

***A Survey of Attitudes and Perspectives on
Rural Character and Economic Development in Lewis County***



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Introduction

People have historically come to Lewis County to enjoy rural life. Some have looked for opportunities to make a living off of the land, reflecting the historical importance of forestry and agriculture. Others come to enjoy recreation such as hunting, fishing, and horseback riding. Many simply enjoy peace and quiet, open space, and traditional rural values.

Recent demographic and economic changes have had an impact on the quality of rural life. Traditional agriculture has shifted to other areas of the country, and many local dairies and large farms have closed. Forestry continues to be an important part of the economy, but changes in lumber harvesting and processing methods have reduced the number of jobs provided by this industry. At the same time, more people have moved into Lewis County to retire or to commute to jobs in the South Puget Sound region.

Lewis County Watch was formed in 2000 to develop solutions to the challenges posed by these changing social and economic conditions. Our members have a strong interest in identifying economic development and land use strategies that preserve the values provided by the rural landscape. The Delphi survey described in this report was designed to help us understand how we can most effectively do this.

Rural people come from a variety of social, political, and economic backgrounds, and have diverse perspectives on how we should approach the changing rural landscape. We hope to use the results of this survey to identify where the common ground lies, as well as where the community is strongly divided.

This report documents the survey methods and results. Chapter 2 describes the study objectives and survey methodology. Chapter 3 provides a detailed description of the results from each questionnaire. In Chapter 4 we integrate the results of the three questionnaires and summarize what we believe are the key findings. Blank survey questionnaires and raw data tallies are available from Lewis County Watch by request.

This study was performed by members of Lewis County Watch, a nonprofit organization dedicated to the improvement of government and land use planning in Lewis County. The study was partially funded by a grant from the Bullitt Foundation. Administrative support and grant management were provided by the Chehalis River Council, a nonprofit organization devoted to the preservation of natural resources within the Chehalis River Basin. We also want to express our appreciation for the survey participants who took time from their busy lives to read and fill out the questionnaires.

Study Design and Methodology

Objectives

The objective of the survey is to explore the attitudes of Lewis County residents towards a variety of rural land use and economic development issues. We hope to gain insight into what people value about rural life, and how they see the relationships between economic development and preservation of rural character. The study focuses on Lewis County residents who are active and knowledgeable about their community, but are not closely tied to the land use debates that have arisen from Growth Management planning.

Rural values are often very personal, and involve complexities that would be difficult to measure with statistical methods. We therefore will use methods that allow us to explore the nuances and range of perspectives that come from people's personal experiences. We are not attempting to develop a statistical profile of the "average" Lewis County resident

Methodology

The survey used in this study follows the Delphi method (*H.A. Linstone and M. Turoff, 1975. The Delphi Method: Techniques and Applications. Published by Addison Wesley*). Delphi surveys are similar to focus group studies in that they use a relatively small survey group to develop complex interactive responses to questions. However, Delphi surveys are completed individually using written questionnaires. This allows the respondents to remain anonymous, and eliminates some of the problems with group dynamics that occur in focus group discussions.

Delphi surveys usually consist of a series of questionnaires. The first questionnaire is fairly broad, and is designed to stimulate thought and narrow the range of issues to explore. Subsequent questionnaires build on the responses to the earlier questions, and include a summary of how the group has responded. In this way each participant learns from the rest of the group, and is able to react to ideas that come out of the survey responses.

Survey Participants

We chose a survey group size of about 30 people, which is large enough to allow a wide range of perspectives while remaining manageable for analyzing responses. Participants were chosen based on personal knowledge by the study team of people in Lewis County who met the following criteria:

- Active and knowledgeable about the community
- Not strongly identified with a particular viewpoint on land use or economic development issues
- Not actively involved in the Growth Management debate

We also wanted the survey group to be representative of the geographic distribution of Lewis County's population. A grid was laid out on a map of the County, and the number of participants for each sector was allocated based on approximate population density. Sectors with high populations (such as the Centralia-Chehalis area) were allocated more participants than were sparsely populated areas. All sectors had at least one representative, except for those areas that lie almost entirely in National Forest or Industrial Forest lands.

Each potential survey participant was personally contacted to see if they were interested. A final survey group of 31 people was then selected.

Survey Questionnaires

The survey consisted of three questionnaires. The first set was mailed to the participants in May 2003, and contained broad questions designed to stimulate thought on

1. Changes people have observed in rural Lewis County
2. Impacts of change on aspects of rural life
3. The extent to which people value various aspects of rural life

Participants chose from a range of responses to each question. Observed changes were rated as None, Some, or Many. Impacts were rated as Positive, No Effect, or Negative. Aspects of rural life were rated as Not Important, Somewhat Important, or Very Important. Participants were also given the opportunity at the end of each section of the questionnaire to provide narrative comments.

The second questionnaire was mailed out in July 2003, and contained questions designed to elaborate on the responses to the first questionnaire. Each question was introduced with a brief summary of relevant responses from the first questionnaire. The format of the questions was much more variable, and allowed for more complex and detailed responses.

The final questionnaire was mailed out in October 2003, and focused on economic development issues raised in responses to the second questionnaire.

Data Analysis

After each survey we tabulated the responses on a master data form. For multiple-choice questions we tabulated the number of people who chose each alternative answer. If the participants were asked to rank a series of alternatives, we tabulated the median and most common rank for each alternative. Narrative responses were reviewed and discussed by the project team.

The tabulated responses were analyzed to identify trends and recurring themes. If more than 2/3 of participants responded in the same way to a question, we classified this as a "large majority" response. If responses were closely split between two alternatives, or covered a wide range of alternatives, the issue was identified as one on which the survey group was divided. These types of questions were often explored further in subsequent surveys to clarify the group's response.

Survey Results

First Questionnaire

The first questionnaire was mailed out in May 2003. We received responses from 24 out of 31 participants. The questionnaire was divided into three sections that addressed (1) changes seen in rural Lewis County, (2) the impacts of change, and (3) the extent to which people value aspects of rural life. Participants were also given the opportunity to write narrative responses at the end of each section to elaborate on these issues.

Changes Seen in Rural Lewis County

The first section of the questionnaire asked participants to rate the extent of change they had observed in various aspects of rural life. Participants could rate the extent of change as “None”, “Some”, or “Many”. For most issues a clear majority (at least 15 out of 24) had observed at least some change. Responses usually clustered in the “some” category.

The first three questions addressed farm and resource lands. 19 out of 24 people had seen farms or dairies closed in their neighborhood, and 18 had seen farms subdivided into residential lots. Subdivision of timberland was less commonly observed, with 14 out of 24 seeing “some” or “many” instances of timber conversion. 16 of the participants saw new neighborhoods developed near their homes.

Other questions dealt with changes in home ownership. A large majority of respondents (19-20 out of 24) saw increases in the number of people moving to their area to retire or commute to jobs in the city. 15 respondents felt that some homes in their neighborhood frequently change ownership. People generally identified a moderate number of homes for sale in their neighborhood.

We asked participants to rate how much change they have seen along various roads in the county. Participants only ranked roads on which they frequently travel. In all cases large majorities (16 to 22) had seen at least “some” change. Jackson Highway and Highway 12 had the highest ratings for level of change.

To help characterize our survey group we asked people how long they had lived in Lewis County. The median response was 30 years, with a range of 7 to 70 years. This shows that most members of our survey group are long-term residents of Lewis County.

Impacts of Change to Lewis County

This set of questions asked people to rate the impacts of these changes on various aspects of rural life. Impact could be rated as either “positive”, “no effect”, or “negative”. A large majority of participants (16 to 18 out of 24) identified negative impacts to traffic, drinking water, rivers, and wildlife habitat. 13-14 participants saw negative impacts to open space, opportunities

to hunt or fish, and the ability to farm. Those respondents who did not identify negative effects usually selected “no effect”, although there were typically a few participants (1 to 5) who felt change had positive effects on these resources. Fewer people saw impacts to timberland, with a small majority (12 out of 21) seeing either no effect or a positive effect on the ability to manage timberland. Most participants had not observed negative effects on the ability to see stars at night, and were evenly divided on impacts to the ability to hear the sounds of nature.

Other questions dealt with social and economic impacts. A large majority felt that change had a positive effect on “attracting people with new and diverse perspectives”. The group was evenly divided on impacts to “a sense of common values within the community”. 12 participants saw negative effects on crime in their area, while 11 saw no effect. Participants were evenly split on impacts to the quality of schools. A small majority felt that change had increased opportunities for local retail shopping, but the group was divided on the effects of change on local job opportunities and opportunities to buy local farm products.

What Do People Value About Rural Life?

This set of questions asked participants to rate the importance of various aspects of rural life. People generally placed high value on quality of life issues such as privacy, peace and quiet, access to open space, opportunities to observe wildlife, and the opportunity to create a unique living environment. The freedom to do what you want with your land was evenly split between “somewhat important” and “very important”.

The ability to farm for a living was generally rated as either “not important” or “very important”. The response to this question is clearly dependent on whether or not the respondent personally intends to farm their land. The ability to grow your own crops was rated as “very important” by more people, although the responses were still divided.

Economic opportunities for themselves and their children were closely split between “somewhat important” and “not important”. We believe that these responses depend greatly on the respondent’s personal economic situation.

