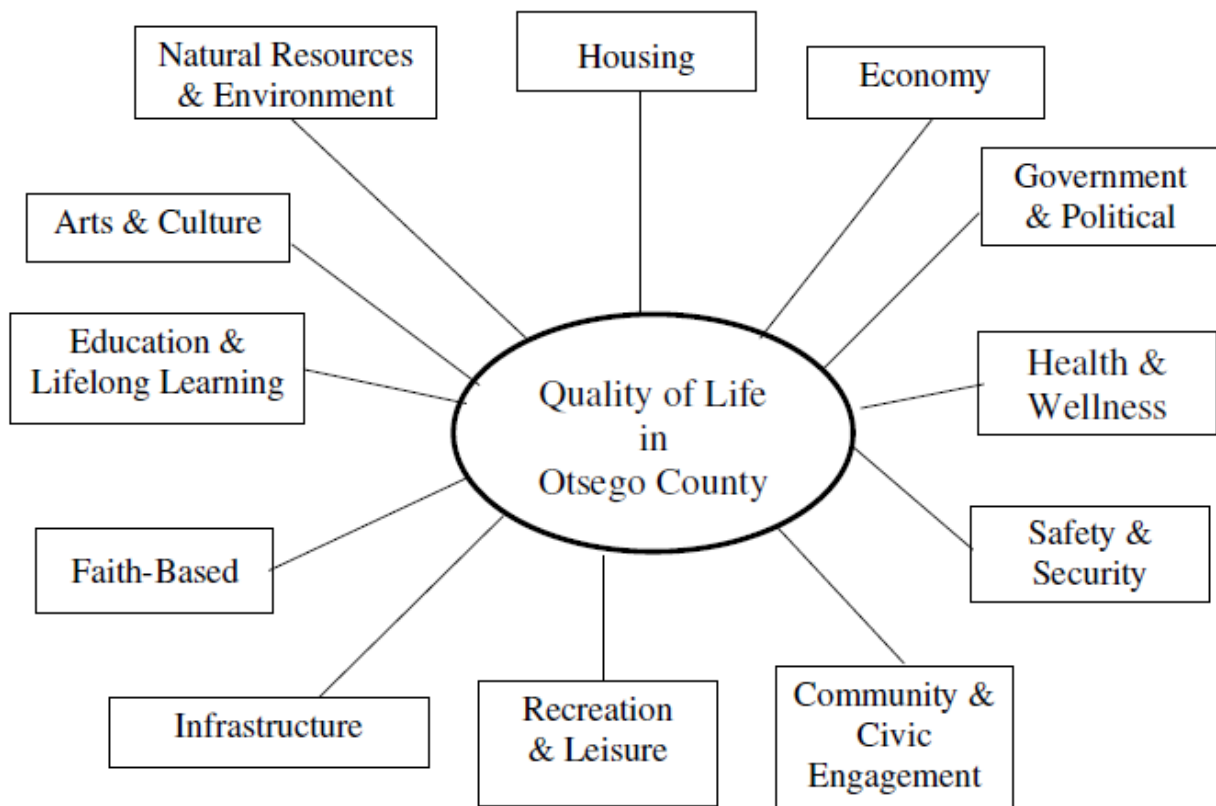
An important aspect of our community's economy is highlighted in these numbers. Between 2000 and 2010 we experienced one of the most severe economic downturns since the Great Depression. Despite Otsego County's growth, we experienced the unsettling reality of loss due to the closing of two major manufacturing employers as well as several building materials suppliers. These closures resulted in the outmigration of many skilled individuals and their families. Trends such as these remind us of the importance of being proactive in planning our future.

Our definition of Quality of Life

Quality of life is different for each of us but, in general, it is an expression that summarizes our opinions about our community. It includes attributes like friendliness, health care, safety, recreation, natural resources, educational and employment opportunities which together determine whether our county is a desirable place to live and work.

With the background information in place, the next step was to define and describe Quality of Life. Following an extensive Internet search and looking at what other communities have done, the Advisory Committee completed the following tasks:

1. Developed a working definition for Quality of Life as shown in the box to the left.
2. Selected 12 categories that delineate the key topics as shown in the diagram below.
3. Listed several examples of the attributes for each category to further describe the scope of this project as shown in the chart on the next page.



