

## Seeking a Quality-of-Life Yardstick

R. L. Reeder, Purdue University

*How does a community measure its quality of life? Reeder offers four criteria that can be used as a yardstick. Then he suggests what the community leadership must do to adapt the yardstick, and what Extension's role should be in the process. Extension must restate community goals in terms of people, organize resources around people priorities, and move with what we know now rather than wait for more research. Many development people make the mistake of thinking about community problems rather than people problems, Reeder says.*

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A little late, to be sure, but I've been attending a community development class, and guess who's talking "quality of life." True, he put it second to job opportunity, yet there it was on the blackboard, put there by agricultural economist Henry Wadsworth. He gave some definition to the term, using words like schools, water, sewage, and shopping. Then he said that the community is developed to give you "the choices you want."

This isn't unlike what Minnesota sociologist George Donahue has been saying for a long time . . . that the advantages of rural living are largely a myth. Urban institutions, he believes, humanize man because they offer the choices that make the difference in culture for the individual.

Assistant Secretary of Agriculture Tom Cowden adds another dimension when he says that future population centers will be near the natural resources—the oceans, mountains, lakes, rivers. "Who really wants to live in the middle of some state that has none of the physical attractions?" he asks . . . and this is another ag economist talking quality of life.

Such well-established disciplinarians could find an echo in my tapes of young people, who are saying the same thing: "There's nothing here in this town for me." Probably they'll go where the jobs are, but their comment includes more than employment. They want to be where they can choose what they want to do, what they want to see.

In a way, we could be much

more comfortable if we simply said that people want to go where the jobs are. It's when we add this quality-of-life variable that we complicate the problem and force ourselves, if we're sincere, to find out what we mean.

### Thorndike's Yardstick

E. L. Thorndike wrote a book 30 years ago that gives us some clues, and perhaps it's time we looked back at what he said. He lists 37 items that reasonable people would use as "goodness-of-life" items. Then he lumped them into six categories: health, educational opportunities, recreation, economic and social, creature comforts, and others.

From his study of 300 communities around the country, he decided the differences in the good life could be attributed 60 percent to the mental and moral qualities of the people, 25 percent to their incomes, 5 percent to work of the government, 3 percent to physical health and energy, 2 percent to previous generations, and 1 percent to homogeneity of race and culture, among others.<sup>1</sup>

He then went on to describe a 10-item yardstick for measuring a community for the quality of its living:

1. Death rate (per 1,000 population) for infants less than a year old.
2. Annual expense per person for operation and maintenance of parks and play-

grounds.

3. Per capita value of city property of schools, libraries, parks, museums, etc.
4. Per capita value of public property used for public service such as schools, fire, jails, waterworks, power plants, etc., and net public debt (not including streets and sewers).
5. Expense per person of operation and maintenance of schools (not including interest on debt).
6. Number graduated from high schools in relation to population.
7. Circulation of library books related to population.
8. Percentage of people 16-18 years of age who are in school.
9. Number of telephone subscribers related to population.
10. Number of homes with electricity related to the total number of homes.

Although some of the items on his list seem dated after more than a generation, it's more than an artifact of the past. He's clearly trying to identify some of the factors that affect those mental and moral qualities of the people that he credits with 60 percent of the responsibility for quality of living. Other writers since have added other variables to his list. For instance, he doesn't include churches as relating to moral quality, while 15 years later Roland Warren put religion high on his pri-

ority rating. Thorndike didn't regard community organization work as relevant, but Warren thought the number of people taking part in organized activity was one of the measures of the good community.<sup>2</sup>

### Searching for a Yardstick

My search for a community yardstick was triggered by the community attitude self-survey that Frederick List did for the University of Missouri. He had the courage to suggest that a community might measure itself, rather than having to hire high-priced consultants who have little knowledge of the community.<sup>3</sup> Reading his publication made me want to dig deeper into the human value systems related to this complicated problem.

Perhaps the mistake most of us make in development work is in thinking about these things as community problems rather than as people problems. List's example of a questionnaire reflects the shallow approach we feel we have to use because of our present lack of knowledge. For instance, he asks for a rating of the worst eyesores in the community—smoke stacks, run-down business buildings, junkyards, houses in need of paint, unpaved parking lots, utility poles, etc. I can find nothing here that will help with my yardstick.