Most people rated “knowing your neighbors” and “having neighbors who share your values” as only somewhat important. At the same time, 16 out of 24 rated a sense of community as very important. In rural Lewis County homes are often far apart, so this question may indicate that people do not necessarily define their community by neighborhood boundaries.

Narrative Responses

Narrative responses elaborated on concerns about the impacts of change, and things that people value about rural life. Several people pointed out the loss of timberland and the replacement of higher paying jobs with lower paying retail jobs. Others wanted to see more development of opportunities for tourism and the sale of local farm products. Several people wrote that they valued the freedom to do what you want with your land, but generally added caveats like “within reason”, or “within sound community and environmental limits”. One person wrote about the value of independence to rural people.

Second Questionnaire

The second questionnaire was mailed out in July 2003, and was designed to elaborate on the broad responses and themes that came out of the first questionnaire. We received 19 responses.

The first two questions dealt with the time frame of observed change. 15 out of 19 people felt that most of the observed change had occurred within the last 10 years. The rate of change was evenly divided between moderate and rapid.

In question 3 people were asked to identify how much growth roads, water supply, sewage disposal, fire departments, police, and schools could accommodate. Water supply and sewage disposal were seen as the factors that most limited growth, with most respondents identifying “slow growth” as the maximum rate these could sustain. Fire and police department capacities were rated evenly between “slow growth” and “moderate growth”, while schools were generally rated as capable of handling “moderate growth”. Few respondents felt that any of these resources could accommodate “rapid growth”.

The next set of questions elaborated on perceptions of land development patterns. Most people felt that new homes were being built by a mix of homeowners and professional developers. 13 out of 19 felt that only a few new homes were needed to accommodate population growth. People clearly felt that developers should be encouraged to build either within urban areas or in the fringe surrounding urban areas. When asked how far they would be willing to drive, most people were willing to commute between 6 and 30 miles to work. They were willing to drive further to shop and recreate, reflecting the need for rural people to occasionally drive long distances to shop in larger cities.

In the first questionnaire people saw the need for development of local job opportunities. We therefore asked them to identify what kinds of jobs were currently being created by growth. Most people felt that retail and service jobs were the most common type of new job, followed by small business owners/entrepreneurs. Family wage trade jobs, professional jobs, and management positions were ranked as the least common new jobs.

In the first questionnaire we asked people to rate the individual importance of various aspects of rural life. We followed this up by asking them to compare and rank those aspects that were rated “somewhat important” or “highly important”. Privacy, peace and quiet, and opportunity to create a unique living environment were usually ranked as either the first or second most important aspect of rural life. Access to open space was ranked either very high or very low by people, indicating that its importance depends on whether the respondent is an outdoors enthusiast. Local economic opportunities and the freedom to do what you want with your land were usually rated as less important than privacy, peace and quiet, and the opportunity to create a unique living environment.

In the first questionnaire responses were mixed on the importance of economic opportunities and the ability to farm for a living. These questions were phrased in a manner that focused on the respondent’s personal economic situation. For instance, a retired person with no children might not personally need local economic opportunities or the ability to farm for a living. However,

they might still think it was important for others in the county to have these opportunities. When asked about the ability to farm irrespective of their personal situation, a clear majority (16 out of 19) rated this as very important. A similar majority rated economic opportunities as very important.

In the first questionnaire we identified an interesting contrast between the value of knowing neighbors (rated as “somewhat important”) and a sense of community (rated as “very important”). We felt this might imply that people have definitions of community that are not necessarily related to the borders of their neighborhood. When asked to identify where they most often found their “sense of community”, small majorities (10 to 14 out of 19) cited their neighborhood, schools/children’s activities, interest groups, and extended family. Churches and recreation/sports were identified by about half of the group. Political/activist groups were identified by only 5 respondents.

Several participants pointed out that the term “traditional rural values” means different things to different people. We therefore asked them to write a phrase that describes a traditional rural value. The responses show that we are a community that values the rural landscape, independence, and the sense of community we find from our friends and neighbors:

- Friendliness, Support from other community members, commitment to health of community
- Strong family and moral values
- Ability to live on your own land without excessive government interference
- Well-kept homes, open spaces, farm animals
- Respect for and practice of sustainable living using available resources
- Being able to make a living off the land
- Having people you can count on in times of need and joy
- Being able to continue farming and raising my family in a healthy environment
- Allowing areas to exist for no other reason than to be open and natural
- Raising a family near outdoor opportunities and farm animals
- Simple basic lifestyle with no crowds, traffic jams, etc.; Family centered
- Communing with nature – working with the soil and plants
- Kids wading in a creek on a warm summer day
- Forest access
- A handshake agreement is honored
- Respect for the land and for the people who live and work on

Third Questionnaire

The third and final questionnaire was mailed out in October 2003 to the 24 people who had returned at least one of the earlier questionnaires. We received 15 responses.

We first asked people to identify the appropriateness of a range of economic activities in rural areas. A large majority of participants felt that low profile businesses like beauty shops, assisted living facilities, home-based industries, daycare centers, and antique shops were appropriate in

rural areas. More obtrusive businesses such as poultry processing plants, motorcross tracks, and warehousing facilities were usually rated as not appropriate in rural areas. An exception to this was shake/lumber mills, which were strongly rated as appropriate in rural areas. This reflects the importance of the timber industry in Lewis County, as well as the historical presence of lumber mills in many rural small towns. The group was divided on the appropriateness of firing ranges and trucking facilities. Many rural residents derive their living from trucking, so it may be that some respondents felt it was important to allow this activity in rural areas despite the potential negative impacts. Firing ranges are difficult to locate in densely populated areas, so some respondents may have felt a need to allow them in rural areas to meet the needs of gun enthusiasts.

The next question asked participants to identify where they thought economic development should be concentrated. The group unanimously felt that economic development should be concentrated either in urban areas or in the fringe surrounding urban areas. This is similar to the response we received on the second questionnaire when we asked where residential development should be concentrated.

In the second questionnaire we asked people to rank how often various kinds of jobs were being created by growth. We followed this up by asking them to rank in order of preference the kinds of jobs we should be trying to create. People showed a strong preference for creation of family wage trade jobs and small businesses. Professional/technical jobs were next in preference. Retail/service jobs and management positions were least preferred.

The final two questions were designed to identify how people would want to work towards protecting the quality of rural life and improving economic opportunities. The group had strong preferences for actions they could take within the context of their personal lives, such as managing their land appropriately or altering shopping patterns to help local businesses. A majority of people were also interested in promoting political actions and candidates that will address these issues. A moderate number of people were interested in working with service organizations, contributing to or joining environmental groups, and participating in community service projects. Only a few people were interesting in lobbying for legislation or testifying at public hearings.

Summary and Conclusions

To learn more about people's attitudes towards the changing rural landscape, we asked 31 Lewis County residents to rate and describe aspects of rural life. The respondents represent people who are active and knowledgeable about their community, but have stayed on the sidelines of recent Growth Management planning debates. Three questionnaires were mailed to participants to be filled out anonymously. The second and third questionnaires elaborated on the results from earlier questionnaires, and allowed participants to react to the group's responses.

The results of the survey provide insight into what people value about rural life. The results are not intended to be a statistical profile of the "average" Lewis County citizen, but do identify common ground and themes for groups seeking to develop sustainable land use and economic development strategies. The following are the survey's most significant findings:

- Most participants had seen at least some subdivision of farm and timberland into new housing developments. Much of this change happened within the last 10 years, at a moderate to rapid rate.
- A large majority identified negative impacts to traffic, drinking water, and wildlife habitat. Small majorities saw negative impacts to open space, hunting, fishing, and the ability to farm.
- A small majority felt that growth was increasing opportunities for local retail shopping, but the group was divided on whether it was improving local job opportunities and opportunities to buy local farm products.
- A majority felt that only a few new houses were needed to accommodate population growth. Water supply and sewage disposal were seen as the resources that most limited growth.
- People placed a high value on quality of life issues such as privacy, peace and quiet, access to open space, opportunities to observe wildlife, and opportunities to create a unique living environment.
- The freedom to do what you want with your own land was valued by all, but was usually ranked lower than quality of life issues such as privacy and peace and quiet. Narrative responses emphasized the importance of this freedom, but usually included caveats such as "within reason" or "within sound community and environmental limits".
- A large majority felt it was very important to retain the ability to farm for a living in Lewis County. Small-scale specialty farms and family farms were identified as the most legitimate farming activities.

- Most people valued a sense of community, but also felt that change was attracting people with new and diverse perspectives.
- Economic opportunities were important to the group. Retail/service jobs were seen as the most common new jobs being created by growth. When asked what types of jobs we should be creating, the group preferred family wage trade jobs and small businesses, followed closely by professional/technical jobs.
- Participants unanimously felt that new residential and economic development should be concentrated in or near urban areas. Low-profile activities such as beauty shops and home-based industries were seen as appropriate in rural areas. Obtrusive businesses such as poultry processing plants and motorcross tracks were usually rated as not appropriate in rural areas. An exception to this was shake/lumber mills, which were strongly rated as appropriate in rural areas.
- To preserve rural character and improve economic opportunities, most people preferred actions they could take within the context of their personal lives, such as managing their land appropriately or altering shopping patterns to help local businesses. A majority were also interested in promoting political actions and candidates.