Examples of the 12 Quality of Life Categories

1. Arts & Culture

Gaylord Area Council of the Arts (GACA) & Community Arts Center, Farm Fest, Otsego County Historical Society & Museum, Gaylord Community Productions, Alan L. Gornick Auditorium, Mt. Carmel Centre

2. Community & Civic Engagement

Otsego Human Service Network, Retired & Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP), United Way, Volunteer Center, Otsego County Animal Shelter, Nonprofit service clubs, Festivals and events such as Alpenfest, Johannesburg 4th of July, Thunder Over Waters, Otsego County Fair, and Wings Over Gaylord air show

3. Economy

Otsego County Economic Alliance, Gaylord Area Chamber of Commerce, Gaylord Area Convention and Tourism Bureau, Golf Mecca, Regional retail market center serving over 200,000 people, Diverse economic base that includes forestry, oil and gas production, manufacturing, healthcare, and tourism

4. Education & Lifelong Learning

Gaylord Community Schools, Grace Baptist School and College, Johannesburg-Lewiston School, St. Mary Cathedral School, Otsego Christian School, Vanderbilt Public School, Kirtland Gaylord M-TEC, University Center Gaylord, Otsego County Library, MSU Extension, GED, Head Start and Great Start preschool programs, Home school

5. Faith-Based

More than 30 churches, 3 parochial schools, Song of the Morning, Big Ticket Festival, Diocese of Gaylord

6. Government & Politics

Special millages, County Democrat and Republican Parties, Nine Townships, City of Gaylord, Village of Vanderbilt, County Board of Commissioners, Otsego County Road Commission, County-wide zoning

7. Health & Wellness

Health Department of Northwest Michigan, Otsego Memorial Hospital, Otsego County Sportsplex, Assisted living centers,

8. Housing

80% owner/occupied homes, 2200 rental units, development and rehabilitation of 31 low/moderate income upper floor apartments in downtown Gaylord

9. Infrastructure

Crossroads of I-75 and M-32, local media (101.5 The Eagle, Gaylord Herald Times, Our Town, Weekly Choice Publications), Otsego County Community Connection www.otsego.org, Gas and electric utility providers, broadband Internet access, Railway, industrial parks, Gaylord Regional Airport

10. Natural Resources & Environment

Headwaters of 5 rivers, over 300 lakes, 105,000 acre Pigeon River State Forest with the largest elk herd east of the Mississippi River, Louis M. Groen Nature Preserve, 27% of the land in Otsego County is state forest, County Recycling Program

11. Recreation & Leisure

Sportsplex, Community Recreation Center, 15 golf courses, 2 ski resorts, 80 miles of groomed snowmobile trails, bowling alley, 39 public parks, Otsego Lake County Park, Otsego Lake State Park, Barrier-free fishing pier, miles of trout streams, hiking and bike pathways, North Central State Trail (Gaylord to Mackinaw City), Northland Sportsman Club, Gaylord Ramp Park. See the Community Recreation Plan for an extensive recreation inventory.

12. Safety & Security

Otsego County Sheriff's Department, Michigan State Police, Gaylord City Police, District Court, Drug Court, Work Camp, Fire Departments, EMS, Otsego County Animal Control

