

Dear residents,

The Town of Sterling Planning Commission is in the process of finalizing the Town of Sterling's first Comprehensive Plan. This plan will guide current and future development and zoning over the next 20 years. Public participation is essential to the overall success of the plan. As part of that participation process the town worked with the University of Wisconsin River Falls - Survey Research Center to administer a survey sent to the 334 residences within Sterling. A total of 170 residents responded to the survey. The following is an executive summary of the survey results. In the coming months the draft Comprehensive Plan will be made publicly available and public meetings will be scheduled for residents to provide additional input to the plan. On behalf of the Town of Sterling Planning Commission, thank you for your interest and participation.

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TOWN OF STERLING COMMUNITY SURVEY REPORT

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Survey Research Center Report 2024/17
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THE SURVEY RESEARCH CENTER

The Survey Research Center (SRC) is a research organization at the University of Wisconsin – River Falls in River Falls, Wisconsin. Since 1990, the SRC has provided statistically sound, lowcost information gathering services for academics, local units of government, non-profit groups, school districts, and other organizations. The SRC conducts surveys on a wide variety of topics including customer satisfaction, resident experience, business climate, equity and inclusion, labor needs, etc. and completes about 25 to 30 survey projects per year. In alignment with its mission of strengthening communities and supporting education, all SRC projects have the goal of improving the welfare and quality of life for community residents, along with furthering the advancement of scientific research.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The SRC would like to thank Tom Schneider, Scott Lines, and other Town of Sterling Board members for working with the SRC to develop a productive survey instrument, providing their input throughout the survey process, and promoting the survey. In addition, the SRC would like to thank the residents of the Town of Sterling for taking the time to complete the survey. Without their robust engagement, the successful completion of this project would not have been possible.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The survey aimed to gauge residents' opinions on the Town of Sterling's Comprehensive Plan. The SRC distributed a mail-out survey to all **334 residents** of Sterling. The SRC received a total of **170 responses** for a response rate of about **47%**. This sample size was somewhat smaller than the minimum sample size needed of 179 responses and allows for the construction of estimates with a margin of error of 5.2%. Key survey findings are as follows:

Quality of Life

- About 96% of respondents expressed satisfaction with the quality of life in the Town of Sterling, with more than two-fifths (44%) of residents indicating that they were “very satisfied”. Female residents are more likely to be “very satisfied” with the quality of life in Sterling compared to male residents.
- The top reason for why residents chose to live in the Town of Sterling was the region's smalltown atmosphere and rural lifestyle, selected by over six in ten (65%) respondents. Other reasons in the top three included the natural features of Sterling (41%), and the cost of a home/land (33%).
- Over nine in ten respondents agreed that the overall character of the Town should continue to be much like it is today (90%), that preserving and celebrating the community's history is important (92%) to their quality of life, and that seniors can live safely, independently, and comfortably in the area (94%). However, senior residents are less likely to “strongly agree” that the overall character of the Town should continue like it is today.

Facilities and Services

- The facilities and services with the highest “good” and “excellent” ratings among Sterling residents (selected by at least eight in ten respondents) were fire protection/EMS/ambulance services (87%), garbage service/recycling (86%), schools (83%) and street and road maintenance/snow plowing (80%).
- Facilities like library services and cell services were the lowest ranked services among Sterling residents, with over one-third of respondents selecting “poor” for these services. Senior residents are less likely to rate cell services as “excellent” compared to their younger counterparts.
- Over half (51%) of the respondents in Sterling indicated that the most important function of the Town was to preserve the small-town character, which was the top-ranked function among the list of functions in the question. Other top functions included measures to plan for and maintain roads and infrastructure (selected by 45% of residents) and to ensure public safety (selected by 42% of residents). Seniors are less likely than younger residents to select preservation of small-town character as the most important function.

Housing

- About 98% of respondents in the Town of Sterling indicated that they would prefer to own a home in the next five years, including residents who are currently homeowners.
- Larger, single-family homes are not only the most prevalent current type of housing, with over half (54%) of respondents living in one, but also the most preferred type of housing among residents, with over half (58%) stating that they would prefer to live in one.
- Over nine in ten residents in Sterling indicated that they were satisfied with the location (95%), size (94%), and affordability (94%) of their current housing. Around nine in ten (88%) were also satisfied with the condition of their current housing. Low-income households are less likely to be satisfied with the location and size of their current housing compared to higher income households. Senior residents are less likely to be satisfied with the condition of their current housing compared to younger residents.
- Over eight in ten (88%) respondents stated that they did not need financial assistance with housing costs.
- About two-thirds (66%) of respondents indicated that the quality and appearance of housing in the Town of Sterling was either “excellent” or “good”, with only 6% of respondents who selected “excellent”. Senior residents are less likely to be satisfied with the housing quality than younger residents.

