

WELLBEING IN UPPER KITTITAS COUNTY: A REPORT ON COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVES

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**INTERMOUNTAIN WEST
TRANSFORMATION
NETWORK**
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This report focuses on community wellbeing perspectives in Upper Kittitas County as part of a larger project on community resilience. Upper Kittitas County community leaders from government, business, and civic sectors were interviewed along with general community members, for a total of 48 interviews. This qualitative research is not a systematic survey of community members. It illuminates key issues and deeper relationships in a community and can guide future research and planning efforts. The report that follows summarizes themes and perspectives we gathered during these Upper Kittitas County interviews.

WHAT CONTRIBUTES TO WELLBEING IN UPPER COUNTY?

NATURE

The pristine ***natural environment*** and ***outdoor opportunities*** were brought up many times as important to quality of life.

“It’s the pace of life, it’s a lot slower than a city. And just being out in the fresh air, and the mountain air. That’s the healthiest place to be, just out of a city and, and in the mountains, I think.”

“The natural beauty around here sort of stirs the soul[...]it’s been good for us in our time of life to just have a slower pace and be surrounded by the beauty and the recreation.”

“We get all four seasons from a real spring or real summer to a real winter and not everybody gets that. We have a 365 acre park of wood forest[...] that we’re fortunate to actually just be in our backyard, that we can go on a hike on a whim, and you’re having a bad day you can drop the office and literally in five minutes and be in the woods. If you like to kayak we have kayaking, we have you know from, shooting guns to kayaking to bicycling, to fishing. I just think it has a little bit of everything for every person.”

SAFETY AND SOCIAL BONDS

Most people felt that communities in Upper County are ***safe and close knit***.

“It’s a close knit community. So you know, a lot of people have close knit relationships, a lot of support If we need something.”

“I think a sense of community and belonging is one of the most important, most empowering and most resourceful things that we can have. But you can intentionally have that community or intentionally not to have that community. No matter where you are, wherever you find yourself. I do think it’s a little easier in a small town like ours to have that because there’s so many overlaps in what we do[...]it feels like you’re surrounded by community and connected to community, sometimes unintentionally, sometimes intentionally. But that feels important. But again, I could probably hide from my neighbors and never ask for anything and then I wouldn’t feel that, but I don’t, I kind of embrace that.”

CULTURAL PRIDE

Many communities in Upper County are extremely ***proud of their heritage***, and feel that ***cultural connectivity*** over shared history is important for community life.

“We are a community of immigrants, really, when you look at it. And it's a mixed bag. Our Pioneer Days Heritage Festival, is the celebration of all of the different cultures that came here five, six, seven generations ago, that traditionally didn't get along. And they found a way to make peace and this was the day that they came together and they brought all of their foods and their different heritage aspects and then they pooled them together. And it's just a big hodge podge of what it is to be Cle Elum, if that makes sense. I would say that's the biggest thing that people are looking to preserve is what makes Cle Elum special. And that's the people, it's the people here and it's all of the different things that they bring to the pot.”

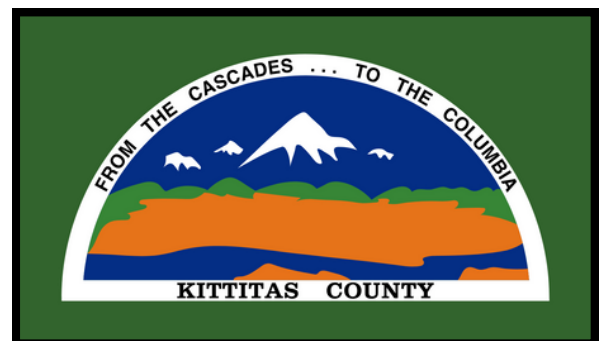
“One of the things that[...] I love about our community is our connection to our past. So there's a really strong Heritage Club and volunteer groups that do a lot of volunteer work on preserving the history. But then also just taking care of the, the community[...] Everything's done in the [Roslyn] cemeteries, other than a small piece, which is the new city cemetery, done by volunteers. So I think there's a lot of connection to the past. A lot of desire to[...] record and maintain kind of the history of the community. And so I think that brings a lot of the community members together[...] kind of that self reliance on the volunteerism and taking care of that history[...] But I think that's something that community members[...] across the board, all really value. So I think that's something that brings the community together is that desire to maintain the historic elements of the community.”

SMALL TOWN FEEL

Many participants mentioned the ***small town feel*** of Upper County communities when they were describing the area in which they live.

“The small community, the community feel. For me, coming from the west side, you know, generally no traffic I think is important and then just the easy access to recreation, outdoor recreation. Whether it be lakes, rivers, mountains, trails, just walking.”

“But that small community feel where everybody kind of knows each other and if you're raising a family[...] everyone kind of watches out for each other. When there's a crisis in the community, it's like all hands on deck. It's almost overwhelming the support that residents give when there is any type of crisis or - recently we had one of the businesses downtown burn and you know, immediately somebody put up a GoFundMe page and[...] money starts pouring in and support and so forth.”



WHAT ARE PEOPLE IN UPPER COUNTY CONCERNED ABOUT?

Interviewees mentioned ***rising costs of living*** are a concern in the community. Oftentimes attributing these financial concerns to past, current, and future population growth.

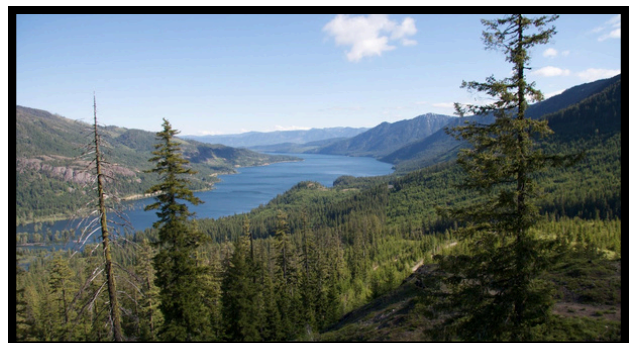
"I would say on the negative side right now, the housing, it's really difficult[...] to find housing and housing is extremely expensive. And we've had a boom in my opinion in the last five years, really strongly in the last three, since the pandemic. Houses have quadrupled in value, and taxes have gone up significantly. We also have a lack of water that's available here, so we don't have water rights."

"Unfortunately, with the market spike, home values skyrocketed ever since about 2020. And so a lot of people that had rentals sold them because all of a sudden it's worth twice as much as it was two years ago. That's hard to not take advantage of. But the people that were renting can no longer afford to rent and they can't afford to buy because of the cost. Whereas people who are trying to get out of the city, they're like, 'Wow, this house is only \$500,000. It'd be \$900,000 in Seattle.' So they're thrilled. And we're like 'what this house was \$300,000 last year and now they want five-hundred?' We're like 'we can't afford that.' So there's been kind of this influx of, not like it was intended to push people out but just kind of influx of people who were like, 'Yeah, I'm so excited. This is gonna work for me and my family.' And then other people who are like, 'I have to move. I have to move somewhere else because there's not a place to rent for me anymore.' Because someone else is moving in, and so it just kind of changed the dynamics of who's here. There's a lot of new people. It's harder and harder to find people who have been here a long time."

Several community members were also concerned about ***lack of high-paying jobs*** for younger adults who want to work and stay in the community they grew up in.

"We don't have a lot of high paying jobs in the community. So we have to kind of balance that as best we can with providing some affordable housing."

"Because right now we don't have, outside of government work, we don't have a lot of really well-paying [sic] jobs in Kittitas County. And so I think like, looking at some of those avenues could really help bring diversity to our economic options for people that want to reside here. Outside of the service industry and some of those areas, that can be good, I mean, for certain segments of the population[...] it's great that we have a younger population that can work in that field, and it gives them flexibility. But as far as, you know, people that are wanting to set themselves up for a career where they're, you know, planning to retire, have enough to retire someday and maybe send their own kids to school and those sorts of things. I think there's definitely a lot of opportunities that we can explore and I think the university and growing that relationship is a really good avenue for that."



Additionally, some interviewees discussed **increased crowds and traffic** from an increasing number of visitors to the area as detrimental to the community's access to recreational opportunities.

"Tourists come here with all kinds of equipment, motorbikes, and boats and it's a playground. And on Sunday afternoon from my house, I can watch a little segment of the freeway, where the traffic westbound is completely blocked up, starting about noon until about 7pm, on a weekly basis."

"It's so hard to just get in in the [Safeway] parking lot on a weekend during the summer or even the winter."

Many participants expressed displeasure over the **price of groceries**, and the lack of readily available, and affordable goods and services for full time residents.

"It seems like the food costs here are kind of high. And I think our assumption is that, or the rumor is, that it's the tourism prices."

"Unfortunately, the people who now have these restaurants and stuff, everything's got really expensive. \$20 hamburger, there's no if ands or buts that's how it is everywhere. So that's, that's one hard thing about it, is trying to afford to eat in your own town."

Several community members also discussed their concerns regarding Upper County's **vulnerability to wildfire**, as well as the impact of smoke.

"We had a big, big fire here about five years ago that was really bad because you realize there's only one road out of the forest and it brought awareness that we're at like a level five as far as house loss risk[...] So now they're doing a lot of trimming the forest, fire wising the forest, putting a lot of money and energy into those sorts of things."

"When it comes to the fires, we just have a huge recreation area out here and so again, I think a lot of people don't understand the severity or the importance of maintaining their campfires. So we have a lot of wildfires that start because of it especially during wildfire season during the summer."

"You get these people from the west side come over here, they go up the woods and build a little fire and pretty soon they got a big one."



HOW IS UPPER KITTITAS COUNTY CONNECTED TO OTHER COMMUNITIES IN THE REGION?

Given that the broader scope of this project is regional, we asked people how they think Upper Kittitas County is connected to other communities in the region. The perspectives shared illustrate a long timeline of connections beyond the local area.