Public Input and Survey Results

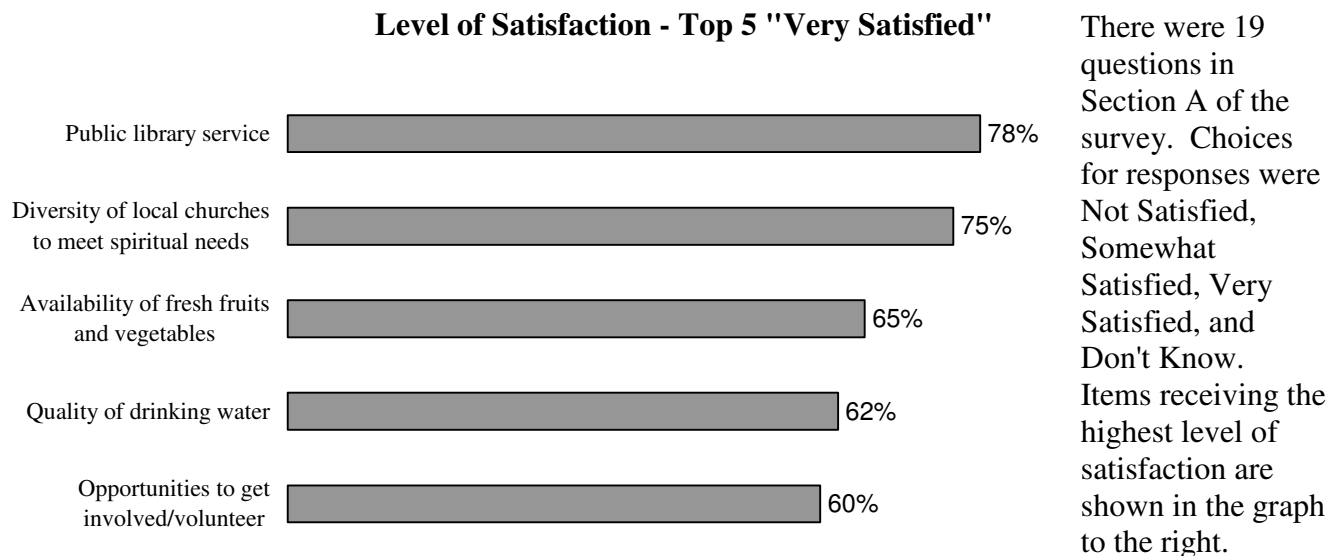
Our next task was asking the people of Otsego County for their input in the following ways:

- Public opinion mailed survey (this section of this report and Appendix A)
- On-line survey (Appendix B)
- Focus group with area youth / high school students (Appendix C)
- Community Conversations held in five locations (Appendix D)

The main source of public input was a 68-question survey mailed to 1167 citizens of Otsego County in November 2011. In a perfect world, we would be able to send a questionnaire to every resident for their opinions. Since that wasn't feasible, our best option was to ask a random sample of county citizens who voted in the 2008 presidential election. Not everyone is a registered voter, so not everyone was included in our survey. We received a nearly 50% return rate.

The questionnaire had four sections:

- What is your **level of satisfaction** with the following attributes?
- What is your **level of concern** for the following issues that affect our quality of life?
- What is your **level of agreement** with the following statements?
- Demographic information (to compare the survey takers with the general population)

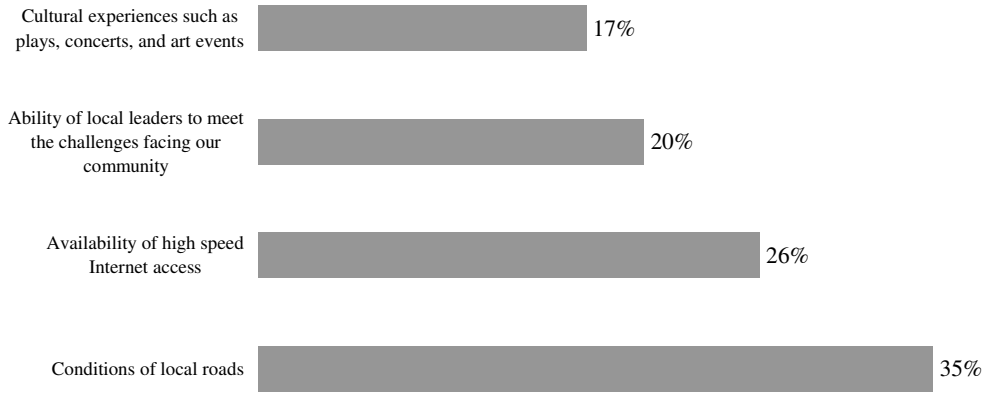


Top honors for satisfaction went to the County Library which provides services at its three locations - Gaylord, Johannesburg, and Vanderbilt. There are more than 30 churches in the county which probably accounts for a 75% approval rating of spiritual needs being met. Perhaps the Farmers Markets, grocery store produce sections, and hobby gardeners contributed to the 65% level of satisfaction with the availability of fresh fruits and vegetables. Most households have private wells for drinking water and water quality has been a high ranking concern in previous surveys. Volunteer opportunities are made possible through organizations such as the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP), the Volunteer Center of Otsego County, schools, various churches and service clubs.

Why did these amenities receive high levels of satisfaction? What do we need to do to ensure or even increase satisfaction in the future? Likewise, why were other items ranked Not Satisfied as shown in the next chart? Sometimes we end up with more questions than answers.

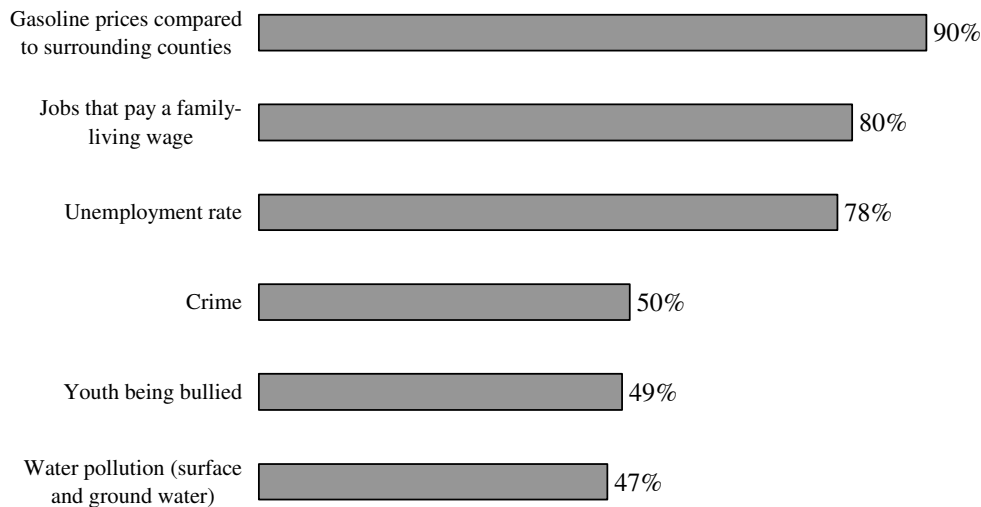
Survey respondents expressed lower levels of satisfaction with the four items shown in the chart to the right. Note that the degree of dissatisfaction is substantially less than that shown in the satisfaction chart. Thus, 60% or more of survey respondents were Very Satisfied with five conditions, while only three issues received 20% or more Not Satisfied. This might indicate, in general, people are "more satisfied" than "not satisfied" and could result in a higher quality of life.

Level of Satisfaction - Top 4 "Not Satisfied"



Section B of the survey asked about the level of concern for 21 issues related to quality of life. The following graph shows the 6 items receiving the highest concern. This list points to what is traditionally collected in a needs assessment. 90% of the survey respondents have a high level of concern for gasoline prices compared to surrounding counties. This issue also received 38 written comments. However it is the combined concern for the unemployment rate and jobs that pay a

Level of Concern - Top 6 "High Concern"



family-living wage that received the most written comments - 73 in all. These two related issues also received a high level of concern by 80% of the respondents.

Even though 50% have a high concern about crime, elsewhere in the survey, 91% of the respondents agree or strongly agree that their neighborhood is safe. The type of crime was further

probed with the follow up on-line survey. See Appendix B. Additional insight can be obtained from the Community Conversations' question "What do you believe are the most pressing problems that must be addressed to improve the quality of life in Otsego County?" See Appendix D.

Next Steps & Indicators

By definition, an assessment includes an evaluation which examines and measures the value or relative importance of the key factors. We brought in a team of outside experts to look at our county and share their observations and suggestion with us. See Appendix E for more details.

We also had to determine out how to quantify with numbers the distinctive features making up our quality of life. These are called indicators. Indicators provide a snapshot of measureable variables that can be tracked over time to show the degree of change and direction of our county's progress.

An universally accepted list of indicators doesn't exist, so we created our own for the 12 categories as previously described. Even though it was helpful to look at the indicators other communities used, we custom designed our indicators based on local conditions and what would be most useful for decision making. It was tempting to select only those that portrayed a positive image of our county. However, we took a more objective approach to produce a balanced assessment. The same indicators will be used for several years.

When selecting which indicators to include, an important question came up, -- "Compared to what?" Indicators are useful when compared with:

- Other counties
- State average
- Our county over time
- 2004 vision statement
- Goals in our county master plan

Another concern is the limitation of each indicator. No single fact or figure will tell the whole story. But a report card or dashboard needs to briefly summarize how we are doing and communicate it so it is easily understood.

34 indicators with their most currently available data are shown on pages 11 and 12. Arrows in the right column measure the direction of progress -- not the change of numerical value in the Prior and Current columns. In other words, if the number of crimes decreased, the arrow points upward showing progress in improving the quality of life in Otsego County.

