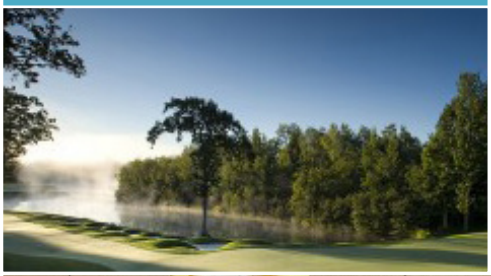
Mecosta County

Community Needs and Opportunities: A Conversation Opener



What is it like living today in **Mecosta County** – and what **opportunities** and **challenges** face us as we forge a future together? What **resources** can we tap to move our community ahead?

This is a conversation worth having. The facts, figures and perspective offered in this report are meant to help open that conversation. Armed with insights about your community, you can begin a community process that includes setting bold goals and harnessing all your resources to help the residents of Mecosta County get ahead, stay ahead and leave behind a stronger community for their children.

October 2016

MECOSTA COUNTY COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

An affiliate of Fremont Area Community Foundation

Mecosta County Community Foundation (MCCF) is dedicated to giving together to enhance our community. Through permanent endowments, the Community Foundation addresses needs in the areas of arts and culture, education, health, nature conservation/the environment, community development, historical resources, and social services. Mecosta County Community Foundation is a geographic affiliate of Fremont Area Community Foundation. Fremont Area Community Foundation manages MCCF's assets while a local advisory board reviews grant proposals and recommends funding. For more information about either community foundation, visit facommunityfoundation.org or call 231.924.5350.

Center for Rural Entrepreneurship

energizing entrepreneurial communities

The **Center for Rural Entrepreneurship** helps community leaders build a prosperous future by supporting and empowering business, social and civic entrepreneurs. With its roots and hearts in rural America, the Center helps communities of all sizes and interests by bringing together research, community engagement and strategy development. The Center's Solution Area Teams empower communities to discover their own answers to the challenges and opportunities they face.

THE ASPEN INSTITUTE Community Strategies Group

The **Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group** helps rural, urban and suburban communities act together to create more vibrant regions that advance and sustain prosperity and wellbeing for local people, places and firms, including those on the economic margins. Aspen CSG connects community and economic development leaders across the nation and equips them with good ideas, tools and strategies to improve results and prospects for their regions.

Table of Contents

	Section Topic	In this section....
1	What resources can Mecosta County tap to support community betterment?	This special analysis by the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship was commissioned by the Fremont Area Community Foundation for Mecosta County and the entire region.
2	What do we think about Mecosta County?	This section features the responses to a 20-question public survey of residents in Mecosta County. The survey was open for anyone to answer from May 5th through June 3rd, 2016.
3	Who is living in Mecosta County?	Each of these four sections profiles recent data on five factors related to the topic of the section. It explains why each measure is important, and highlights a key point or two. The underlying facts and figures all come from publicly available sources, like the US Census, the State of Michigan and other agencies that conduct research across the country.
4	How are Mecosta County's people doing?	
5	How is Mecosta County's economy doing?	
6	How is Mecosta County, the place, doing?	

Using this Booklet as a Conversation Guide

Please use this booklet with local organizations, groups, family or neighbors to start a discussion about how Mecosta County is doing today, and what we might want to address together to make the County an even better place tomorrow – to live, work and raise a family.

There are reflection questions at the end of each section – and some Overall Priority Questions on the back cover. We encourage you to work with local groups or neighbors to answer the reflection questions individually, and then share your answers with each other before you answer the Overall Priority Questions.

The Mecosta County Community Foundation wants to better target its grantmaking and action on priorities set by the community. So the Community Foundation is eager to hear from any group or individual who has used this guide. We would especially like to hear:

- When you used it – and with what group and how many people.
- Your group's answers to the Overall Priority Questions.
- Any other ideas you have about the top priorities people in our area should take on together that will build a better future for Mecosta County.

Please send the Mecosta County Community Foundation your ideas – contact details are on the back cover.

About the Data

This report is intended to start a conversation about community opportunities and needs. As a result, the data included provides a general overview of the county's people, the place and the economy using simple graphs and estimates.

Every indicator is listed with its date and data source. If a particular indicator interests you, we recommend accessing the original data source. The source will provide additional information including margins of error and more nuanced discussion on how to interpret the estimates. This is particularly helpful for smaller communities where estimates can be less accurate.

If you want someone to help organize or facilitate a group conversation or discussion, help is available! Please contact Maria Gonzalez at 231.924.5350 or at mgonzalez@facommunityfoundation.org.

1 What resources can Mecosta County tap to support community betterment?

Finding the resources to support community development is a pressing challenge. But, every community has financial assets that, when developed and managed properly, can create a lasting community impact. How big is that opportunity?

Resources for Development

Successful communities regularly reinvest in themselves. In Mecosta County, community philanthropy represents one of the most underdeveloped resources for furthering community betterment projects and programs. One important way of assessing a community's capacity to give is a region's **Transfer of Wealth** (TOW). TOW measures how much wealth will pass from the estate of one generation to the next.

Current and former residents who care deeply about their hometown are likely interested in using or leaving some of what they have to support community betterment now and in the future. Giving from one's accumulated wealth or estate creates a permanent legacy that supports the hometown forever. Understanding the tremendous size of the community's TOW is the first step in capturing its potential for community development.

Mecosta County's Transfer of Wealth

$532,000,000

will transfer between generations in the next 10 years

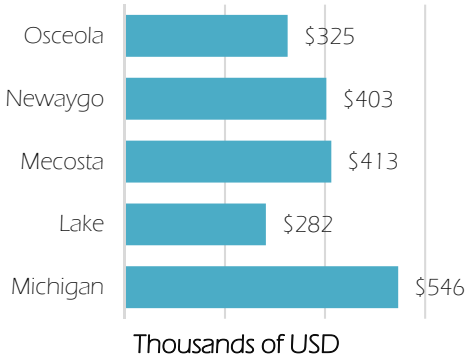
$26,600,000

is 5%, which, if captured to support community betterment, could generate $1.3 million annually

$13,000,000

is what the community could generate over a decade if it captures and endows just 5%. Imagine what that could do for your community!

a. Average household net worth



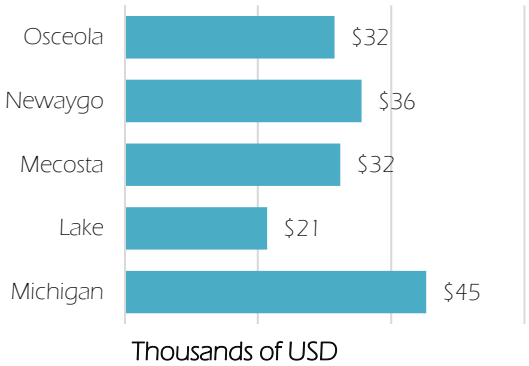
Why it matters: Many communities and community residents see themselves as poor and believe they don't have the financial means to make their place better. Understanding that every community—even your community—has wealth, can shift attitudes from "the glass is half empty" to "the glass is half full" and motivate action.

