

BERKSHIRE COUNTY SURVEY

Results shed light on attitudes about living, working in our region

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In 2015, Berkshire Regional Planning Commission conducted a "Young Adults" survey, gauging the overall attitudes of more than 2,800 current and former Berkshire residents on their lifestyle and work experiences in the region. The understanding gleaned from the 2015 survey informed a number of efforts. An example of this is the Berkshire Initiative for Growth, a multi-year task force from which targeted projects like the Berkshire 40 Under Forty Awards, the Berkshires Ambassadors program, and #LiveBRK were launched. Additionally, programs already in existence were reinvigorated by information from the survey, such as the Berkshire Youth Leadership and Berkshire Leadership Programs.

Four years after the initial survey, in 2019, a similar survey was issued in collaboration with 1Berkshire. This new survey reached a broader age range and included additional questions that further explored workplace experiences and expectations around employment benefits. This more recent "Berkshire County Survey" received over 1,500 responses, with resident responses generally reflecting the distribution of population in our 32 municipalities. In both surveys, responses from current residents reflect a high level of satisfaction. People consistently enjoy living in the Berkshires for a variety of reasons, and more people today plan to remain in the Berkshires over the next five to 10 years than did in 2015.

In both surveys, the majority of respondents, whether they still live here or not, consider the Berkshires a desirable place to live. More than half of those who have moved away indicated they would return if their current job and current pay were available in Berkshire County. An increasing percentage of respondents said they miss the Berkshires after having left, and the number of people who stated they will or might – given the



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right circumstances – move back to the Berkshires has increased.

To be clear, there are already many well-paying positions available in the Berkshires – in fact, hundreds that are currently going unfilled. To tackle this workforce gap, 1Berkshire's "the jobs thing" (which did not exist at the time of the

earlier survey) now posts only full-time, year-round, benefited positions paying at least \$40,000 per year. Current posted jobs include positions in finance, education, hospitality, health care, engineering and architecture, to name a few. Since this particular job board is fee-based, each listed position is representative of tens, if not hundreds, of other openings in the same industries that are seeking qualified talent. This is no exaggeration. MassHire's Jobquest site lists over 1,000 opportunities regularly, and MassHire Berkshire Workforce Board consistently reports more open positions than known job-seekers in the county.

Employment is a key reason people move to the Berkshires already. Indeed, both of us writing this are now proud Berkshire-ites because we were hired into the region over a decade ago. This speaks to a new narrative. The Berkshires are ripe for new transplants to come in and fill key roles

in the regional workforce, while also discovering all of the amenities and quality of life aspects that make living and playing in the Berkshires such a fulfilling experience.

Unfortunately, survey responses and anecdotal evidence also tell us that the lure of employment elsewhere remains a contributing factor to out-migration from the

Berkshires. Higher pay in other areas, even if that move is likely to come with a higher cost of living, serves as a strong draw to opportunities elsewhere.

If we take anything from the survey results in 2019, it is that job-related concerns can make or break plans to create a life here in the Berk-

shires. Wage levels, benefits packages, and out-of-the-box perks (such as dog friendly workplaces, remote work policies, etc.), taken individually or collectively, are enough to sway someone's decision. This set of employer offerings is an area where "we" collectively can have an impact. Employers in the Berkshires can use these aggregate results and take a close look at how they're meeting the perceived and real wants and needs of the workforce they seek to recruit and retain. How organizations communicate about opportunities for advancement, the types of non-salary benefits packages, and agile paid time off

were all identified as important to respondents. Generally, responses indicated that these items are being provided at a satisfactory rate, yet health/dental benefits, retirement plans, flexible schedules, and bonuses or perks for good performance all showed to be lacking across the breadth of employers represented by respondents.

Unsurprisingly, when it comes to potential residents choosing a place to live, there are always going to be deciding factors we can't influence: people either have family in the area or don't, or they prefer large urban areas to our rural setting. We can, however, look at the factors that are valued by those who do enjoy living here, and play them up so that like-minded people can be attracted to the area – things like the natural scenic beauty of our region, or the availability of outdoor recreation. In fact, 1Berkshire has long been incorporating these themes into their communication and marketing to visitors, and current and potential residents.

Training and recruitment have become paramount issues, with a number of regional partners coming to the table to bolster existing programs and offer new ones. Both technical schools in the region, Taconic High School and McCann Technical School, have seen high demand for their graduates. Additionally, higher education institutions in the region have created agile programs to support workforce demand, such as the MCLA Electrical Engineering concentration developed to provide a workforce pipeline to General Dynamics Mission Systems, and the Berkshire Community College Hospitality Fast Track and Cannabis Industry concentrations focused on supporting emergent workforce gaps.

Startups and speed-ups have become an integral component to our shifting economic ecosystem. National trends show that regional economic prosperity relies on growth, and the diverse array of entrepreneurial ventures and businesses bubbling up in the Berkshires are proving to be a major key to current and future development.

Through the dynamic efforts of incubator programs at Lever and Mill Town Capital, dozens of businesses have been given the runway needed to develop, launch and grow across the region. Even more recently, the launch of EforAll Berkshire County has injected a whole new wave of energy and focus on the support of startups and businesses heading into an accelerator phase. These types of ventures, and the energy behind them, not only impact the businesses directly, but have begun to inspire a more entrepreneurial vibe in the Berkshires that is becoming increasingly attractive to potential transplants to the area.

As organizations come up to scale and see an increased need to recruit and retain, resources like the Berkshire Recruiter have become more heavily utilized. New and innovative programs have also begun to take root: the Employer Resource Network program being piloted through Working Cities will provide high-touch support to help employers retain employees with non-traditional support needs.

It is no secret that the Berkshires have seen a decrease in population, beginning in the 1970s. This reality has the potential to unite us in our collective desire to improve the region and make it an even better place to live and work. Those of us who live and work here see and feel the potential that the region offers, but it is on all of us to showcase that spirit and energy to the next generation of residents, both those raised here, and those recruited from outside the Berkshires. Done comprehensively, through aligning lifestyle marketing with improved employer offerings, the increasingly vivacious and vibrant economy and filled workforce capacity we all hope for will become a reality.

To view the full report on the 2019 Berkshire County Survey, please visit: <http://berkshireplanning.org/> ♦

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