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Janet Kiser

County Survey Valuable Tool in Rural Development

Spurred by vocal opposition to a proposed new pulp mill, officials in Washington's Pend Oreille County surveyed its citizens to try to find out what the majority thought. The 1982 survey of 4,300 voters provided a source of information about citizen opinion that the officials were able to use in their decisions, and not just about the new pulp mill. The survey data also led the county to obtain new grants to improve roads and sewers and to enhance the county's health care system.

Pend Oreille County, WA, was mired in controversy in the early 1980's. Unemployment rates, nearly 16 percent in 1980, had risen to 27.7 percent in 1982. Per capita income was, and still is, low compared with other Washington counties. Toypack, a Japanese/American wood products firm, proposed building a 550-ton-per-day pulp mill on the Pend Oreille River in the heart of the county. The mill could create additional jobs, but many feared its effect on the environment.

Concerns about pollution from the mill were legitimate and opposition to the mill was vocal. A group called Pend Oreille Citizens for Clean Water and Air insisted that the people of Pend Oreille did not want the mill built. The problem was that while planners heard the opposition's side of the argument, they had difficulty assessing the level of support for the mill.

To resolve the issue, the county government canvassed the opinions of its registered voters with a mail survey, not just of residents' opinions on the proposed pulp mill, but also on other types of development and residents' preferences for financing such development. Dubbed

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"What's the Way for Pend Oreille," the survey helped local leaders first to realize that opposition to the mill was not so strong (although citizens were concerned about the quality of rural life) and second to gauge citizen attitudes toward what they expected of the county and their support for future development.

Rural Way of Life Important

Those responding to the survey wanted, above all, to preserve their rural way of life. The people overwhelmingly wanted to protect the environment from damaging activities, to retain farmland for agricultural pursuits, and to "protect the present way of life in Pend Oreille County" (table 1).

That's not to suggest they were unaware of the county's economic problems. Many were themselves caught up in them, if we can judge by the responses. Only a third of those surveyed were satisfied with their current incomes (fig. 1) and many noted that unemployment was the most serious problem facing the county (table 2).

But people didn't choose to live in Pend Oreille for economic reasons. They chose to live there mainly because they liked its rural atmosphere and way of life (fig. 2) and its clean air and water, scenic beauty, and outdoor recreation possibilities. Despite dissatisfaction with their incomes, two-thirds were satisfied with Pend Oreille as a place to live.

The survey invited respondents to write their feelings about Pend Oreille County and its future. Over 100 typewritten pages recorded responses to this question. Both newer and long-term residents stressed the need for jobs and a stronger local economy. But they opposed such progress if it meant pollution, increased population, city-type problems, or higher welfare rolls. They feared any changes that might compromise their rural lives.

Table 1—Preserving rural lifestyle is number one goal for Pend Oreille residents

	Percent*
Protect natural environment from damaging activities	88.5
Retain land currently used for agricultural purposes as farmland	84.6
Protect the present way of life in Pend Oreille	78.7
Encourage industrial growth that meets current government standards for environmental protection	77.9
Encourage county to develop own standards for environmental protection	74.7
Develop industries based on natural resources	72.3
Develop new housing	68.4
Build nongovernmental funding sources for local development	68.1
Set up courses for college credit	67.7
Encourage more local government support in county's industrial growth	63.0
Develop recreation facilities to attract tourists	60.5
Get government grants for local improvement	59.3
Cooperate with Kalispel Tribe in industrial, recreational development on and off reservation	46.8
Increase local taxes for new industries, sites	16.5

*Percent that considered the goal a high or medium priority for the county.

County residents would not necessarily welcome new arrivals, even though almost half of all respondents could be considered new themselves (having lived in the county 10 years or less). Almost half wanted no growth or a lower growth rate for the county, compared with 8 percent who wanted growth speeded up.

Need for Industry

Two-thirds favored "developing the county's economic base to provide more jobs and bring more money into the area." Almost three-quarters ranked as a medium- to high-priority county goal the "development of industries that make use of natural resources such as timber, water, or minerals."

Respondents urged industrial growth that "meets current governmental standards for environmental protection," and encouraged the county to "develop its own standards for environmental protection."

Light industry was acceptable. Heavy industry was not. One respondent summed it up:

"I feel that the economic base of this county is the land, water, trees, and minerals. I think that base is about tapped unless some unknown mineral deposit is discovered. If we want economic development, we must look for it in some light industry hiring unskilled to semi-skilled workers. The number of people in our county is now too great for them all to find employment in the primary or secondary industries that feed off of our economic base. An industry such as a pulp mill will further deplete an already taxed timber supply, bring more people to the county, and create more human problems."

Respondents also preferred that new industry be sited in designated industrial areas or along the rail line. Their top goal for the Port District, an economic development agency, was the development of an industrial site for lease to business (fig. 3).



Photo courtesy of Newport Miner, Newport, WA

One of the major conclusions from the survey was a strong commitment by the citizens of Pend Oreille County to preserving the environment, even at the expense of some economic growth.

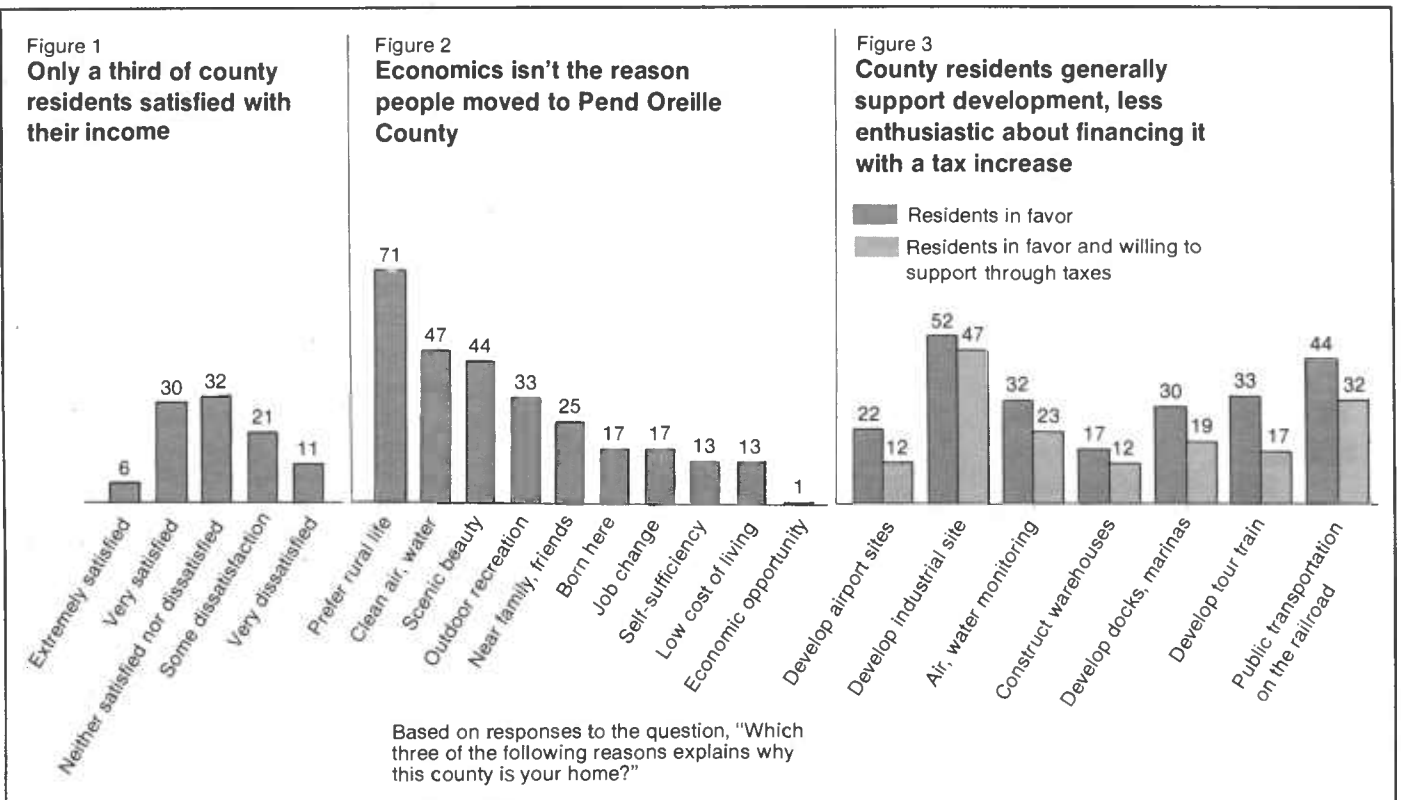
But voters, despite their ages or length of residency, opposed a tax increase to benefit industrial development (table 1).

The strong preservationist sentiment surprised county planners.