Maybe I can find something in the writings of the philosophers of the past. Plato sought universal values, and decided that "freedom of choice" was first. Yet he means more than Wadsworth does. Choice

is important, but the key is the freedom of the citizen to make that choice, the permissiveness of a society that will let him choose. Plato's other universal values were: reason not force, individualism (to be one's self), and equality.

Gabriel Almond looked for particular American values that will concern us as we try to find community values. He included extreme competitiveness for "what others want," a fear of failure so great that we must have constant reassurance or some form of narcosis. He found a distrust of complex and subtle reasoning and the wish to cut authority down to size. He points out the moral norms that are in continual rivalry with the competition ethic, the belief in compatability of morality and expediency.<sup>4</sup>

There may be some quality-of-life factors evident in the polls. George Gallup found the top personal concern around the world to be good health. It was in 1968 that his national poll showed for the first time that Americans' top community concern was crime and lawlessness, with educational quality running second.<sup>5</sup> Last year the Lou Harris polls reported 95 percent of Americans wanted green grass and trees as their top desire, closely followed by "neighbors with whom I feel comfortable." When questioned about goals and values, 82 percent of Americans asked for peace with self, honesty with others. A distant second-place tie: "raising an admired family" and "being able to do what I want."<sup>6</sup>

The polls show that another change is taking place. Individualism seems to be giving way gradually in the United States to acceptance of more government interference in our lives and to more social planning. We're turning from a moral to a causal interpretation of behavior, and turning from a work ethic to that of enjoyment and consumption. Of course, the young people are at the cutting edge of such change, and many of them insist that work isn't worth doing for its own sake. They want to make human values paramount to property values, to believe that the money-power-fame syndrome is an empty goal.

There may be guidelines for us in what industry looks for in a community because here again there are quality-of-life factors being considered. Industrial developers report that to keep personnel happy in the community they must find out about the educational system, church activity, outlets for civic activity, how newcomers are received, the housing, and recreational and shopping facilities. They mention the "government tone" of the community.

Perhaps we can be guided by the writers of our literature, such as these lines from a J. P. Marquand book:

If it was not one thing, it was another. When you were in love you had a feeling that all problems would be automatically settled once you had married the girl you loved. When the children were born and the house became

filled with screams and diapers, you were certain that the problem would solve itself when the children were able to walk and button themselves. The future kept holding a bundle of hay in front of you, and you plodded after it, but you never got the hay. . . .<sup>7</sup>

### Units of Measurement

Although cynically, Marquand stated what I believe to be a basic unit of measurement for the community yardstick. We need to find in our community the hope of a better time to come, the promise of new and good experiences. Whatever our age or station, we want to look forward with pleasure to tomorrow.

For my second unit of community measurement, I'd look on my wall where hang some lines once written by Rebecca West:

What a nation should be: a shelter where all talents are generously recognized, all forgivable oddities forgiven, all viciousness quietly frustrated, and those who lack talent honored for equivalent contributions to graciousness. . . .

Plato thought man's quest for freedom was the ultimate meaning of life, and the community ought to respond to this by placing no unnecessary restraint on its people. At the same time, it will need to encourage good citizenship by finding avenues for maximum citizen participation in community life.

For a third unit, I would paraphrase a Gallup poll finding and suggest that I want my community

to be a place where "I can live in peace and honesty with myself and others." This is because I'd essentially choose pleasure over pain, reason over force, friendliness over enmity.

My fourth unit to measure quality of life would be a combination of the others. It would be best described as a community that's good for young people. It ought to promise parents that their children will have things better than the parents had. This seems to be a basic human desire, especially for mothers, that they leave things better for their children, thus achieving a kind of immortality.

### Three Steps for Leaders

If these are four of the basic quality-of-life measurements, then how do we go about adapting them for a community?

First, local leaders will need a desire to measure their community for its quality of life, as well as its job opportunities, if they have to be measured separately.