Vision Statement

Collectively Otsego County residents envision their rural, northern Michigan community to be a place where housing is affordable in attractive, safe neighborhoods.

Students can attend neighborhood schools and participate in after-school activities that stimulate their minds and/or bodies.

Residents have the possibility of meaningful employment opportunities locally and they can enjoy the region's cultural and recreational activities after work.

Through proactive planning and zoning enforcement, the aesthetic appeal and unique environmental quality of the county will be protected. Infill and adaptive-reuse developments will compliment the traditional feel of the pedestrian friendly downtown commercial areas. The option for clustered residential will help to preserve agricultural lands and open space. Landscaping provisions will enhance community streetscapes and add to the distinct characters of Gaylord, Vanderbilt, and the town centers of Elmira, Johannesburg, and Waters.

Otsego County desires to preserve its natural resources while protecting its residents' property rights. In doing so, Otsego County will remain an enjoyable place to residents and visitors alike.

One County—One Vision 2004

Implementation

Now we need to use this information and not let it sit on the shelf and be forgotten. Creating a new committee isn't needed. We can do it - and do it better - using existing organizations. Here are some suggested actions we can take to implement the results of our quality of life assessment.

- Share the findings of this assessment so individuals and organizations can benefit from the information and data collected. For example, the areas of highest concern could influence the types of programs that receive funding by the Otsego County United Way and the Otsego County Community Foundation.
- Promote opportunities to work together which thereby focuses attention on gaps in services as well as reduces or eliminates duplication. Collaborative efforts such as the Otsego Human Service Network and the Otsego County Economic Alliance have demonstrated the benefits of this approach.
- Compare the findings from the quality of life assessment with the county vision that was created in 2004. (see page 9).
- Define terms such as living wage and affordable housing so we have a common understanding and can measure its progress in a consistent manner.
- Create a single source / comprehensive community profile and directory (print and on-line) to reduce redundancy and increase user convenience and satisfaction.
- Use the public input (Appendix A - D) along with perspectives from the CAT Team (Appendix E) when updating and evaluating efforts such as the county master plan, communities for a Lifetime assessment, the health department's Mobilizing for Action through Planning & Partnerships (MAPP), and other activities previously mentioned.
- Complete the Community Organization grid on pages 13 & 14 and use it to bring together stakeholders who share similar goals to create a synergistic plan of action to address high priority issues. Encourage service organizations to revisit their mission statement to see how it aligns with community issues and furthers the quality of life in Otsego County.

**"Coming together is a beginning,
Staying together is progress,
Working together is success."**

- Henry Ford

Quality of Life Indicators - 2012 Report Card

Indicators provide a snapshot of measureable variables that can be tracked over time to show the change or direction of our county's progress. Sources of indicators use the same methodology from year to year in collecting and reporting the data so we can compare apples to apples.

Indicator	Prior	Current	Progress
Arts & Culture			
Attendance at the Otsego County Historical Museum	2011 1593	2012 2044	↑
Number of artists in the Gaylord Area Council of Arts (GACA) Juried Fine Arts Exhibit	2011 9	2012 17	↑
Number of musical concerts presented by the Gaylord Community Band plus those sponsored by GACA	2011 10	2012 12	↑
Community & Civic Engagement			
Number of volunteer hours by RSVP and the Volunteer Center of Otsego County combined	2010 48,319	2011 50,918	↑
Total amount awarded in grants by the Otsego County Community Foundation	2010 \$36,612	2011 \$53,466	↑
Percent of survey respondents who agree or strongly agree that our festivals help generate community spirit		2011 87%	Baseline
Economy			
Unemployment rate	2010 14.9%	2011 12.4%	↑
Median household income	2010 \$43,601	2011 \$44,129	↑
Percent of population living in poverty	2010 12.8%	2011 13.6%	↓
Number of business establishments	2009 818	2010 797	↓
Education & Lifelong Learning			
Number of visits to the Otsego County Library in Gaylord, Johannesburg, and Vanderbilt	2010 124,190	2011 124,776	↑
High school graduation rate (on time)	2010 79.7%	2011 85.9%	↑
Percent of students who achieved reading proficiency in 3rd grade	2010 69.7%	2011 67.1%	↓
Enrollment at the University Center Gaylord and Kirtland Gaylord M-TEC combined		2012 1053	Baseline
Faith-Based & Spirituality			
Number of individuals served by the Otsego County Food Pantry which is managed by local churches	2010 5615	2011 6092	↓
Percent of survey respondents satisfied with the diversity of local churches to meet spiritual needs		2011 88%	Baseline

