

Rural Nebraskans support having their communities take a range of steps to improve economic development, according to the Nebraska Rural Poll.

A University of Nebraska-Lincoln expert said the good news is that many entrepreneurial resources already are available.

The 16th annual UNL poll, taken last March and April, asked questions, as past polls have, about rural Nebraskans' attitudes about their communities. But a series of economic development questions was new.

About three-quarters of survey respondents agreed that the following strategies would have a positive impact on their community:

- Providing loans to small business and entrepreneurs in the community (79 percent)
- Developing a youth entrepreneurship program in local schools (76 percent)
- Providing training or technical assistance to small businesses or entrepreneurs in the community (74 percent).

In addition, there was strong support for other economic development ideas, including: promoting development of wind energy; improving access to high-speed Internet; and providing tax incentives to companies that locate in a community.

"This is folks saying 'we need to do something. We probably should do everything we can'," said Randy Cantrell, a rural sociologist with the Nebraska Rural Initiative.

Connie Reimers-Hild, UNL Extension educator in entrepreneurship and innovation, said she was pleased to see rural Nebraskans' interest in economic development strategies and added that the state has put in place many resources to address those needs.

Reimers-Hild said local extension offices, chambers of commerce and economic development offices are a good place to seek information on entrepreneurial assistance. She also cited the Center for Rural Affairs' Rural Enterprise Assistance Project, which helps secure funding for rural businesses, and the University of Nebraska website Nebraskaentrepreneur.com.

The website is "a one-stop shop for entrepreneurial resources," she said.

The Nebraska College of Technical Agriculture at Curtis and community colleges across the state also have entrepreneurial programs, Reimers-Hild said.

Many rural Nebraskans already are tapping into these resources, and Reimers-Hild encouraged others to do so, too.

Reimers-Hild noted that successful rural entrepreneurship plays a key role in helping rural Nebraska retain residents and keep them satisfied with their lives. As in past years, this year's poll shows ongoing dissatisfaction with such amenities as retail shopping, entertainment, restaurants and arts/cultural activities.

"Access to amenities relates directly to economic development and entrepreneurship," she said.

However, the poll also shows rural Nebraskans remain satisfied with other aspects of their community, finding them to be friendly, trusting and supportive by wide margins.

Other findings:

- On another question new to this year's poll, 56 percent disagreed that their community is powerless to control its future. However, respondents' views on that question varied depending on demographics.

Forty-five percent of residents of communities of less than 500 disagreed with that statement, with 28 percent agreeing and 27 percent undecided.

And education level was key, too; 67 percent of people with a four-year college diploma disagreed with the statement, while just 43 percent of those with a high school diploma or less education did.

- Community size also played a role in how people answered another question: Has your community changed for the better during the past year?

Thirty percent of those living in or near communities of 10,000 or more said yes; 19 percent of those in or near communities of less than 500 people said yes.

- Similar differences were seen in a question about whether residents expected their communities to be a better place to live 10 years from now.

Twenty-five percent of residents of larger towns said yes, while just 12 percent of those who live in smaller towns agreed.

- Only five percent of respondents said they expect to move in the next year, but of those, 58 percent expect to leave the state, the highest percentage in the 14 years the question has been asked.

- The Rural Poll is the largest annual poll of rural Nebraskans' perceptions on quality of life and policy issues.

This year's response rate was about 39 percent. The margin of error is plus or minus two percent. Complete results are available online at <http://cari.unl.edu/ruralpoll/>.

The university's Center for Applied Rural Innovation conducts the poll in cooperation with the Nebraska Rural Initiative with funding from UNL Extension and the Agricultural Research Division in the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources.