

Introduction

During the planning process, a variety of survey tools were used to ensure the Henry County Comprehensive Plan was drafted in the best interests of county residents and businesses. The surveys that were conducted during the preparation of the comprehensive plan were a continuation of survey tools used during 1997, when the Henry County Planning Commission began the development of its Farmland Preservation study. During this time, it became apparent that it was very important to develop a county comprehensive plan—the first comprehensive planning endeavor to occur in Henry County since 1972.¹

This specific planning process used two survey methods. One survey was mailed to a random sample of county residents in January 2002, while the primary audience of the second survey focused on township and county officials. The results of the two surveys provided unique results that often mirrored each other, and yet had some notable differences. These survey results, in addition to advice provided by the diverse comprehensive plan advisory board, established a foundation from which this plan was developed. The highlights of these survey tools are addressed in this specific Plan component. Please see **Appendix B: Community Survey** for more information concerning the completed results of this survey.

Planning Issues

Developing a countywide paradigm that sets the tone for future growth and development is a unique endeavor, as the nature in which they are developed often comes during unique moments in governance. It is important that public officials in Henry County have all the necessary facts and information at hand before decisions are made. Random sample surveys, because of their broad nature- and because they often transcend the ballot box- provide a good basis for sound decision-making. In the future, it is very important that the county continue to build upon these survey tools so that an accurate reflection of its residents and businesses can be attained.

Trends

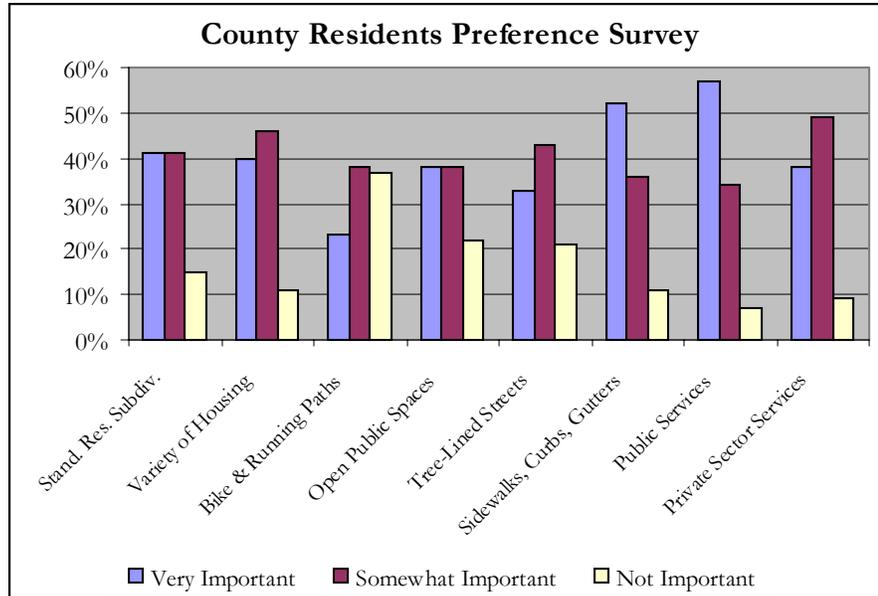
Two “preference” surveys were conducted during the planning process. The focus of the first survey was to acquire an insight of Henry County residents. Approximately 759 random sample surveys were mailed to county property owners during January 2002, yielding a response rate of 30%. The second survey primarily focused on township and county officials during a township trustee association meeting in October 2002. The purpose of these two surveys was to establish the similarities and differences between these two unique groups, and also to compare these results to the 1997 land use survey that accompanied the farmland preservation strategy. The results of the public comprehensive plan survey conducted in 2002 can be found in Appendix B.

The results of both surveys indicate a remarkable likeness, as both the public and private groups tended to answer the surveys in similar fashion.² However, some differences in preference did emerge during a comparison of the two surveys. Making a judgment on the basis of these differences is difficult. However, it could pertain to the very conservative nature by which land use issues are addressed in this primarily agrarian society of Northwest Ohio, where innovative planning tools are not well known and examples of “best practices” are limited.