Transportation

- A majority (70%) of the residents from Sterling indicated that the condition of local roads were “excellent” or “good”, but only 12% of respondents classified local road conditions as “excellent”.
- Over nine in ten (94%) residents agreed that the overall road network in the Town meets the needs of its residents.
- Over six in ten (67%) respondents agreed that the Towns of Sterling and Cushing should work together to create ATV/UTV connections in the Town. Low-income residents are less likely to strongly agree that the Towns should work together to create ATV/UTV connections compared to higher income residents.
- Over two-fifths (44%) of the residents disagreed that there should be more off-road biking and walking trails in Sterling and over half (56%) disagreed that there should be more biking and walking lanes along public roadways.

Natural and Cultural Resources

- Over two-thirds of residents indicated that it is “very important” to preserve the area's groundwater (77%), lakes, rivers and streams (73%), and air quality (69%). Meanwhile, more than three in ten residents stated that becoming a more environmentally sustainable community (32%) is either only “somewhat important” or “not at all important”.
- Well over half (61%) of residents with a private well indicated that their water had been tested for bacteria and nitrates in the last three years. Among those who got their wells tested, only 6% indicated that the tests concluded that the level of nitrates present is considered not safe by the EPA, while 69% stated that this safety level was met for their private wells.
- Over half (56%) of Sterling residents stated that they “agree” or “strongly agree” with the need for additional public outdoor recreational opportunities in the region. However, a large percentage of residents also disagreed, with over two-fifths (43%) expressing disagreement.

Land Use and Growth

- Over seven in ten (76%) residents of Sterling supported the statement that the Town of Sterling should seek agreements with the Town of Cushing on future land use and growth.
- At least half of the respondents from the Town of Sterling “strongly agreed” that maintaining the Town’s rural character is important (53%) and that quality of life and property values from impacts of activities or development on neighboring properties (53%) should be protected. Female residents are more likely than male residents to “strongly agree” that maintaining the Town’s rural character is important.
- On the other hand, about 43% of the residents disagreed that landowners should be allowed to develop land any way they want. Senior residents are less likely than younger residents to strongly agree that landowners should be allowed to develop land any way that they want.
- The most popular locations for future housing development among the residents of Sterling are near the Town of Cushing (46%) and scattered along Town and County roads (23%).
- A large majority of Sterling residents (69%) are in favor of a traditional design for housing development over an open space/cluster design.
- Around nine in ten (89%) residents of the Town of Sterling do not plan to sell their property for residential or commercial development.

Economic Development

- A little less than half of residents from the Town of Sterling “agree” or “strongly agree” that the Town should support alternative energy as a form of economic development (47%) and that more new businesses and light industry are needed (45%).
- About two-thirds (68%) of residents disagreed that the Town should use incentives to recruit or promote new business and industry. Over half (59%) of the residents disagreed that salvage and junkyards should be allowed to operate in Sterling.
- A large majority of residents agreed that new home-based businesses (92%) and agriculture related businesses and ag-tourism (88%) are appropriate for the region. On the other hand, over half of the respondents agreed that manufacturing and warehousing development (64%) and technology related developments (57%) are inappropriate for the area. Senior residents are less likely than younger residents to “strongly agree” that technology related developments are appropriate for the region.
- Over two-fifths of residents stated that they want to see new development near existing commercial and industrial development (43%) and near the Town of Cushing (41%). Only 10% of residents stated that development can occur anywhere in Town. Senior residents are more likely than younger ones to select near the Town of Cushing as a preference for new development.

Agriculture

- Nearly half (48%) of the residents answered that large-scale farming should not be allowed in the Town and around two-fifths (40%) stated that large-scale farming should be restricted to areas designated for agricultural use. Only 12% stated that it should be allowed anywhere in Town. Female residents are less likely than male residents to support large scale farming anywhere in Sterling.
- A majority of residents agreed that local agricultural products should be encouraged and marketed locally (97%) and that too much farmland is being converted to non-farming uses (72%), and over three-quarters (75%) disagreed that conflicts between farms and neighbors are common in the Town. Female residents are more likely than male residents to “strongly agree” that local agriculture should be encouraged and marketed locally.
- Over one in four (28%) residents indicated that they own farmland in the Town, either farmed by the residents or leased/rented for farming. Senior residents are more likely than younger residents to own farmland.