Such desire doesn't come easily because study committee members have usually been selected for their leadership reputation. Often they don't feel a community-wide commitment to learn about people problems. They believe they were chosen because they have reputations for already knowing about problems and about how to get things done. They get impatient at more probing and want to show results for their effort, which leads them to select

surface problems that can be approached by a community campaign to raise money or get votes.

Second, the leaders will need to be willing to listen to the answers they get from a broad spectrum of the community.

This is difficult, not only for community leaders, but for all of us, especially if we have a reputation as knowledgeable people. Therefore, we tend, if we ask for other opinions at all, to ask about things we've already selected as problems. If we're chosen as leaders, we believe it's because we represent a certain segment of the community, so it's painful to listen to opposing groups or to what disinterested people think of our problem. Then committees, organizations, and institutions usually prefer to gloss over the basic community inadequacies to which they contribute, if not otherwise, with a patina of publicity.

Third, local leaders will need to be willing to enlist help from a broad base of citizenry, if they seek to improve the community situation, if they'd build up its resources to offset its deficiencies.

This is a large three-way program for community leaders, who are usually sincere, dedicated people deserving of sincere, dedicated direction. That puts the assignment back with us who work in Extension community development. Where can we start to help local leaders understand the people of their community, listen to them, and enlist their help in building the kind of community people want?

### Three Steps for Extension

First, we'll want to restate our community goals in terms of people, based on what local leaders find quality of life means in their communities.

This will be reflected in plans of work and monthly reports, and for a while may upset the computers. Yet we'll find this not too far from the original purposes of Extension. Past and present glories have come basically from what we did with people, although our discipline lines have caused us to report in terms of crops and livestock. We'll find our "good conduct" medals measuring us less in acres, pounds, and numbers; more in terms of participation, decision making, and communication.

Second, we'll want to organize ourselves in our institutions, and in our counties, around the people priorities as local leaders find them in their communities.

Such a step seems rather commonplace and simple, yet anyone who has tried to develop interdisciplinary or interagency programs knows the complications that can set in. It means the broadening of narrow department lines, the realignment of projects and specialties. We haven't succeeded very well in our attempts to cut community problems to fit our expertise, and we know this. Thus, the effort to re-tread ourselves doesn't require a change of attitude, but rather a different kind of professionalism. As our customers increase their role in

deciding our program, we'll have to increase our responsibility in deciding the direction professional societies and disciplines go.

Along the way toward restoring the clientele to power, we'll find it advantageous to work more closely with other agencies and institutions that have relevant expertise. This is because quality of life concerns the relation of person to person, group to group, community to community. There's a little expertise in many places and with many people, but not a lot of competence in any one person or institution. Our field experience in Extension gives us more than our share of the eventual know-how.

Third, it's time we moved with what we have and what we know, rather than waiting until more of the research is done.

This means accepting and documenting what we know from our years of working with people who had decisions to make. It means learning from our mistakes as well as from our successes, and being willing to admit to both. Our help can come from many institutions and people including local leaders. We're not the authoritarian itinerant lecturers in community planning; we're part-time learners, part-time teachers, in the unknown land of group decisions.

Meanwhile we'll want to endorse increased quality-of-life research on community problems and on the processes and methods that community groups use. As knowledge is uncovered, new constructs

and theories developed, we'll want to apply them to our community situations. We'll be adapting and modifying them to fit people needs because, when people begin studying their community, no one is completely ignorant and no one completely wise.

#### Footnotes

1. E. L. Thorndike, *Your City* (New York, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1939).
2. Roland Warren, *Studying Your Community* (New York, New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1955).
3. Frederick List, *The Community Attitude Self-Survey* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri, University Extension Division, 1969).
4. Gabriel Almond, *Voice of the People* (New York, New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1962).
5. George Gallup, *Gallup Opinion Index* (Princeton, New Jersey: Gallup International, 1969-1970).
6. Louis Harris, "A Life Poll," *Life*, LXVIII (January 9, 1970), 102-106.
7. J. P. Marquand, *So Little Time* (Boston, Massachusetts: Little, Brown & Company, 1943), p. 67.