Pend Oreille County has 28,500 acres of cropland, most of which is located in the Pend Oreille River Valley. Agriculture is almost entirely oriented toward hay and beef cattle production. For most area

Preserve Agricultural Land

Only 6 percent of the respondents favored using agricultural land as indus-



farmers, farm income is secondary to off-farm income because of the distance to markets, the short growing season, and the small amount of highly productive soils.

Table 2—Biggest problems: unemployment and low incomes

	Percent*
Unemployment levels	90
Low income level of families, individuals	84
Lack of money to develop area	73
Inadequate or poor housing	69
Poor use of existing resources (river, timber, rail)	69
Lack of rental units	66
Steady increase in number of people moving into area	65
Inadequate public transportation	64
Need for agricultural development	60
Lack of planning, controls on use of land	55

*Percent that considered the problem to be moderate or serious.

But the data do not show exactly what respondents meant by wanting to preserve agricultural land. The county is two-thirds forest. People may have meant to preserve cropland acreage only or they may also have meant timberland or garden plots as potential sites for their own agricultural use. But preserving land of questionable agricultural productivity is further evidence of strong sentiment toward preserving the rural ways that drew them to Pend Oreille.

Nevertheless, respondents were two-to-one in favor of "planning for the use of land in Pend Oreille County."

Other Findings

Closely connected to industrialization was the issue of land-use planning. Opposition to the county's highly controversial performance standards was as clearly stated as opposition to the pulp mill: "I feel individual landowners should have the say on what they do with their own property and not be governed by a land-use commission. We are already bound by State and Federal law on certain things and I don't think we need any additional restrictions, or fees, or inspectors, or anything

else. I don't have any right to say what my neighbor can do with his property any more than he can tell me what to do with mine. . ."

Voters were also asked their opinions of public services available in the county (fig. 4). Electrical power ranked as the best public service and Pend Oreille County boasts some of the lowest electrical rates in the Nation.

The quality of health care ranked second. Pend Oreille County's health care is provided by a private ambulance service, two hospitals, a nursing home, an emergency squad, dentists, resident physicians, visiting physicians from Spokane 50 miles away, emergency helicopter service, and a county health department. Compared with long-term residents, newcomers reported more medical needs, wanted more specialist care, sought more help from county-based physicians, but tended to have more money problems that prevented them from seeking medical care when needed.

Newcomers also differed from long-term residents in their recreational interests. Many see Pend Oreille as a paradise for hunting, fishing, boating, snowmobiling, and other activities. Newcomers added newly popular activities such as racquetball, handball, and cross-country skiing. Their preferences may be age-related since most newcomers were 26-40 years old.

Welfare Fraud Suspect

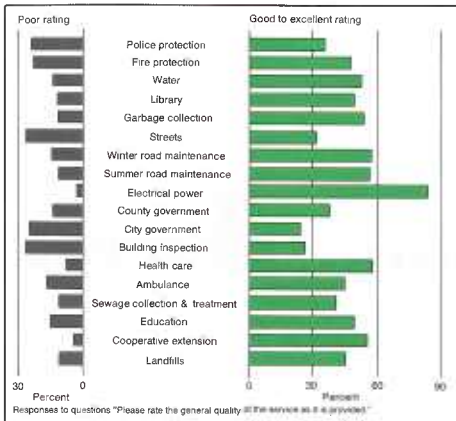
There was no specific question about welfare in the survey, but the issue was definitely on people's minds. Respondents perceived welfare as widespread, burdensome to those paying for it, and going to the wrong people.

"There are too many able-bodied people drawing welfare and bragging about it. It is quite sickening to see them so well endowed with personal belongings. . . while law-abiding, conscientious, prideful people keep plugging away at any job they can find to feed this useless element."

"I think welfare is our biggest problem. There are many people moving in from out of state and stop in Newport on their way and go get signed up for welfare."

"... make people who have been on welfare for a long number of years work for

Figure 4
Public services: the good (electricity) and the bad (streets)



city, county, or taxpayers for their checks and food coupons.”

Pend Oreille County had a large number of people on the welfare rolls in 1981, as it does today. However, the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) feels that less than 2 percent of the county’s welfare recipients have a long-term dependency on welfare and that most recipients received assistance for less than 12 months. Most welfare families are headed by women with minimal job skills. The local DSHS office reported one case of welfare fraud in 3 years.

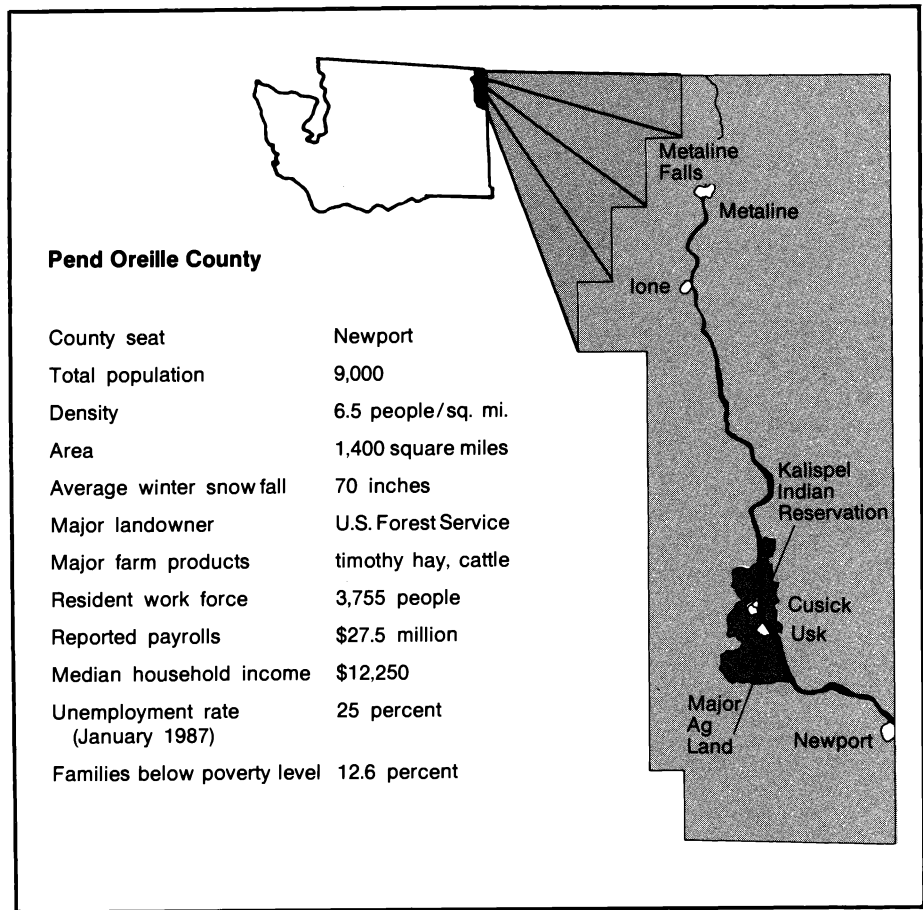
Survey Helps Planners Tailor Services to Community Needs

Sponsors of similar surveys should apply survey results when and where appropriate in directing a county’s future. Pend Oreille received over \$630,000 in grants for improvements in 1984. Applications for these grants were based on tabulations of what the people deemed they needed. County planners used cross-tabulations of demographic data to show the benefit of street and sewer repairs to low- and moderate-income households in four Pend Oreille communities. Over 13,600 feet of streets were improved and 500 feet of sewer and water connections were added. These improvements served 1,171 people.

In addition, the county built a 2,000-square-foot community center. The survey provided data for 1984 grant applications for city park development and construction of a county library building.

The survey documented the need for increased hospital services from a 25-bed community hospital. As a result, visiting physician services were contracted from the Spokane medical community. Eight consultants specializing in orthopedics, cardiology, pathology, urology, podiatry, and vascular surgery now offer regular outpatient services in the hospital. A cardiology treadmill and birthing room have also been added.

The pulp mill that provided the original impetus for the survey was never built, not necessarily because of the survey results, but because of poor economic conditions. Since 1984, however, plans for a \$210-million, environmentally clean newsprint mill have made steady progress. In 1985, Beak Consultants



released an Environmental Impact Assessment of the newsprint mill’s potential effects on Pend Oreille, with the county survey providing the primary source of information for effects on county residents. The assessment team’s project manager considered the survey an “invaluable asset” in preparing the report.

The survey has been used as a model for needs assessment by Washington State University’s rural sociologists and by planners in other towns. The economic development group, the Port District, used survey statistics in a cooperative agreement with the State to bring economic development services to the county.

Newcomers, Long-Term Residents Share Similar Outlooks

Although economic development was important to the county, survey results strongly recommend proceeding with caution. Recall that the respondents approved economic development, but provided qualifications for such development.

Opinions of long-term residents were consistent with those of new residents. Because of the predominance of the people opposed to the pulp mill and the many new faces in the county, many believed the newcomers and longer term residents were in opposition to each other. But the survey showed that they held similar views about rural living, job opportunities, government control, county goals, industrial development, housing options, and public services.

Voters appreciated the opportunity to be heard. Respondents equally represented the county’s new and longer term residents; low, middle, and higher incomes; men and women; and the young, middle-aged, and retirees. The issues were personally important to them. Postage rates had increased shortly before the survey was mailed to voters, and they voluntarily added the extra 3 cents to the return envelopes containing their completed surveys. Although some questioned using government money to fund the survey, many sent notes of thanks for being asked their opinions and wanted copies of results.

About the Survey

The design and distribution of the survey followed techniques developed by Don Dillman, rural sociologist at Washington State University. Dillman's total design method (TDM) increased the quantity and quality of responses with its attention to detail and personal touch. TDM elements applied to Pend Oreille's survey included introductory cover letters, return envelopes, reminder postcards following the first mailing, and reminder letters and additional surveys if the postcards did not bring results.

The county's cooperative extension agent and rural sociologists from Washington State University directed the survey. The county has no radio or television station, has no higher education facilities, and is 50 miles from an urban center. The project showed the university's ability to provide an isolated area with the expertise to zero in on major issues. The project also demonstrated that instead of hiring outside consultants, volunteers could be mobilized and trained to do the job.

The idea came from the Rural Development Committee made up of community decisionmakers and extension and other government representatives. To ensure its neutrality and lend credibility to the survey, the committee formed a

21-member Survey Steering Committee representing county government, Native Americans (the local Kalispel Tribe), agriculture and forestry groups, educators, planners, economic developers, and businesses in the county.

The Steering Committee broadened the survey to elicit opinions on lifestyle and economic development for Pend Oreille, and included only two questions about the pulp mill. Residents were asked their goals for the county and to evaluate the need for industrial development. They were asked opinions about land use planning, public services, county problems, communicating with county officials, housing needs, cultural/recreation needs, hospital and health care, and demographic data.

Although using registered voter lists for the survey meant that others would not be included, the results gave a good picture of public opinion. The 2,482 completed, returned questionnaires represented a large sample of the county's 8,500 people. Returned questionnaires represented 60 percent of the 4,300 registered voters contacted.

To survey all 4,300 registered voters, the county extension agent raised \$3,800 from county-based organizations and individuals to print the survey, buy stamps, and pay for key-punching data.

Anonymity was guaranteed in the cover letter. The extension agent trained volunteers to code data. Managers at Key Tronic Corp., a local manufacturer of computer keyboards, developed an answer template to simplify coding the data. Coded data were entered into computers at the Sociological Data Processing Center at Washington State University in Pullman, 130 miles away.

Preliminary results were published in a 5-week series in *The Newport Miner*, the county newspaper. All sponsors, the county library, and local decisionmakers received an 84-page manuscript containing a more thorough analysis of results. The extension agent showed a slide presentation of results to 250 people in 14 community groups in the county.

Results from a survey of this type usually remain valid for 5-10 years, as long as major changes in society do not occur. Since the survey results have been published, employment in Pend Oreille has worsened, the wood products and mining industries have suffered economically, and the standard of living has generally declined. In addition, Key Tronic, the major industrial employer in the county, closed. Because no immediate relief is in sight, voters, if resurveyed, might alter their viewpoints on issues directly related to their wallets.

End Note

The most vocal people often do not reflect the majority opinion. The original purpose of the survey was to learn how voters actually felt about a pulp mill locating in Pend Oreille County. Survey results showed neither a clear rejection nor acceptance of the mill. About 47 percent of respondents favored the idea, 32 percent opposed it, and 20 percent were unsure.

A major benefit of the mill to those who favored it was the new jobs it would bring to the county. Those opposed feared pollution from such a large mill. Both were

predictable attitudes, but decisions would have stood on shaky ground without the survey.

The overwhelming message was the need for jobs while preserving the natural environment. It is questionable if those preferences are compatible. Unemployment rates for the county were 23 percent in 1986. Many newcomers who arrived in the 1970's have left because they could not find jobs to support even the modest lifestyle they desired. The economic outlook now is grimmer than it was in 1982. If resurveyed, voters now might place the need for jobs above their desire to pre-

serve the rural lifestyle. In fact, there has been no opposition to the new newsprint mill and its acquisition of 700 acres of farmland along the river for its site.

Writing proposals (that is, requesting money from granting sources for community improvement projects) provided the most practical application of the data. The 84 pages of results did not contain extensive comparisons of data by age, length of residence, location of resident, gender, or other demographics. However, the data were refined by computer analysis for cross-tabulations when the county planner applied for grants that required such information.