Historically, Upper County has ties to the wider Yakima Nation homelands since time immemorial. In the mining days about 100 years ago, people came into the area for work from around the world. Then for some time, Upper County was a collection of “sleepy mountain town[s].”

“The Yakima Nation has been in that area since time immemorial. And we wanted to make sure that their interests were not only represented but that to the extent possible, restored to the area. So, they have always been a very active role.”

“And then we're famous for coal mining. [In] Roslyn. ... we have these really amazing cemeteries where you can literally see sections of the cemeteries designated, that's the Croatians, that's the Russians, that's the African Americans, that's the Italians.”

In recent years, Upper County has **increasingly depended on the Seattle area for jobs, healthcare and shopping**, and also to Ellensburg and Yakima groceries, though interviewees described a **general divide between upper and lower Kittitas County**.

“Because we're an hour and a half from Seattle, and especially with COVID. People realize like, obviously, that completely transformed the workplace and how people work, realize that people can do their jobs just as well telecommuting as they could in other ways.”

“Costco in Issaquah and Costco in Yakima. Or we go to Ellensburg. There's a lot of different stores there too. Not much local that you can get for us.”



The strongest contemporary regional connection is to Seattle (or the “Westside”) as newcomers and tourists tend to come from there to stop over, visit, or set up new residence. There is some **resentment and tension about the changes brought by these Westsiders**, but some also **recognized the influx of funds from these developments** that support community services.

“Cle Elum and Roslyn are one latte east of four and a half million people. They can buy a latte in North Bend and it'll still be warm when they get to Cle Elum and need a restroom.”

"But then there was a big resort went in called Suncadia and that is drastically changing the demographics of our community and also there are other resort-like developments being brought in, in the area. Lots of new houses and things like that. Most of which - now these are million-dollar houses. Most of which are second or third or fourth homes, so the people that are buying them are not really contributing to the community. They're weekend warriors.”

“I will say that however, there are a small number of people who are coming over and are making this their homes and are putting their kids in the local schools. And I think that's brought a lot more attention to the quality of the education locally, the availability of after school programming and the kind of like variety that that offers. So there has recently been an influx in interest and engagement in things like a skate park or rec center, just programming in general available for teens. And that's something that hasn't been available in Cle Elum and Roslyn for ... several decades. So, it's nice to see that being revitalized because you have more families who are making money from jobs in Seattle actually putting their kids in the smaller schools out here.”



AS PEOPLE LOOK TO UPPER COUNTY'S FUTURE, WHAT ARE THEY EXCITED ABOUT?

MAINTAINING THE LOCAL ENVIRONMENT	WELL-PLANNED DEVELOPMENT
<p>Initiatives in the community that <i>protect the access to natural amenities</i> were valued by many of the people interviewed.</p>	<p>People mentioned enthusiasm for improving <i>planning for growth and development</i> in their communities.</p>
<p>“In the beginning, there was a railroad and then there was Cle Elum[...] a township has 36 one square mile sections in it, and in several townships every odd-numbered section was granted to the railroad. And so it created this checkerboard land ownership between the federal government and the Burlington Northern Railroad[...] So, The Nature Conservancy formed the Central Cascades Forest, LLC and purchased 47,921 acres of forestland in Kittitas County from Plum Creek Timber for the purpose of safeguarding clean water, wildlife habitat, and outdoor recreation. In partnership with community stakeholders, we have worked to transfer those lands into permanent protection under various state and federal land ownerships, until the last vestige of that checkerboard is down to about 10,000 acres in the county[...] Every time I can work to hold lands in public ownership, it gives the people a) the right to access and b) the right to have input on land use actions. And with only 25% of our county being developable, I'm okay with that.”</p> <p>“Exciting? Just being out in the mountains[...] There's no way to describe until you get out here. I can't describe it to ya.”</p>	<p>“I mean, we have some pretty significant land development projects coming up that could more than double our size. I think, done properly, there could be some advantage, especially to our local businesses, of being more sustainable and viable throughout the year. Right now, a lot of those businesses struggle on what we call the shoulder seasons. Winter we're really busy, summer really busy; but those spring and fall times can really lack much tourism when[...]really what sustains them during that time is the local residents and there's just not a large population. So that's an opportunity that those, some of these developments will come. That kind of contradicts my small town mentality of that's what people value, but I think we have room to grow and still be considered a small town.”</p> <p>“I would have to say what's exciting about the community is we have some overdue growth opportunities, and I think that is very exciting. But change is very hard, for generations that have lived here[...] But I still feel like the excitement is, the growth brings different opportunities then what we've had in the past decade.”</p>

It has been a pleasure to get to know Upper County through this project. Additional details on the project methods or anything else can be obtained by contacting **Dr. Courtney Flint at Utah State University (435-797-8635 or courtney.flint@usu.edu)**. This project is funded by the National Science Foundation (Award #2115169) and is part of the Intermountain West Transformation Network, which is focused on highlighting pathways for guided transformation to greater resilience in communities and landscapes.

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