↑ = Progress improved

↓ = Progress decreased

↔ = No change in progress

Quality of Life Indicators - 2012 Report Card

Indicator	Prior	Current	Progress
Government & Politics			
Percent of voter turnout in a Presidential election	2008 65%	2012 60%	↓
Percent of survey respondents satisfied with the ability of local leaders to meet the community's challenges		2011 59%	Baseline
Health & Wellness			
Percent of adults with health insurance (includes Medicare and Medicaid)	2011 85%	2012 87%	↑
Percent of adults who are obese	2011 30%	2012 31%	↓
Number of home delivered meals served by the Otsego County Commission on Aging	2010 45,397	2011 45,200	
Housing			
Percent of families paying more than 30% of their income for rent	2010 50%	2011 50%	↔
Number of Otsego County homeless people staying at the Friendship Housing Center	2010 125	2011 200	↓
Average price of residential / home sales	2010 \$96,029	2011 \$94,897	↓
Infrastructure			
Number of rides provided by the Otsego County Bus System	2010 105,344	2011 101,141	↓
Miles of county roads improved by the Otsego County Road Commission	2011 25	2012 31	↑
Number of flights from Gaylord Regional Airport	2011 2542	2012 2854	↑
Natural Resources & Environment			
Number of stream miles enhanced through fish passage projects and in stream habitat improvement	2011 14	2012 21	↑
Number of seedlings sold at the Otsego Conservation District's tree sale	2011 45,500	2012 37,840	↓
Annual inches of snowfall at the National Weather Service - Gaylord Station	2010 68.2"	2011 112.0"	
Recreation & Leisure			
Number of youth enrolled at the Otsego County Sportsplex Summer Day Camp	2011 90	2012 100	↑
Total number of rounds of golf played at area courses	2010 205,227	2011 233,115	↑
Safety & Security			
Percent of survey respondents who feel their neighborhood is safe		2011 91%	Baseline
Number of felony arrests	2009 284	2010 256	↑

↑ = Progress improved

↓ = Progress decreased

↔ = No change in progress

Conclusion

Quality of Life is an abstract, subjective concept. It means different things to different people. Each of us have our own interpretation of our individual quality of life, what causes it to be what it is, and how it can be improved. Quality of life is similar but distinctly different from standard of living which primarily focuses on economic concerns. Our definition includes a triple bottom line: economic, environmental, and social, which are described in the 12 categories and corresponding indicators.

The aim of this community assessment was to gain a better understanding of the quality of life in Otsego County on a macro level. What makes Otsego County a desirable place to pursue a career, raise a family, and retire in comfort? Is it the variety of restaurants and shopping options, friendly neighbors, or abundance of outdoor activities? On the other hand, are there conditions that need to be improved such as traffic congestion, affordable housing, and jobs that pay a living wage? Finding the answers to these and other concerns was the purpose of conducting our Quality of Life Assessment.

Even though this study is based on Otsego County, contributors to our quality of life aren't confined within our borders. We enjoy an abundance of regional attributes such as Mackinac Island, Hartwick Pines, Sleeping Bear Dunes, Cheboygan Opera House, Interlochen Center for the Arts, Lakes Michigan and Huron, shopping and specialized medical services. The Internet also makes our physical location less of an issue for some shopping, employment, and social networking opportunities.



Likewise, people travel to Otsego County from around the region and farther to shop in our stores and recreate on our golf courses, ski hills, lakes, rivers, forests, and trails. This regional activity contributes to our community's ability to provide the quality of life it experiences.

Northern Michigan is often referred to as "God's County" because of its natural beauty, clean air, slower pace, and friendly people -- important amenities that might be easily taken for granted. Hopefully this project has given each of us a chance to pause and take a broad view of our

community; a chance to reflect and be reminded that things don't just happen - we have to make them happen. We do that by examining what we already have, what we lack, and what we value. Then, together, we determine what we need to do to create our desired future. This quality of life assessment will hopefully help us move in that direction. Time will tell.

92% of the survey respondents agree this is a great place to raise a family