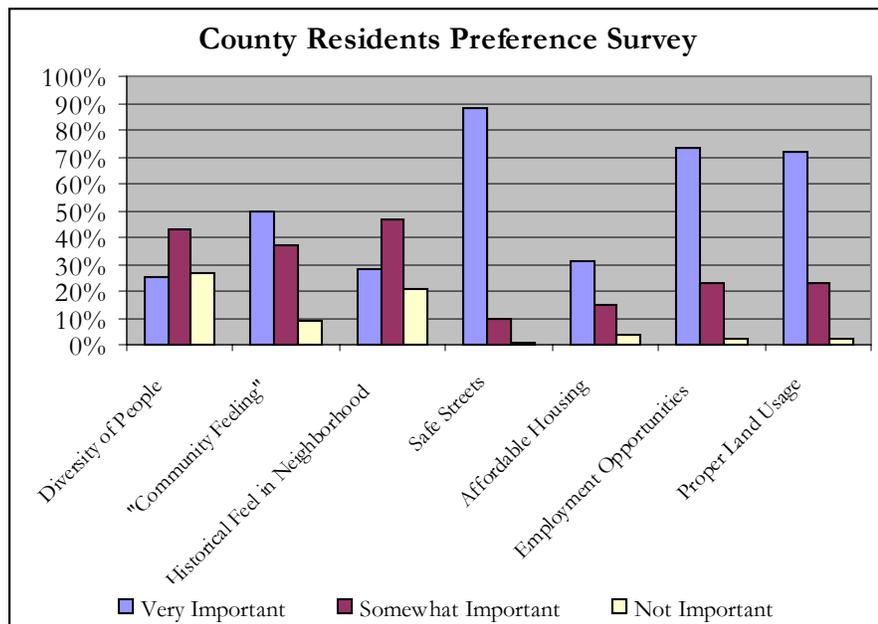
¹ Several studies have been conducted in Henry County. However, most of these studies were of specific nature and often addressed issues only pertaining to water and sewer issues and land use.

² Only the responses to the residential survey will be highlighted in this chapter. These results will be compared with the results of the public officials survey in the narrative.

Nevertheless, one main conclusion can be safely drawn. While residents tend to prefer more of a variety in housing types and themes often reflected of master planned communities (bike paths and parks, more open space, tree-lined streets, etc.), they still prefer larger lot sizes for single family dwellings within incorporated areas, and smaller lot sizes for single family dwellings in rural, unincorporated areas (42% preferred 1 acre lot sizes). This preference for smaller lot size in rural Henry County was also mirrored by public officials.

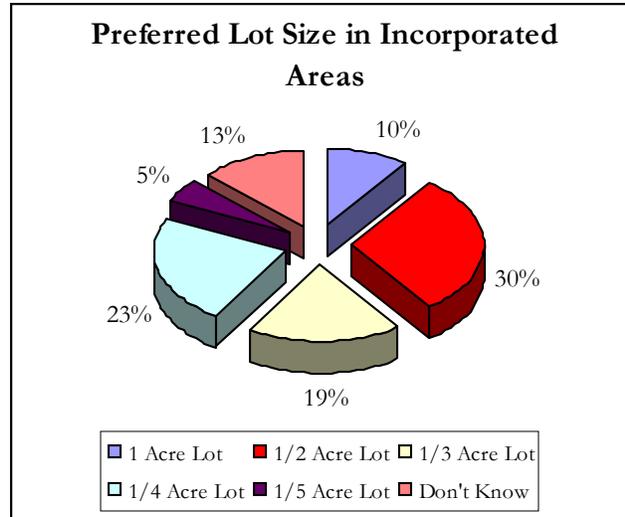


The survey asked county residents their opinion on 17 questions. When asked to rate 15 variables or “characteristics” of the county (in the format “very important”, “somewhat important”, or “not important”) residents rated safe streets (88%), employment opportunities (73%), proper land use (72%), public services (57%), and “community feeling” (50%) as “very important”.



Characteristics rated 50% or higher as “somewhat important” were: a variety of housing types and styles (50%), open public spaces (50%), and private sector services (54%). A few characteristics noted as “not important” by higher percentages were: bicycle and running paths (64%), tree lined streets (36%), and “diversity of people” (32%). Most characteristics, however, were rated as “somewhat important” at higher percentages than were rated “not important” indicating a general belief that most surveyed characteristics were generally important to the county’s well being and quality of life.

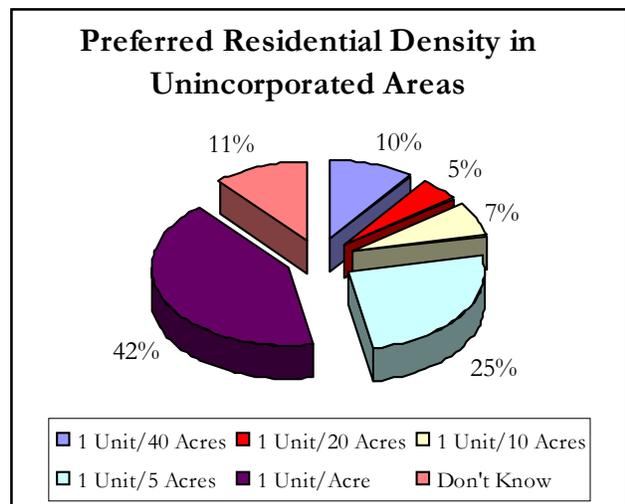
Some notable differences between county residents and public officials emerged when asked to rate these preferences, as the public tended to have higher preferences than public officials for the following: a variety of housing types and styles (40% to 21%); bicycle and running paths (23% to 4%); open public spaces (38% to 25%); tree lined streets (33% to 21%); and affordable housing (31% to 11%).



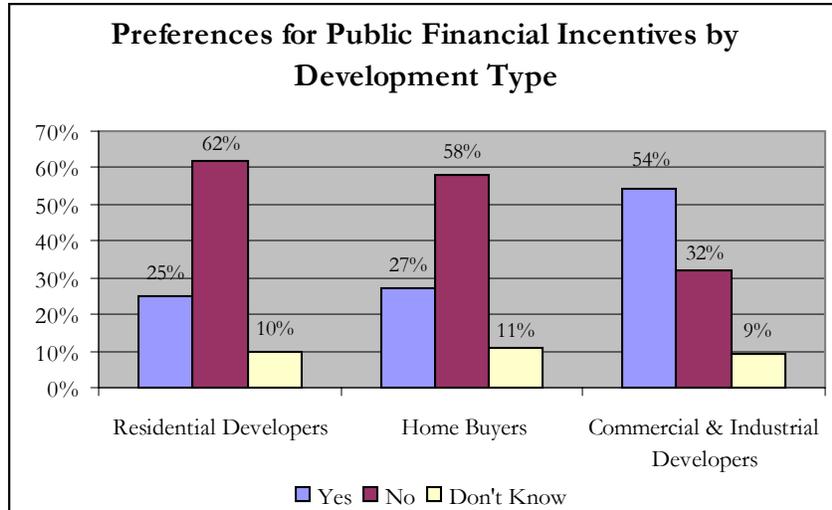
When asked their preferences for the level of single-family density within incorporated and unincorporated areas, survey respondents were generally inclined to prefer larger lots in incorporated areas and smaller lot sizes in unincorporated areas. This preference tends to be inconsistent with land use preferences noted on other survey questions and the following several conclusions could be drawn:

1. The survey respondents were not fully informed to the current lot sizes in Henry County’s incorporated areas where 5 single family residential units per acre is often the norm;
2. The survey respondents believe that smaller lot sizes in rural Henry County would help to minimize sprawl and encourage farmland preservation;
3. The survey respondents, although they strongly prefer development to be first accommodated within Napoleon and other villages, still prefer the county to be rural and less populated. Larger lot sizes in villages and cities would then equate to less residents;
4. County residents and public and private officials could benefit tremendously from public informational processes in which the benefits to compact and conservation land use methods are highlighted.