How the county stacks up: Mecosta County has lower average household current net worth when compared to Michigan but is comparable to other counties in this region. In 2015, 9.9% of permanent resident households are classified as high net worth with estates averaging greater than $2 million.

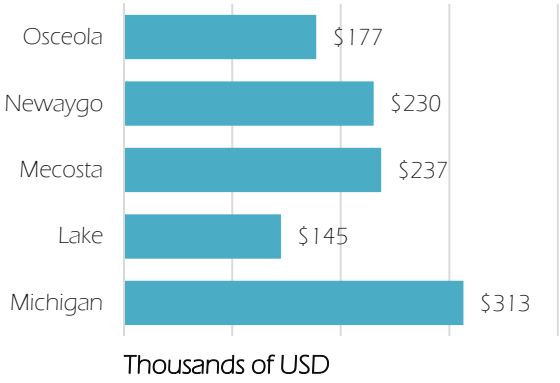
b. 10-year TOW Opportunity (per household)

Why it matters: Understanding how much wealth is likely to transfer in the short term is important to communities. This allows communities to set specific goals to work toward for how much they want to try to secure in an endowment for the community. Communities with specific endowment-building goals tend to do better in achieving or exceeding them.

How the county stacks up: Over the coming decade (2015-2025), $532 million in household wealth will transfer from one generation to the next. This equals $32,000 per household on average. Mecosta County has significant philanthropic opportunity over the current decade.



c. 50-year TOW Opportunity (per household)



Why it matters: Understanding how much wealth will transfer over a longer term is also important. It can motivate communities to take a more proactive approach to economic development. This allows communities to envision where they want to be in the long term and to start building a pool of funding to achieve their vision.

How the county stacks up: The estimated transfer of wealth opportunity for Mecosta County over the next two generations (2015-2065) is a remarkable $3.9 billion, which equals $237,000 per household. Investing in community philanthropy today can position the county to grow significant community endowments over the coming years.

Trends and Data of Note

- The transfer of wealth estimates for Mecosta County are conservative – because they reflect only measures of permanent resident household wealth, which do not include corporate or former resident wealth.
- Other likely donors that would contribute to community endowments in Mecosta County include:
    - **Regular Seasonal Residents.** Every year, Mecosta County's population grows significantly as seasonal visitors come to the County to enjoy its lakes, rivers and forests. Many of these visitors are "regulars" with deep ties to their seasonal homes. There is donor potential among these regular seasonal residents.
    - **Former Residents.** For years, many of Mecosta County's young people have been graduating and moving outside of the County. Many of these first-generation former residents have become successful in work and life and represent a significant potential donor group who continue to care about their hometown.
    - **Land Wealth.** Cash may be tight but significant wealth is held in the County's land. Land-wealth-based charitable giving is a major opportunity for this community.
    - **Closely-Held Family Businesses.** Additional wealth can be found in closely-held family businesses. These locally-owned, rooted businesses are run by residents who care about the community and have the capacity to give back.
    - **Thrifty Retirees.** Every community has people who work hard, spend less than they make, invest well and, over time, create modest estates. The County's Thrifty Retirees have both motivation and capacity to give back to the community they love.

Discussion Questions

1.1 What one or two things most **surprised** you in this data about the Transfer of Wealth?

1.2 What one trend, fact or idea in this data and discussion gives you the most **hope** for the county?

1.3 What one trend, fact or idea in this data and discussion causes you the most **concern** – for any reason?

2 What do we think about Mecosta County?

Everybody has thoughts and opinions about their community. Taken together, local opinions can offer a "reality check" on what is working and what is not.

From May 5th to June 3rd, 2016 the Mecosta County Community Foundation, Lake County Community Foundation, Osceola County Community Foundation and Fremont Area Community Foundation fielded a survey in their four home counties. The survey responses both identify regional trends and highlight opportunities and challenges in each specific county.

Demographics of **Mecosta County** Responses

- 249 surveys were collected from county residents; 77% were from women and 23% were from men.
- 34% of respondents have lived in the area less than 10 years; 25% have lived in the area 30 years or more.
- 6% of respondents consider themselves part-time residents; 94% live in the area full-time.
- 78% of respondents were 35 or older (51% of the county's population is younger than 35).

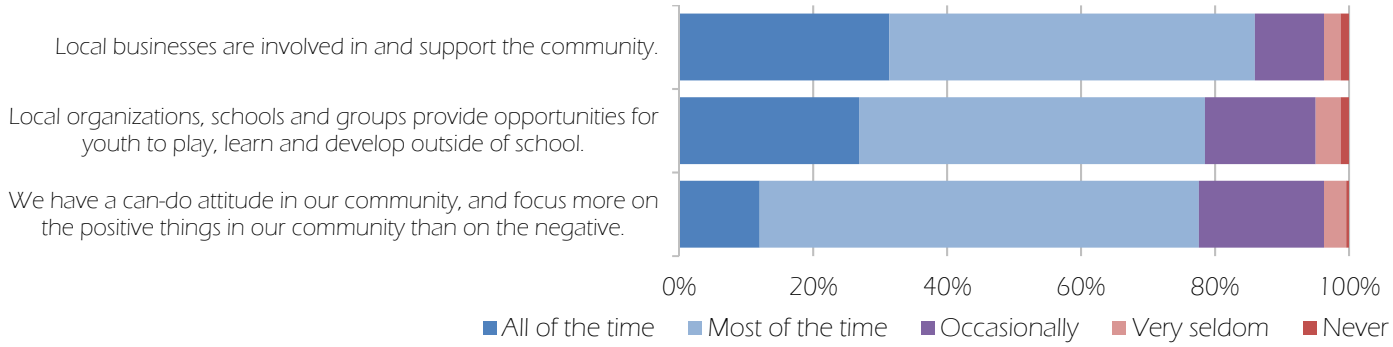
Demographics of **All** Survey Responses

- 1,030 surveys were collected throughout the area; 75% were from women and 25% were from men.
- 28% of respondents have lived in the area less than 10 years; 30% have lived in the region 30 years or more.
- 7% of respondents consider themselves part-time residents; 93% live in the area full-time.
- 74% of respondents were 35 or older (45% of the region's population is younger than 35).

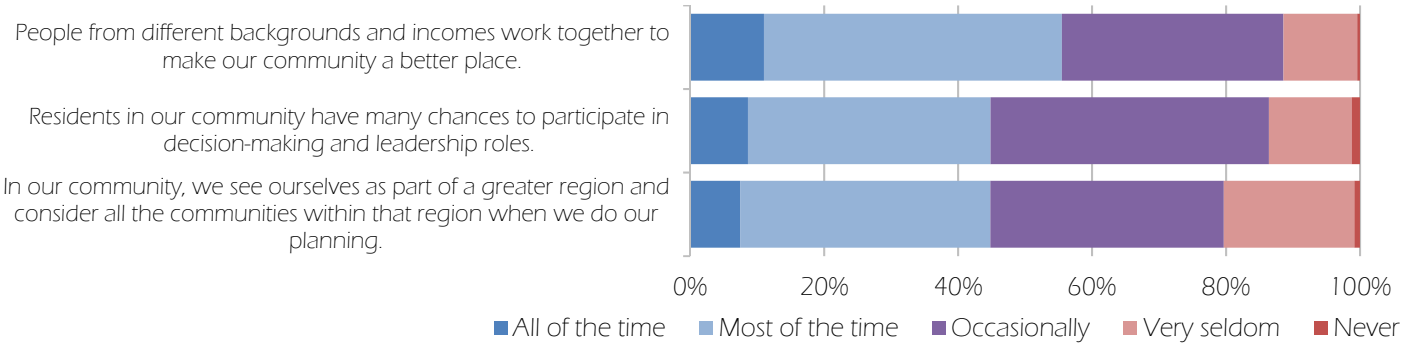
a. Ranking community strengths and weaknesses

All survey takers were presented with the same 17 positive statements about their community and were asked if the statements were always, mostly, occasionally, very seldom, or never true.

Statements rated as always or mostly true by the highest percent of residents:



Statements rated as occasionally, very seldom or never true by the highest percent of residents:



b. Open-ended reflections

Based on your experience, what are the one or two very best things about living in your community?

People/community character (46%)
Respondents said that the people within the community and the character of the community were among its best assets.

The weather & environment (29%)
Respondents listed the weather, the lakes & parks and the small town environment as quality benefits of the community.

Size (28%)
Respondents said that the "small size" or "small-town living/atmosphere" was one of the best things about their community.

Schools (14%)
Respondents listed schools and the school system as community strengths.

Convenience/access to amenities (10%)
Respondents said that their town has - or has easy access to - a variety of amenities, such as shopping/dining, medical services, entertainment and higher education institutions. Many said they liked living in a small town with convenient access to amenities in larger cities.

What are the one or two most challenging things about living in your community?

Lack of amenities (37%)
Respondents cited a lack of amenities, such as shopping, dining, and medical facilities as one of the most challenging things in their community. Many cited having to travel to find what they need.

Cliques/unwelcoming (16%)
Respondents noted that community residents seemed "cliquey" and "unwelcoming" to those who did not grow up in the community.

Jobs/economy (8%)
Respondents cited a lack of jobs or "the economy" as the most challenging thing about their community. Many said that there are not enough "well-paying" or "professional" jobs available.

Housing/infrastructure (7%)
Respondents said that failing infrastructure and a lack of housing (sometimes "affordable" housing) were the most challenging things about their community.

Amenities for youth & families (7%)
Respondents said that the lack of family-friendly activities and opportunities for youth to engage was a challenge.

If you could wave a magic wand to change just one thing in your community, what would it be?

More amenities (25%)
Respondents wanted to bring more restaurants, shopping destinations, and entertainment venues to the community. Some mentioned specific chains that they hoped would open in the community while others were more general and expressed desire for a vibrant business district with activities for families.

Infrastructure (9%)
Respondents wanted to develop the necessary infrastructure to better utilize abandoned buildings and maintain roads.

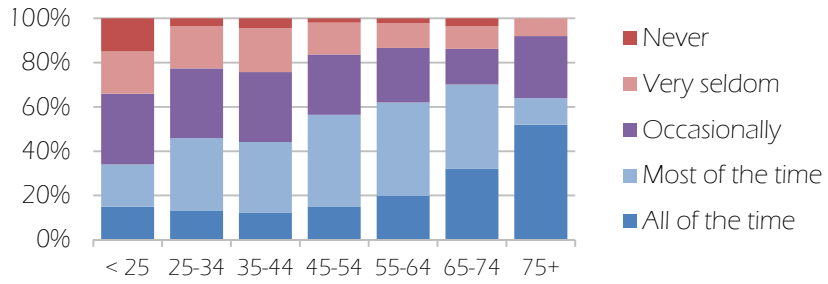
Different jobs, better economy (8%)
Respondents wanted to bring more jobs and a greater variety of jobs into the community to better the economy and raise the earnings of residents.

Nurture pride, civic engagement (6%)
Respondents wrote about fixing a wide range of resident morale challenges they see hindering community advancement.

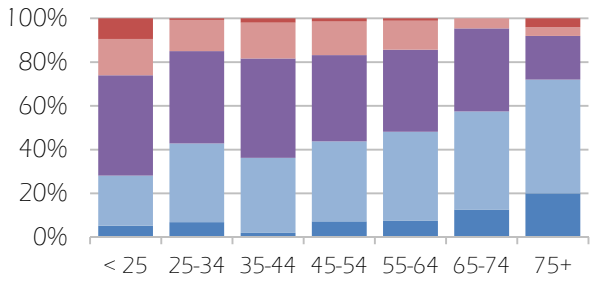
Physical fitness opportunities (8%)
Respondents noted that the community needs to offer more options and opportunities for fitness activities.

c. Regional demographic trends of note

Our community offers a good amount of arts, entertainment and recreation for our residents.*



As we work on community issues, we welcome questions, new and different perspectives, and alternative approaches to doing things.*



*These graphs aggregate responses from several counties in the region.

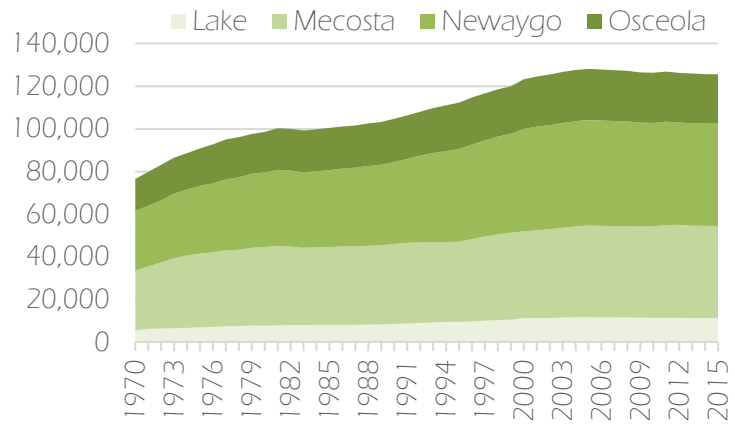
Discussion Questions

1. What one or two things most **surprised** you in this data about the area?
2. What one trend, fact or idea in this data and discussion gives you the most **hope** for the area?
3. What one trend, fact or idea in this data and discussion causes you the most **concern**?
4. Which fact in this data would you most like to **change** – and why?

3 Who is living in Mecosta County?

Any examination or conversation about a community starts with a few key facts about who is living here now – and how that is different from the past and might soon change.

a. Population



Why it matters: Changes in a region's population can signal economic activity, expansion or contraction of sectors or institutions, and migration trends. Population shifts can also bring to light potential opportunities and challenges – like growth, decline, need for housing, schools and the like.

