

Regional Assets and Migration

For Maximize Northwest Missouri | January 2021

Summary

Northwest Missouri (NWMO) community leaders wanted to understand the most valued characteristics within the region and how to focus their efforts and resources to retain and attract people and build the region's entrepreneurial ecosystem. Leaders also wanted to know if COVID-19 could make the region a more attractive place to live. A survey was conducted to address these questions in a partnership between the Community Foundation of Northwest Missouri's Maximize NWMO Regional Vitality Initiative and University of Missouri Extension's Exceed program.

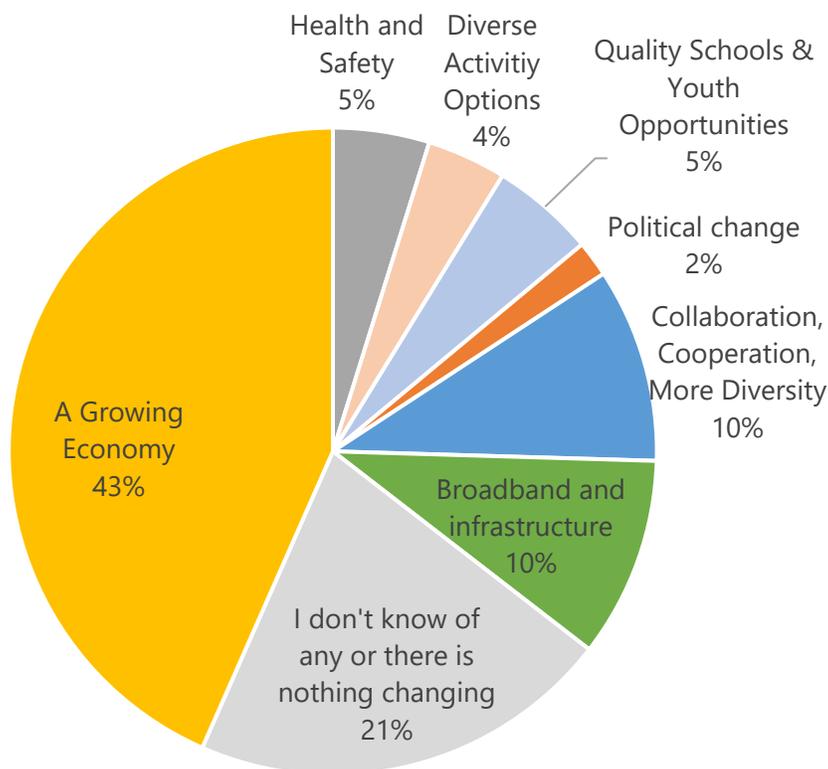
This brief summarizes the survey responses on the region's current assets and those that are most desirable to migrants, followed by implications from the survey results with a focus on actionable results. The results summarize the views of people who currently live in the region, grew up in the region, and have moved into or out of the region, and suggest several opportunities for local organizations and leadership groups to work together and improve the desirability of NWMO as a place to live.



Celebrating Regional Assets

Survey results suggest the region's top assets include safety, small towns, proximity to metropolitan areas and low cost of living—all things that could be attractive to new residents. The one best thing about NWMO, after family and social relationships, was community pride or a sense of belonging, according to 18% of respondents.

Regarding the future of NWMO, the figure to the right shows respondents were most excited about a growing economy (43%) and growing high-speed internet infrastructure (10%). Respondents were also excited about increasing collaboration, cooperation and diversity (10%). The biggest concern for the region's future was leadership (20%).



Source: Authors categorizing 1,088 responses into eight categories

Regional Assets Can Influence Future Movers

Respondents were asked to identify actionable regional assets that were *very important* in deciding where they will live in five years. Among a set of 15 choices, the top five were:

- Healthcare (62%)
- Quality of local K-12 schools (62%)
- A strong or growing economy (57%)
- High-speed internet (55%)
- Access to stores such as grocery or hardware stores (54%)

When asked which asset was *the most important*, 18% said K-12 schools, 11% said the economy, 8% said healthcare and 5% said broadband internet. All of these areas can be influenced by local policies.

