

Local business owners have emphasized the following factors as crucial to their businesses' success:

1. Access to Affordable Utilities (Electricity, Water, etc.):

Importance: 79.22% of respondents rated this as very important.

Recommendation to County Government: Ensure the provision of affordable utilities by working with utility providers and implementing policies that promote efficiency and cost-effectiveness.

2. Access to Reliable High-Speed Internet:

Importance: 73.08% of respondents rated this as very important.

Recommendation to County Government: Focus on enhancing and expanding reliable high-speed internet infrastructure support businesses. Invest in technology-related initiatives to improve connectivity.

3. Access to a Skilled Workforce:

Importance: 58.97% of respondents consider this very important.

Recommendation to County Government: Implement programs that enhance the local workforce's skills and collaborate with educational institutions to align training with business needs. Foster a supportive environment for vocational training.

4. Access to Affordable Healthcare:

Importance: 46.75% of respondents consider this very important.

Recommendation to County Government: Explore initiatives to improve healthcare affordability and accessibility for businesses and their employees. Collaborate with healthcare providers to address local business needs.

5. Access to Affordable Housing for Employees:

Importance: 40.26% of respondents rated this as very important.

Recommendation to County Government: Direction to County Government: Develop strategies to address the affordable housing needs of employees. Consider zoning and housing development plans that support a diverse range of housing options.

Overall Recommendation to County Government:

1. Prioritize the development and improvement of infrastructure, with a specific focus on high-speed internet access and utilities, to cater to the evolving needs of businesses.
2. Foster collaboration with healthcare providers to explore effective solutions that improve the affordability and accessibility of healthcare services for businesses and their employees.
3. Address the housing needs of employees by developing and implementing plans that actively support affordable housing options, thereby contributing to a more stable and satisfied workforce.
4. Invest in workforce development programs to ensure that the local workforce is equipped with the necessary skills, aligning with the demands of businesses and fostering economic growth.
5. Implement business-friendly policies and regulations to create a supportive regulatory environment, facilitating the success and growth of local businesses while minimizing obstacles to their operations.

Local business owners have emphasized the main challenges facing businesses in Polk County:

1. Limited Access to a Skilled Workforce:

Challenges: 72.73% of respondents identified this as a significant challenge.

Recommendation to County Government: Implement workforce development programs and collaborate with educational institutions to enhance the local workforce's skills.

2. Limited Access to High-Speed Internet:

Challenges: 33.77% of respondents indicated limited access to high-speed internet.

Recommendation to County Government: Prioritize infrastructure development, especially in the provision of reliable high-speed internet to support businesses.

3. Limited Access to Affordable Healthcare:

Challenges: 25.97% of respondents highlighted limited access to affordable healthcare.

Recommendation to County Government: Collaborate with healthcare providers to explore solutions that enhance healthcare affordability and accessibility for businesses and their employees.

Other Challenges Mentioned by Respondents:

- 1. Perceptions and Appearance:** Some businesses face challenges due to negative perceptions about the area, lack of pride in appearance, and insufficient support for the business community. Addressing these aspects could improve the business environment.
- 2. Location and Affordability:** Limited resources in the area and the need for more affordable options. Businesses are affected by the fact that many desirable resources are at least a 45-minute drive away.
- 3. Fair Salaries:** Businesses may face challenges related to offering fair salaries. This suggests a need for attention to wage levels to support both businesses and their employees.
- 4. Limited Cooperation and Support:** Some businesses feel they receive limited cooperation and help from the county. Enhancing support mechanisms and fostering collaboration could alleviate this challenge.
- 5. Infrastructure and High Utilities:** Businesses cite challenges related to infrastructure and high utility costs. Addressing infrastructure needs and exploring ways to manage utility costs can contribute to a more business-friendly environment.

Overall Recommendation to County Government: The County Government should focus on addressing workforce development, improving infrastructure, enhancing healthcare accessibility, and fostering a supportive environment for businesses. Additionally, initiatives to improve the area's appearance and address negative perceptions can contribute to a more vibrant and thriving business community.

Local business owners have highlighted infrastructure improvements they would like to see in the county, with corresponding suggestions for the County Government:

1. Improved Road Conditions:

Importance: 61.04% of respondents consider this very important for their business.