How the county stacks up: After modest population growth during the 1970 to mid-2000s, Mecosta County is now experiencing a decline in growth. 2005 through 2014 shows the slowest population growth of any decade since 1970.

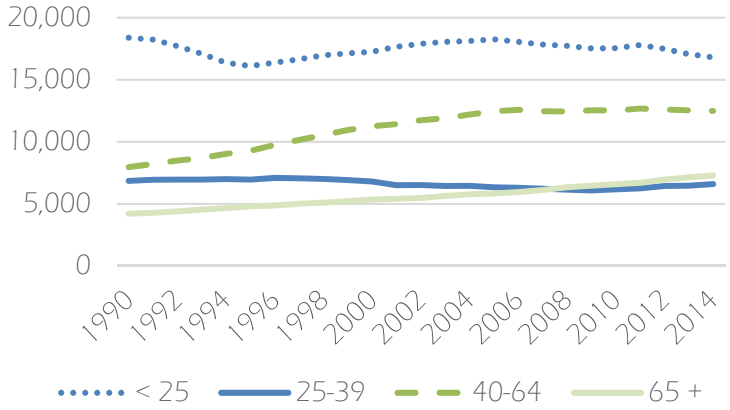
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Population Estimates Program, 2016

b. Age composition

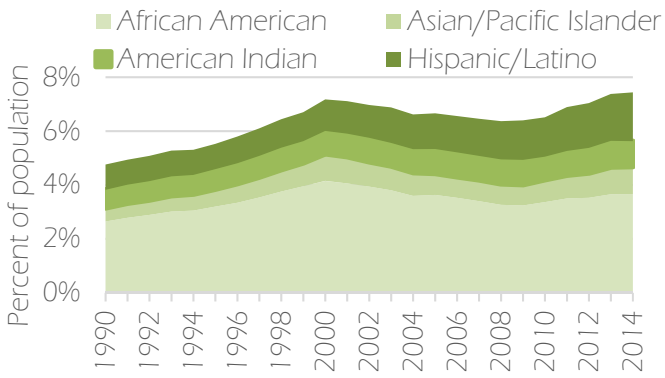
Why it matters: A population with balanced age groups is an indicator of community health and vitality. Do families think this is a good place to have children? As young people grow up, do they find the education, amenities and employment to build a life? And as they age, do they have the support and community culture they need and want to stay here?

How the county stacks up: The under-25 age cohort displays fluctuations over this period. Both the 40-64 and 65 plus age cohorts display growth. After declining from 1990 through the late 2000s, the 25-39 age cohort is now showing signs of growth.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Population Estimates Program, 2016



c. Racial and ethnic diversity



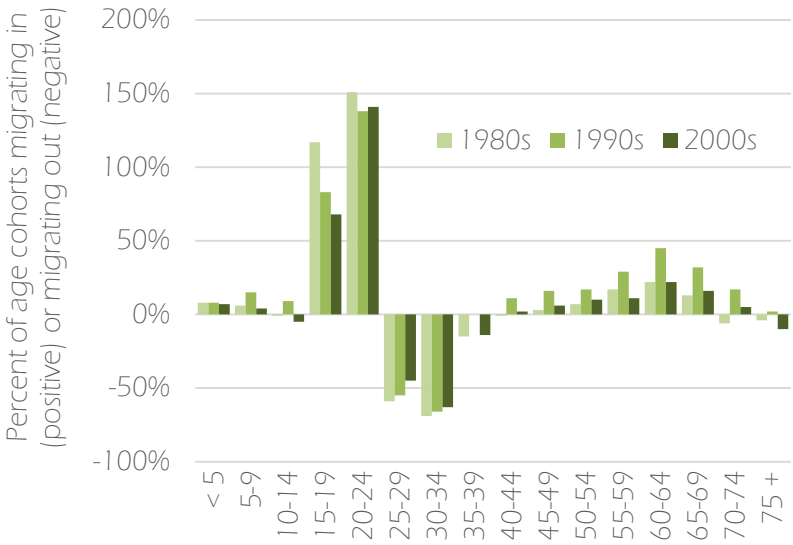
Why it matters: One dynamic demographic trend shaping our country's future is that our communities are becoming more diverse. New neighbors are more likely to be Hispanic/Latino or African American.

How the county stacks up: Mecosta County has limited racial diversity. The population is predominately White (non-Hispanic). However, that diversity has grown by 40% from its1990 proportion of 5% to more than 7% in 2014. Growth in the Hispanic/Latino population accounts for much of that increase.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Population Estimates Program, 2016

*Hispanic/Latino, for this graph, means residents who identify racially as White but ethnically as Hispanic/Latino.

d. Net migration



Why it matters: Residents moving out of a region subtracted from new residents moving in define its net migration. Big changes in net migration for any age group can signal significant shifts in a region's future.

How the county stacks up: Mecosta County has a very typical "higher education town" migration pattern – a sharp rise in college-age residents and a deep outmigration following graduation. There is modest in-migration for those between 40 and 65 followed by a loss of seniors. For comparison, in the 2000s, statewide net migration was negative for almost all age groups.

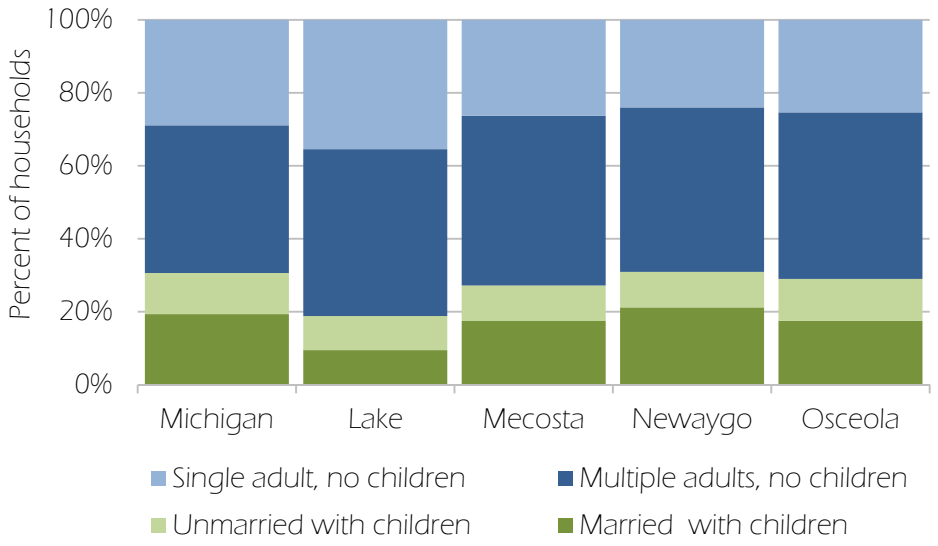
Source: Center for Demography and Ecology, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2013

e. Household structure

Why it matters: The wide range of household types that exist today reflects emerging trends in American society. For example, there are fewer married couples with children and more single-adult households. Different household types may call for different services and may signal future trends or changes in the community.