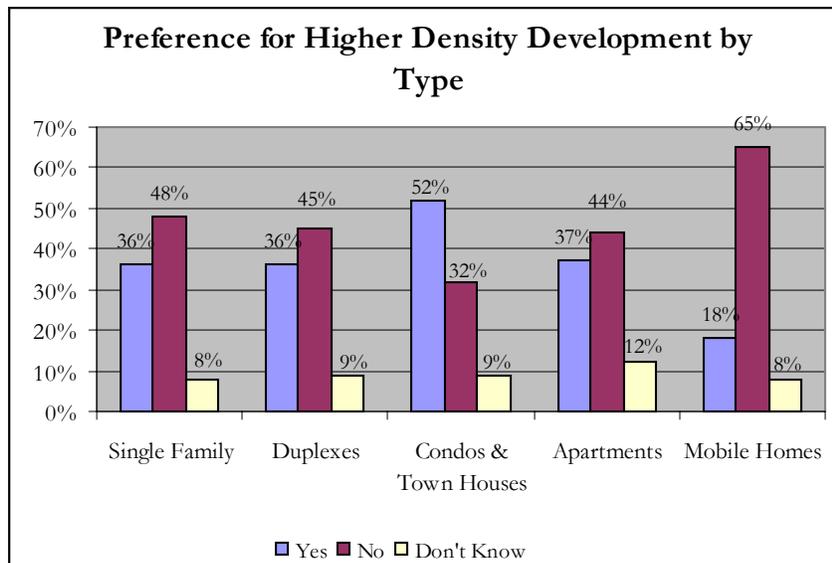
Another conclusion of these results is that both survey groups could be more familiar with the “typical” development patterns (the “5.00” acre-developments) in unincorporated areas of the County than they are of the “typical” development patterns within the county’s several villages and Napoleon (where housing density is predominately 5 dwelling units DU or more per acre).

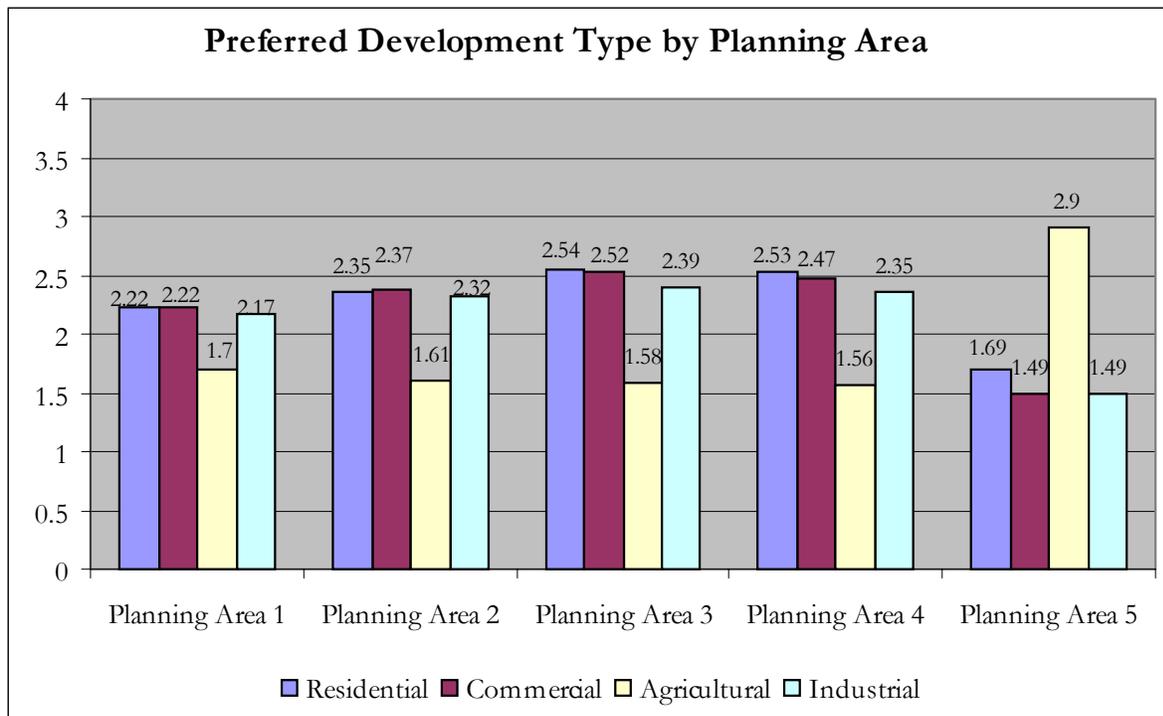


When asked their preferences to questions pertaining to “higher density housing”, survey respondents were generally not in favor of it, although 52% were in favor of higher density methods for condominiums and townhouses. While more respondents did not favor higher density for the remaining development types, it can be noted that a substantial number of respondents indicated they simply “don’t know” or are not knowledgeable on the subject matter. Because of this, it may be that respondents are “on the fence” on this issue and could be more interested into the benefits of higher density housing methods.



When asked which types of development they would prefer and where (1 equals “highest priority” and 4 equals “lowest priority”), respondents noted a preference similar to that of one voiced by many private and public officials (and comprehensive plan advisory board) during the planning process; and that is a desire for the county to continue to grow and develop in areas where the infrastructure is most accommodating.





Surveyed residents preferred residential, commercial, and industrial development to occur in Planning Area 5 (Napoleon) than in any other planning area (a rating of 1 means most preferred and 3 less preferred). Respondents also indicated a preference for residential, commercial, and industrial development to occur in Planning Area 1 (Ridgeville, Freedom, Napoleon, and Harrison townships) and Planning Area 2 (Liberty, Washington, and Damascus townships) over the remaining planning areas (3 and 4), which comprise the southernmost townships in the county. However, residents also indicated that maintaining agriculture in all portions of the county except Napoleon was also a high priority.

Survey respondents were generally more in favor of utilizing public financial incentives to promote commercial and industrial development than any other development type. This correlates with the strong desire for the county to maintain and promote its workforce and create economic opportunities for county residents.

Conclusion

Some common themes can be drawn from the results of both surveys insofar as county residents and the public officials’ unique perspectives on Henry County’s growth, development, and “quality of life” issues.

One major theme that surfaced is that there is a “window of opportunity” to educate Henry County residents on different methods to accommodate growth and development. While the public’s current preferences on land use and development issues are generally conservative in nature, they seem willing to become more understanding of land use methods that can conserve agricultural resources and promote areas of the county most capable of accommodating growth. These areas of Henry County would consist of those seven townships where the established infrastructure and

thoroughfare network are most suitable (the townships of Ridgeville, Freedom, Napoleon, Harrison, Liberty, Washington, and Damascus).

To help promote these areas to best grow and develop, 57% residents preferred the use of a regional water and sewer district (only 13% disagreed), and one-third of those residents surveyed even indicated a desire to pursue a sales tax increase to promote the preservation of selective agricultural and natural resource areas. Eighty-three percent of survey takers also indicated that selective agricultural and other significant natural resource areas should be preserved (although 52% believed that it should not be from monies raised from sales taxes).

The results of the survey are clear. While it appears that there is a tendency on behalf of Henry County residents to embrace a “conservative” market approach to land use and other development issues, there also appears to be another underlying theme of the compiled results: Henry County residents tend to be open to the idea of more government and “public” involvement into the growth and development process. While they may not have any specific ideas on exact conservation development practices, they overwhelmingly believe that land use techniques that help to build communities, prevent sprawl, and promote the rural landscape should be used more than not.

In sum, Henry County residents are shifting the proof of burden onto those individuals or groups most involved with the development of Henry County. In the future, it is very important to survey residents as to their unique preferences concerning the built environment, as the current survey indicates that county residents have clear preferences as to what they believe Henry County should look like in the future.