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OVOF survey finds residents struggling, economic recovery to be difficult

WENATCHEE — Now that the economy is reopening in Chelan and Douglas counties amid the COVID-19 pandemic, some local businesses and community events are unlikely to see customers and visitors return in large numbers soon, according to a new survey conducted by Our Valley Our Future / Nuestro Valle Nuestro Futuro.

Just 35 percent of survey respondents said they will dine at a sit-down restaurant within the first month of their reopening, which occurred for many restaurants last week, and 56 percent of survey respondents said they will do so within three months. Community events fared worse, with 22 percent indicating they will attend an event a month after they are allowed and 37 percent saying they will attend one within three months. Similar percentages of residents — 22 percent and 34 percent — said they would work out at a gym or indoor fitness center within a month and three months, respectively.

In comparison, 58 percent of respondents said they will visit a retail store within a month and 78 percent said they will visit a store within three months.

In another question asked in the survey, 64 percent of overall respondents and 76 percent of Latino respondents said getting sick from the coronavirus is the most pressing concern for themselves and those in their household in the coming weeks and months.

The hesitancy among some to visit brick-and-mortar businesses and to return to the previous “normal,” coupled with lost jobs and hours suffered by residents due to the pandemic, is likely to have a significant economic impact on the region. Consumer spending alone typically makes up a big chunk of a community’s economic activity.

A total of 607 residents completed the 24-question Our Valley Our Future survey, which was conducted from May 13-27 and was meant to measure the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economic and social well-being of residents and to gather ideas on ways the region can recover in the weeks and months ahead. About 72 percent of the respondents live in the Wenatchee and East Wenatchee areas, and 25.4 percent self-identified as Latino/Hispanic. These figures generally match official demographics for the two counties.

Approximately 35 percent of all survey respondents said they have lost work hours or a job since March 1 due to the coronavirus outbreak. When broken down to just those who were in the work force prior to the pandemic, that figure jumps to 43 percent. Of the survey respondents

who make \$35,000 a year or less, 66 percent said they have lost work hours or a job.

About 21 percent of respondents said they anticipated having to tap into their savings in order to pay for their rent or mortgage in June. That figure rises to 24.7 percent when only those who owe rent or mortgage each month are considered (some people own their homes or live with others). Another 5.6 percent said they would not be able to pay their rent or mortgage in June. The survey asked which actions people would personally take to speed up the region's economic recovery from the pandemic. 85.5 percent of respondents said they would purchase goods and services from locally owned businesses; 80.2 percent said they would pay bills on time to assist the economy; 78.2 percent said they would wear a mask while in a business to help prevent the spread of the coronavirus and to help keep the business open.

Asked to prioritize where local governments should spend recovery dollars, residents ranked food assistance, housing assistance and small business loans, in that order, as the highest priorities.

The Our Valley Our Future survey also provided residents with an opportunity to offer up ideas that would help in recovery efforts. Among the answers: A large-scale 'Buy Local' campaign, outdoor dining for more restaurants, free Internet service for all, tech support so businesses can have a greater e-commerce presence, low-cost child care facilities, additional behavioral health services, and more bike infrastructure and community gardens. (For the entire list of ideas, please see the full survey report at www.ourvalleyourfuture.org.)

"We need to move away from thinking 'bounce back' because that connotes a return to the way things were," wrote one resident. "We need to figure out new ways to forge ahead in a safer and more thoughtful manner."

"The pandemic has shown us that with the right infrastructure and technology in place, businesses can continue operating successfully with remote workers," said another resident. "I would like to see our leaders supporting businesses with making this transition and keeping it post-pandemic; it is good for the environment and for the well-being of people that work rule our lives less."

Wrote another resident: "(We need) more help for people who work in orchards or packing sheds. They are the most vulnerable ones and they are the ones who feed us, and we don't pay a lot of attention to their health. It's the highest percentage of infected people and deaths."

Yet another resident had this advice: "Every household should have reliable internet access, especially in rural areas like Waterville and Mansfield so they can live there and make a living. All students should have access to an I-pad device."

Other key findings from the survey:

- Nearly 45 percent of the survey respondents said they or someone in their household has been struggling with anxiety, depression, sadness and/or isolation since March 1. Thirty-four percent said they have had difficulty getting daily exercise and 30.3 percent said they have struggled to keep a healthy weight during the pandemic. Purchases of products other than food and medical supplies was cited by 24.8 percent of

respondents. About 23 percent said they have struggled to travel to areas outside the region and 18.6 said they have struggled to connect with a faith-based community. About 15 percent of respondents said they struggled to access medical care.

- The Apple Capital Loop Trail has received a lot of use during the coronavirus crisis, with 48.1 percent of respondents who have recreated saying they have gone there for exercise. The Wenatchee Foothills were cited by 35.8 percent.
- Asked how much longer they are willing or able to practice physical/social distancing, 67.5 percent of residents said as long as required, while 8.6 percent said less than a month, and another 7.1 percent said they would no longer do so.
- Over the next year or more, 89.1 percent of respondents said they anticipate washing their hands more; 68.7 percent said they will use hand sanitizer more frequently; 67.2 percent said they will wear a mask and/or gloves; 60.1 percent said they will abstain from social gatherings; and 35.4 percent anticipate working from home.

Our Valley Our Future, founded in 2015, is a collaborative nonprofit organization that brings together residents and organizations to improve the region's quality of life. Its guiding document is its Action Plan, which includes more than 160 projects led by partnering organizations. Our Valley Our Future serves as convener, facilitator, data-collector, planner and communicator.

For the complete report with results for all 24 questions in both English and Spanish, please visit www.ourvalleyourfuture.org.

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