How the county stacks up: About 75% of the households in Mecosta County have no children living in them, though a larger proportion of those have more than one adult in them. Nearly one in five households are married with children.

Source: American Community Survey 5-year estimates, 2014



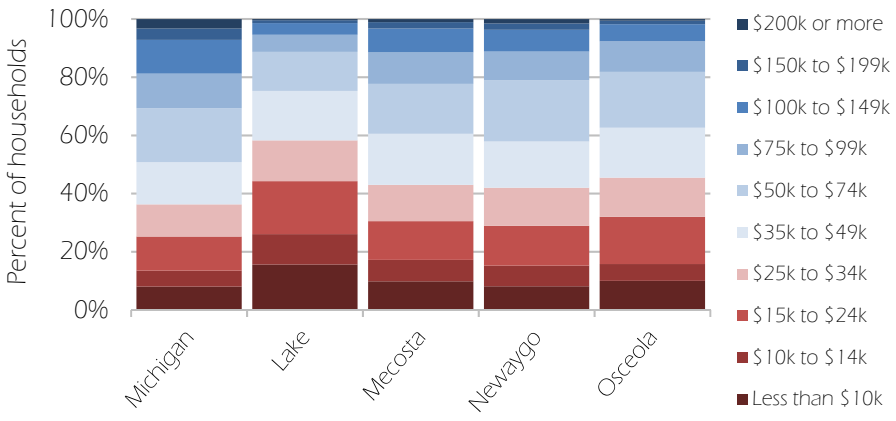
Discussion Questions

1. What one or two things most **surprised** you in this data about who is living in the county?
2. What one trend in this data gives you the most **hope** for the county?
3. What one trend in this data causes you the most **concern** – for any reason?
4. Which fact in this data would you most like to **change** – and why?

4 How are Mecosta County's people doing?

Once you understand who lives in a region, you must consider how those people are doing—looking at income, assets, education, and health.

a. Household income distribution



Why it matters: Household income provides a general indicator of well-being of its members. It correlates with health, educational outcomes and happiness.

How the county stacks up: About 43% of households in the County earn less than $35,000, which is 150% of poverty for a household of four. At the other end, Mecosta is second only to Newaygo as the wealthiest county in the region.

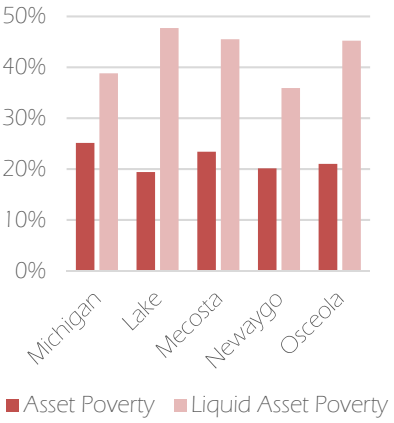
Source: American Community Survey 5-year estimates, 2014

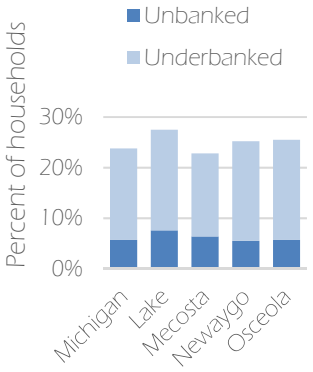
b. Households and assets

Why it matters: New poverty measures assess if households have sufficient resources to subsist at the poverty level for three months without income. Asset poverty is calculated using net worth, while liquid poverty is calculated using liquid assets like cash and stocks. Unbanked households don't have bank accounts, and underbanked households use non-traditional financial tools like payday loans.

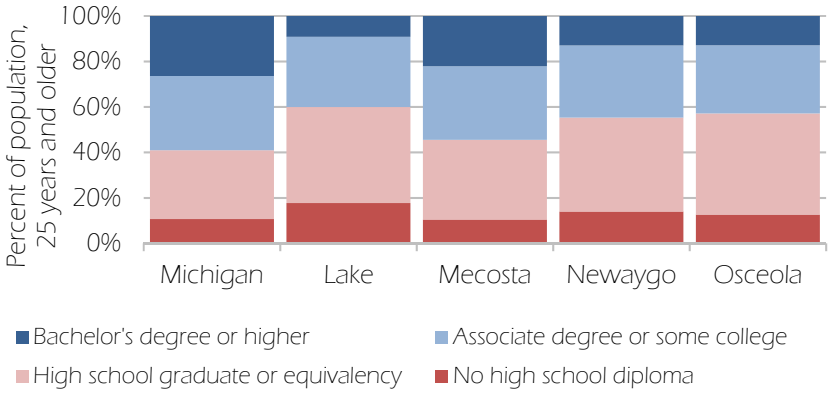
How the county stacks up: Nearly one-quarter of the households in Mecosta County are asset-poor (the highest rate in the region), 46% are liquid-asset-poor, 6% don't have bank accounts, and 16% use non-traditional financial tools.

Source: CFED, Assets and Opportunity Local Data Center, 2016





c. Educational attainment

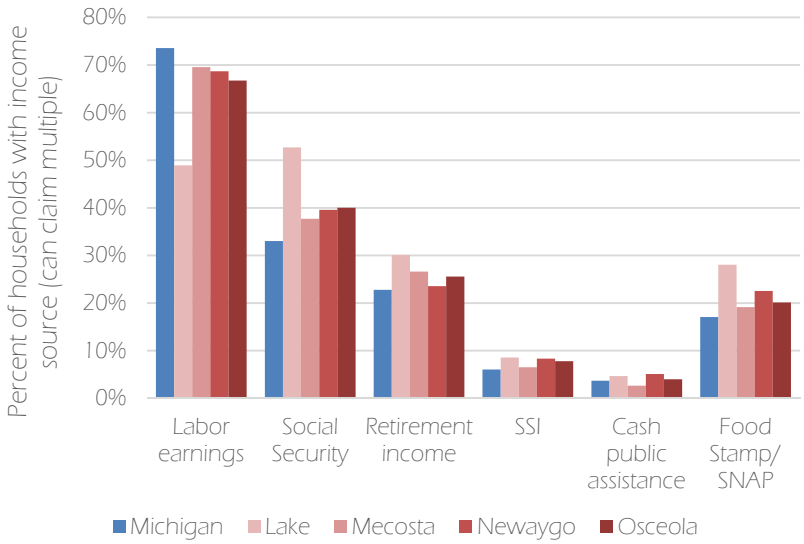


Why it matters: A leading factor shaping any economy is educational attainment. Higher education levels within a community typically result in higher incomes, more wealth formation and even healthier residents.

How the county stacks up: About 46% of residents over 25 have no college coursework or degree. One-in-five residents have a bachelor's degree or higher, the highest percentage in the region.

Source: American Community Survey 5-year estimates, 2014

d. Labor and non-labor earnings



Why it matters: Labor earnings include income generated by working. Other forms of income represent retirement income from investments and transfer payments associated with Social Security, farm programs and those receiving help due to illness, insufficient wage income, or unemployment.