Recommendation to County Government: Prioritize road maintenance and improvement projects to enhance the overall infrastructure and support businesses.

2. More Opportunities for Training and Workforce Development:

Importance: 58.44% of respondents consider this very important for their business.

Recommendation to County Government: Collaborate with educational institutions and businesses to create opportunities for training and workforce development, addressing the need for skilled employees.

3. Expanded High-Speed Internet Access:

Importance: 42.86% of respondents find this very important for their business.

Recommendation to County Government: Invest in expanding high-speed internet infrastructure to ensure reliable and widespread access, supporting businesses that rely on digital connectivity.

Other Suggestions

1. **Access to Utilities:** Respondents mentioned the importance of timely access to sewer, water, and electricity for new developments. Streamlining the process for utility access could support business growth.
2. **Affordable Retail Space:** Some businesses expressed the need for more affordable retail space. The County Government could explore policies or initiatives to promote accessible and reasonably priced commercial spaces.
3. **Traffic Restructuring:** Business owners suggested restructuring traffic downtown to support local businesses and ensure pedestrian safety. Urban planning and traffic management strategies can contribute to a more business-friendly environment.
4. **Cleanliness and Neighborhood Regulations:** Business owners emphasized the importance of neighborhood cleanliness and consistent application of regulations, especially in areas governed by homeowners' associations (HOAs). Ensuring a clean and regulated environment can positively impact businesses.
5. **Support for Startups and Mentorship:** Some respondents expressed the need for support in launching businesses and mentorship opportunities. The County Government could explore programs to assist startups and foster mentorship networks.
6. **Motivation and Attendance:** Addressing motivation and attendance issues among the workforce was mentioned. Initiatives promoting a positive work environment and employee engagement could be beneficial.
7. **Expansion of Shopping Attractions:** Business owners expressed a desire for more shopping attractions, including larger retail stores. Encouraging retail expansion could contribute to economic growth.

Overall Recommendations to County Government: Prioritize infrastructure projects such as road improvements and high-speed internet expansion. Additionally, collaborate with businesses, streamline processes for utility access, and consider initiatives to support training, workforce development, and a vibrant business community.

Local business owners provide insight on what they think can be done to improve economic development in the county:

1. Supporting Small Businesses and Entrepreneurs:

Importance: 74.36% of respondents consider this a key aspect of economic development.

Recommendation to County Government: Prioritize support programs for small businesses and entrepreneurs, including access to funding, mentorship, and training. Fostering a supportive environment for local businesses can contribute to economic growth.

2. Encourage the Retention and Growth of Existing Businesses:

Importance: 70.51% of respondents believe this is crucial for economic development.

Recommendation to County Government: Implement initiatives that support the growth and sustainability of existing businesses. This may involve providing resources, incentives, and a conducive environment for businesses to thrive.

3. Attracting New Businesses and Industries:

Importance: 61.54% of respondents see this as a significant factor for economic development.

Recommendation to County Government: Develop strategies to attract new businesses and industries, potentially through targeted incentives, marketing efforts, and infrastructure development to make the county an attractive location for investment.

Other Suggestions:

1. **Workforce Quality and Appearance:** Respondents emphasized the importance of having a skilled and professional workforce. Improving the quality of the workforce, along with addressing the appearance of business signage, can enhance the overall professional image of the county.
2. **Encouraging Resident Return After Education/Training:** Some respondents highlighted the need to encourage residents, particularly those who pursue higher education or training, to return to the county. Creating opportunities and incentives for talented individuals to stay or return can contribute to economic development.
3. **Affordable Housing:** Affordable housing was mentioned as a critical factor. Addressing housing affordability issues can enhance the county's appeal for both residents and businesses.
4. **Supporting Growth and Aesthetics:** Business owners expressed a desire to support the overall growth of the small town and enhance its aesthetics. This could involve community beautification projects and initiatives to create an attractive and welcoming environment.

Overall Recommendation to County Government:

Focus on a multi-faceted approach, including initiatives to retain and grow existing businesses, attract new businesses, support small businesses and entrepreneurs, improve the quality of the workforce, address housing affordability, and enhance the overall appearance and appeal of the county.

Local business owners provide insight on how they can best engage in the county's decision-making processes and strategic planning efforts:

1. Business Roundtables and Focus Groups:

Importance: 50.65% of respondents believe these forums are the most effective means of engagement.

Recommendation to County Government: Organize business roundtables and focus groups to actively involve business owners in decision-making and strategic planning. Ensure timely and transparent communication about these initiatives to encourage participation.

2. Community Forums and Events:

Importance: 16.88% of respondents find value in community forums and events.

Recommendation to County Government: Host community forums and events specifically tailored to engage businesses. These could be opportunities for direct interaction, information sharing, and collaborative discussions.

3. Social Media Outreach:

Importance: 14.29% of respondents consider social media outreach as a valuable engagement method.

Recommendation to County Government: Leverage social media platforms to disseminate information, updates, and gather input from businesses. This could involve creating dedicated business-focused channels or groups for communication.

4. Surveys and Feedback Forms:

Importance: 14.29% of respondents see surveys and feedback forms as effective tools.

Recommendation to County Government: Implement regular surveys and feedback forms to collect opinions, preferences, and concerns from businesses. Design these tools to be accessible and user-friendly.

Other suggestions:

1. Proactive Outreach: Respondents emphasized the importance of proactive outreach to ensure that business owners are informed and invited to participate in decision-making processes well in advance. After-the-fact knowledge was deemed less effective.
2. Diverse Representation: Business owners suggested appointing a diverse group of business people to committees rather than relying on a select few. This ensures a broader range of perspectives and experiences are considered.
3. Combination of Methods: Some respondents highlighted the effectiveness of a combined approach, incorporating various engagement methods. This could include a mix of roundtables, social media outreach, surveys, and community events to maximize participation.

Overall Recommendation to County Government: Implement a comprehensive approach to engage businesses, including the organization of business roundtables, effective use of social media, regular surveys, and hosting community forums and events. Proactively communicate these initiatives, involve a diverse range of businesses, and consider combining multiple methods for optimal engagement.

Local businesses provide insight on Strengths & Weaknesses:

Strengths:

1. **Community Support and Volunteerism:** The community exhibits a strong sense of support and volunteerism, contributing to a positive environment.
2. **Natural Beauty and Quality of Life:** The county is praised for its natural beauty and quality of life, contributing to a favorable living environment.
3. **Proximity to Major Thoroughfares:** The location, particularly its proximity to I69 and major thoroughfares, is highlighted as a strength, enhancing connectivity.
4. **Local Business Support:** Local businesses are perceived as supporting each other, fostering a collaborative environment.
5. **Recreation Opportunities:** Access to recreation opportunities, including a lake, contributing to the area's appeal.
6. **Community Values:** Including friendliness and a small-town atmosphere.
7. **Active Chamber of Commerce:** Recognized for its efforts in promoting businesses.

Weaknesses:

1. **Workforce Challenges:** Lack of employees willing to work, wage concerns, and unskilled labor.
2. **Infrastructure Issues:** Weaknesses in road infrastructure, limited utility infrastructure for business expansion, and high property values and real estate taxes are identified.
3. **Communication and Information Access:** Limited access to information through the **city** website.
4. **Limited Educational Opportunities:** For both children and adults, along with poor extended education opportunities.
5. **Economic Development Opportunities:** The need for more industrial and commercial businesses, encouragement for franchise restaurants, and overall economic development.
6. **Affordable Housing and Healthcare:** Concerns about the affordability of housing, healthcare, and utilities.
7. **Transportation Issues:** Traffic congestion, limited public transportation, and challenges in transportation infrastructure planning are cited as weaknesses.

Recommendations to County Government:

1. Address workforce challenges by focusing on wage concerns, employee shortages, and promoting skill development programs.
2. Prioritize infrastructure improvements, including road and utility infrastructure, to support business expansion.
3. Improve communication channels, especially through the **city** website, to provide better access to information about industrial expansions, recreational activities, and city documents.
4. Invest in educational opportunities for both children and adults, emphasizing skills training and workforce development.
5. Support economic development by encouraging new businesses, addressing affordability concerns, and fostering a business-friendly environment.
6. Address transportation challenges, including traffic congestion and limited public transportation, through strategic planning and investment.