Narrowing the focus to respondents who indicated they were likely to move again reveals that access to fresh produce, coffee shops and bakeries, professional services (e.g., lawyer) and arts & entertainment were important regional assets likely to influence their decision about where to live.

Strengthening the Region—implications from the survey results

Survey results have implications for entrepreneurial ecosystem building, return migration strategies and areas where investment could help both. Attracting and retaining talent in the region feeds the entrepreneurial ecosystem building blocks that ensure the region thrives in the future.

Entrepreneurship

Supporting new businesses was the most popular community effort respondents would support, with one-third of respondents selecting this option over building recreation places (12%), regional events (9%) and other options. Results suggest there is widespread approval among respondents for supporting job-creating businesses and entrepreneurial opportunities. Entrepreneurship and the economy are linked closely to each other, and supporting the growth of local entrepreneurs can be an effective way to grow a region's economy.

A declining economy was reported by 30% as their biggest concern about the future of NWMO. In other open-ended questions, respondents expressed concern about a lack of well-paying jobs in the region while businesses reported not being able to find qualified workers—perhaps due to the low wage being offered, thus these concerns, like many others, are related.

Return migration strategies

In December 2020, a Gallup study reported that 48% of Americans said they prefer to live in a town or rural area as opposed to a city or suburb, up from 39% in 2018. This indicates that people may be looking to move to more rural areas.

The region's net population loss has increased annually since 2015. Encouraging those with ties to NWMO to return to the region, in an effort to reduce population loss, was a stated goal of the survey. Jobs and educational opportunities motivated over half of the moves outside the region. Of those who have left the region, 16% said community events would make it easier for them to move back, 14% said broadband access and 13% said recreation opportunities.

Two return migration strategies surfaced from the survey:

- Carefully targeted return migration efforts are warranted. Young retirees might be targeted for return-migration to the region. COVID-19 made Baby Boomers more likely to value living closer to family and friends.
- Flexible work arrangements are possible within the region. Nearly 1 in 5 respondents either owned their own business (12%) or work remotely outside the region (7%). Combined with investment in the regional assets discussed below, flexible work arrangements could entice those with ties to NWMO to return.

Notably, 15% of in-migrants to NWMO did not feel a sense of belonging. If return migration is going to increase the region's population, a concerted effort to reach-out to newcomers, help them get their footing and invite them to be a part of decision-making and community leadership is likely needed.

Asset Investment

Survey results implied that K-12 education, healthcare, the economy, broadband internet, stronger youth organizations and inclusivity were important factors for the region to continue to invest time and resources in. The survey also suggested the following investments may be helpful:

- Access to fresh produce, coffee shops, professional services, and entertainment
- Building stronger youth organizations unrelated to sports
- Including a wider range of people and perspectives in local decision making
- Going out of your way to make newcomers feel welcome
- Leadership training and trust-building activities

Finally, respondents expressed concern that there was less and less for NWMO children to do, particularly outside of sports. K-12 school quality and funding were top youth-related worries. These worries suggest that partnerships with school districts may be fruitful in engaging with families new to the region. Also, helping school districts maintain ties with high school alumni so that alumni, which already has some personal ties to the region, can be strategically engaged about future assets and opportunities.

Methodology and Sources

The online survey received 2,182 responses and 1,939 completed responses, July-September, 2020—a robust set of views by age and migration status. Responses have not been weighted. This survey project built upon a synthesis of entrepreneurial strategies conducted by MU Extension's Exceed team in early 2020. A copy of the survey, results and the entrepreneurial strategy synthesis can be found online at tinyurl.com/muexceed.

Survey Respondents Summary

Respondents were:

- 35% Baby Boomers, 32% Gen X and 26% Millennials
- 75% women, 19% retired, 58% employed in the region

Of respondents:

- 37% lived in households with kids
- 9% grew up in NWMO and now live outside the region; 22% grew-up elsewhere and now live in NWMO
- 27% donate money or materials to local nonprofits