How the county stacks up: About 70% of households in Mecosta County claim labor earnings, 38% claim Social Security, 27% claim some other form of retirement income, 7% claim Supplemental Security Income, just 3% claim cash public assistance, and 19% participate in SNAP.

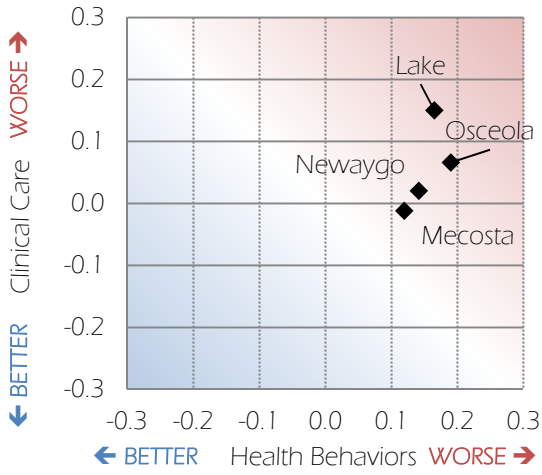
Source: American Community Survey 5-year estimates, 2014

e. Health Factors

Why it matters: Indicators like health status, happiness and attitude shed light on people's current and future well-being. County Health Rankings and Roadmaps assigns counties a standardized health behavior score (the Michigan average score is 0) taking into account factors such as obesity, smoking and sexually transmitted infection rates. It also assigns a clinical care score including factors such as the ratio of residents to doctors and dentists, and rate of preventative care screenings.

How the county stacks up: Of Michigan's 83 ranked counties, Mecosta County ranks 54th for health factors. Most concerning are the county's lack of access to healthy foods, limited access to exercise opportunities, and rate of alcohol-impaired driving deaths.

Source: Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, County Health Rankings and Roadmaps, 2016



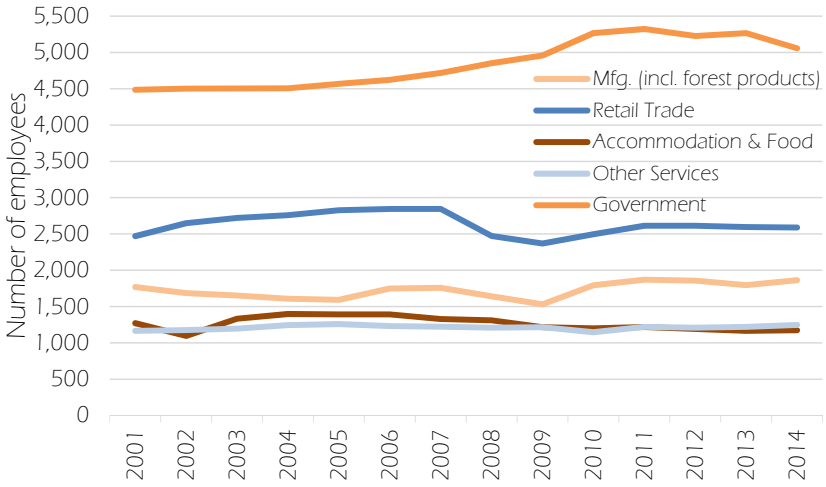
Discussion Questions

1. What one or two things most **surprised** you in this data about how people are doing in the county?
2. What one trend in this data gives you the most **hope** for the county?
3. What one trend in this data causes you the most **concern** – for any reason?
4. Which fact in this data would you most like to **change** – and why?

5 How is Mecosta County's economy doing?

The factors that drive or drain a local economy – specific industry sectors, the labor force participation of residents, the sources of the income people spend – all affect the future.

a. Largest employment sectors



Why it matters: Every economy has a unique set of industry sectors. Understanding which sectors drive a local economy is essential to understanding how the region will perform economically in the future.

How the county stacks up: Government is the largest employer in the county followed by retail trade, manufacturing, and tourism-related accommodations and food service. Overall, employment is relatively flat with a loss of government workers in recent years.

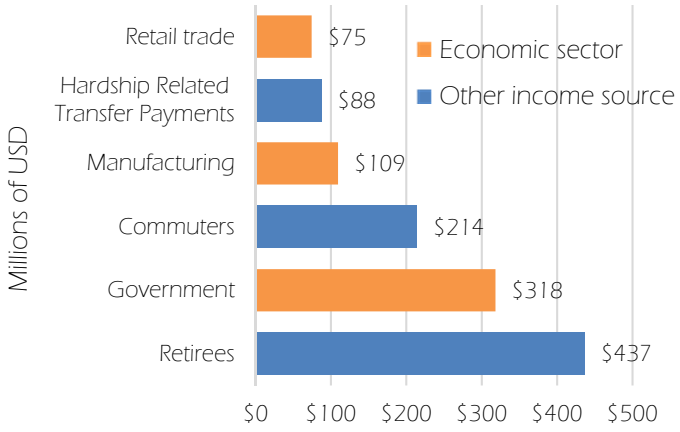
Source: Headwaters Economics, Economic Profile System, 2016

b. Income by source

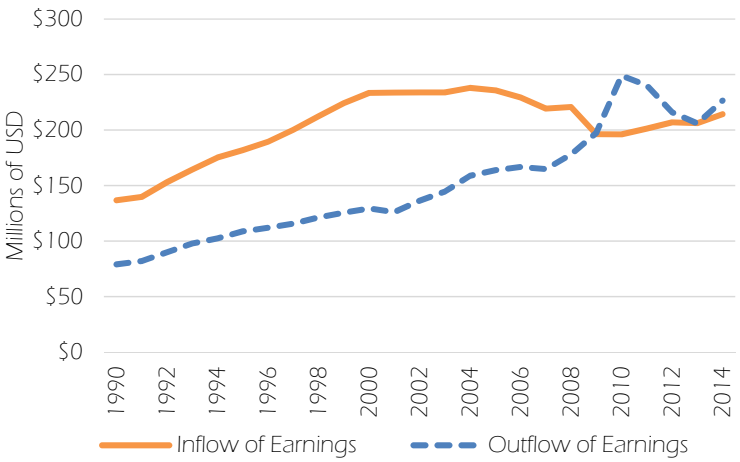
Why it matters: Another way to understand a region's economy is by looking at which sectors produce the most income. Depending on local wages, sectors with relatively few employees can be responsible for a large portion of economic activity.

How the county stacks up: Based on household earnings, the largest economic driver in the county are retirees followed by government, commuters, manufacturing and Hardship Related Transfer Payments (Medicaid, public assistance, unemployment, etc.). Government earnings are higher in part due to the location of Ferris State University in the community.

Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis, Regional Economic Accounts, 2015



c. Inflow and outflow of earnings

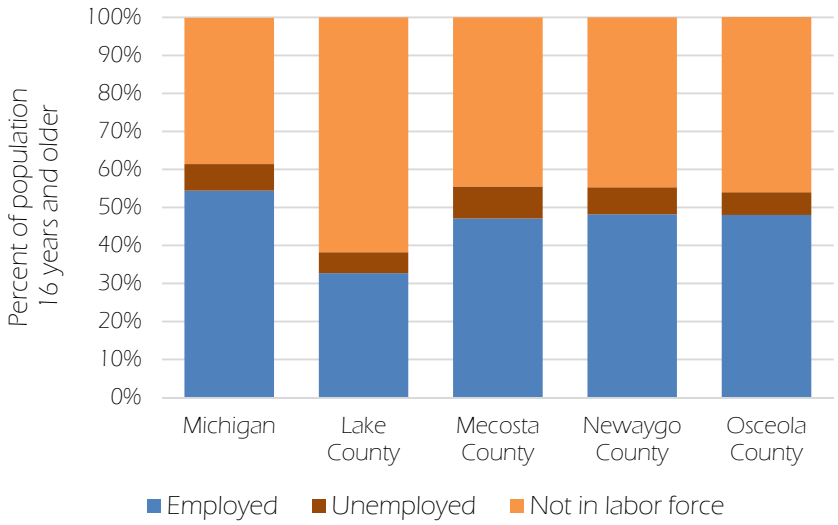


Why it matters: Many Americans commute to work, entertainment and shopping. People who work in Mecosta County but live in another county tend to spend more of their paycheck in the county where they live, creating an "outflow of earnings" – and vice versa.

How the county stacks up: Inflow earnings (those living in the county and working outside of the county) declined in the early part of the decade and are now rising once again as the regional economy recovers. Outflow earnings (those living outside of the county and working in the county) rose sharply between 1970 and 2010, declined for a short while and are now growing again.

Source: Headwaters Economics, Economic Profile System, 2016

d. Labor force participation



Why it matters: Aging communities and communities experiencing economic distress typically have lower labor force participation rates. Conversely, communities that are growing, younger and doing better economically have higher labor force participation rates and lower unemployment rates.

How the county stacks up: Labor force participation is slightly lower when compared to Michigan, with a large share of the population either not in the labor force or unemployed. The county is aging, which accounts for the relatively high values not in the labor force.

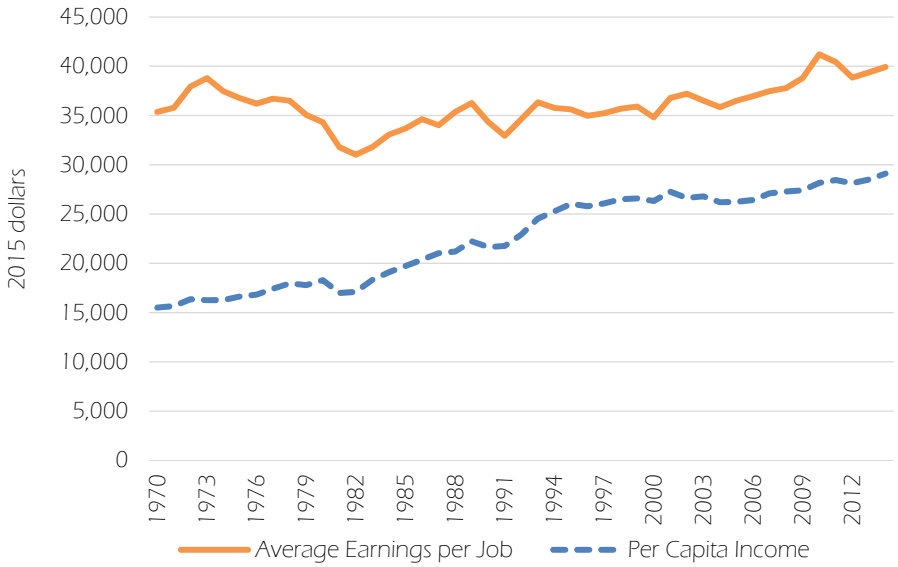
Source: American Community Survey 5-year estimates, 2014

e. Average earnings and income

Why it matters: Average earnings per job is a measure of the average compensation per job and an indicator of the quality of local employment. Per capita income is a measure of income per person (from all sources) and a measure of economic well-being.

How the county stacks up: Both per capita income (total personal income divided by total population) and average earnings per job have been increasing in real or inflation adjusted dollars. Growing average earnings is a positive sign that economic well-being is increasing.

Source: Headwaters Economics, Economic Profile System, 2016



Discussion Questions

1. What one or two things most **surprised** you in this data about how the county's economy is doing?

2. What one trend in this data gives you the most **hope** for the county?

3. What one trend in this data causes you the most **concern** – for any reason?

4. Which fact in this data would you most like to **change** – and why?

6 How is Mecosta County, the place, doing?

The natural resources, buildings and amenities in a place, as well as where people live and shop, make a difference in the community's quality of life.

a. Environmental quality

	Air	Water	Land	Built
Lake	13th	11th	7th	57th
Mecosta	46th	59th	36th	36th
Newaygo	37th	4th	21st	4th
Osceola	23rd	47th	16th	39th

Rankings out of MI's 83 counties – #1 is best; #83 is worst

Why it matters: The Environmental Quality Index (assessed from 2000-2005) provides counties a way to gauge their long-term environmental wellbeing and to understand its influence on the quality of life for residents. Here we include four domains from the index: air (air quality data and measures of toxins), water (contaminant incidents, drought, tap water quality), land (pesticides, brownfields), and built (housing quality, recreational opportunities, road distance).

How the county stacks up: Mecosta County, compared to neighboring counties, has the lowest ranks in air, water and land quality measures. On air and water quality measures, Mecosta County ranks in the bottom half of Michigan's counties.

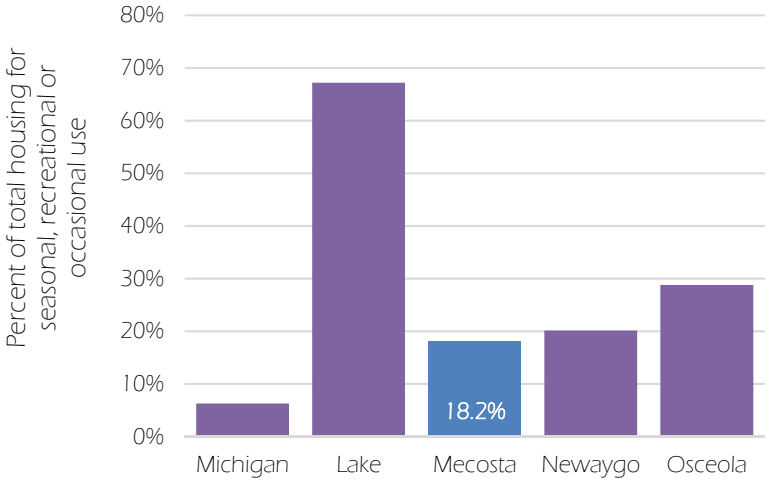
Source: Environmental Protection Agency, Environmental Quality Index, 2013

b. Seasonal homes

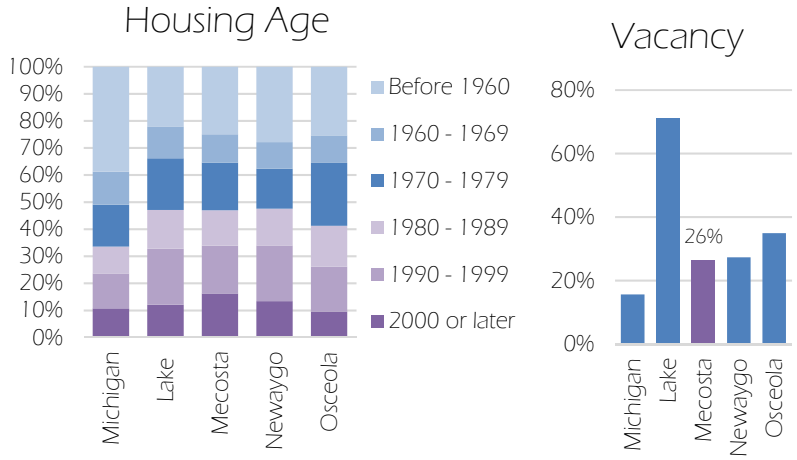
Why it matters: This region of Michigan is home to a wonderful mix of natural resources including rivers, lakes and forests. For years, it has been a desirable seasonal home location for people from outside the region. During certain seasons, large number of visitors take up residence in seasonal homes, greatly expanding the county's population base and economic activity.

How the county stacks up: Nearly one in five housing units in Mecosta County are seasonal homes. The county's population increases significantly as visitors fill these seasonal homes, increasing economic activity primarily in the warmer summer months.

Source: American Community Survey 5-year estimates, 2014



c. Housing age and vacancy

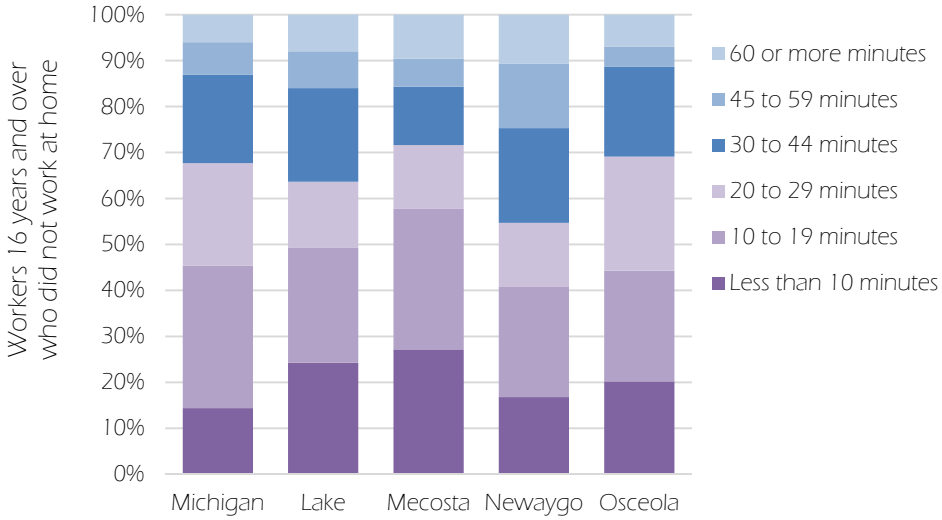


Why it matters: Housing age and vacancy are rough measures of housing quality and housing costs – older homes require more upkeep, and vacant homes can deteriorate and reduce housing value. Alternatively, very low vacancy rates can be a sign of housing shortages and an affordability crisis.

How the county stacks up: Mecosta County has a somewhat younger housing stock when compared to Michigan. The county's housing age is comparable to other counties within the region. 26% of housing units are vacant, largely due to seasonal and student-related housing.

Source: American Community Survey 5-year estimates, 2014

d. Commuting to work



Why it matters: Many Americans commute to work, entertainment and shopping. Commuting might mean more access to jobs. It can also be a sign that economic activity is occurring elsewhere, taking dollars and resources to a neighboring community.

How the county stacks up: Mecosta County has the shortest commuting time to work of any of the four counties and when compared to Michigan averages.

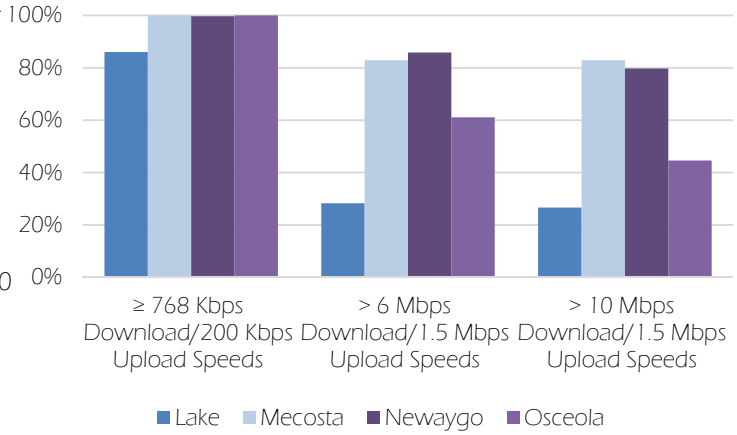
Source: American Community Survey 5-year estimates, 2014

e. Broadband access

Why it matters: Broadband access is increasing across the United States, but many rural areas are being left behind. According to the Council of Economic Advisors, broadband has many socio-economic benefits including improved labor market outcomes, increased growth, better health care and enhanced civic participation.

How the county stacks up: According to telecommunications industry data, just over 80% of households have access to download speeds greater than 10 Mbps and upload speeds greater than 1.5 Mbps – the best performance of the four counties in the region.

Source: Connect Michigan (telecommunications industry), 2016



Discussion Questions

1. What one or two things most **surprised** you in this data about how the county, the place, is doing?

2. What one trend in this data gives you the most **hope** for the county?

3. What one trend in this data causes you the most **concern** – for any reason?

4. Which fact in this data would you most like to **change** – and why?

Overall Priority Questions: Looking Forward

This Assessment is offered as a conversation opener – a tool that can help open a discussion about what is good and what is challenging today in the area, and what we want to work on to make a better future for our people, economy and place.

You may review this by yourself, or work with a local group or set of neighbors to answer the questions at the end of each of the six sections in the Assessment. Having done that, we recommend one final reflection.

Thinking across all six sections of this Assessment, and taking into account all your insights when you reviewed them, answer these final two Overall Priority questions:

1. What does this data – and your reflections – suggest should be the area's top two or three priorities for action over the next five years?
2. For each priority you listed, what other information or deeper data do you think would be very useful or critical to know before exploring and choosing a good strategy to address that priority?

MECOSTA COUNTY COMMUNITY FOUNDATION
An affiliate of Fremont Area Community Foundation

4424 W 48th Street
Fremont, MI 49412

Fremont Area Community Foundation: 231.924.5350

www.facommunityfoundation.org