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Greater Wheeling Regional Plan

SURVEY RESULTS



Survey Results

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Executive Summary

The Wheeling Area Strategic Plan included a process for public involvement. Originally, it was to have involved holding open forums and in-person stakeholder meetings. The sessions had been scheduled for early Spring, but they were delayed and eventually cancelled because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead, we conducted a web-based survey to gather ideas and opinions from people from across the region. It was available from mid-July until the end of August. Some of our key findings are as follows.

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

- The two highest-rated characteristics related to Wheeling’s geography: the region’s proximity to other places and historic surroundings both had an average score greater than 4.0.
- Respondents who described themselves as local residents rated the characteristics of energy production, cost of living, and crime rate/safety lower than the other stakeholder groups.
- Local residents rated the age of residents more positively while business owners rated climate less positively.

DEVELOPMENT

- Based on the responses, almost every industry is thought to be at least somewhat appropriate for the region.
- Three industries were selected as being appropriate for the region by more than three-quarters of respondents: education (78.6 percent), health care (77.9 percent), and manufacturing (75.2 percent).
- Education ranked highest overall, but it garnered the support of just over half of those who identified themselves as business owners (51.7 percent), compared to more than four-fifths of others (81.7 percent).

DEVELOPMENT FOCUS

- More than two-thirds of people selected business retention and expansion (68.7 percent) as the most important development focus, and more than three-fifths selected infrastructure improvement (62.6 percent).
- Business owners expressed less than the expected level of support for retail expansion but were more supportive of entrepreneurial enhancement.
- Local residents showed the opposite trends as they were more supportive of expanding retraining opportunities and less supportive of entrepreneurial enhancement.

DEVELOPMENT IMPEDIMENTS

- The region’s workforce was viewed as an impediment by more than two-thirds (69.3 percent) of respondents. The strength of this response, especially when compared with the other items, indicates that this is an area that should be addressed in any regional development plan.
- Business owners listed communications infrastructure less often and the other category more often than would have been expected.

EDUCATIONAL PRIORITIES

- At greater than 4.5, vocational education had the highest average score for educational priorities.

- Primary and secondary education and STEM education each had an average score between 4.4 and 4.5.
- The only relatively low-ranked education category was distance education, which had an average score of just under 3.6.

LAND USE

- Downtown redevelopment was selected as the most important land use issue by more than two-thirds of respondents (68.7 percent).
- Two issues selected by about two-fifths of respondents made up the second tier of responses: sustainable development (43.9 percent) and historic preservation (37.8 percent).

INITIATIVES

- Respondents rated three potential initiatives above the others: quality of life, regional infrastructure, and regional economy. Each had an average score greater than 4.00 (which was “very important” on the rating scale).
- Respondents from Ohio County and respondents who said they were local residents rated quality of life substantially higher than respondents from other places or from other stakeholder groups respectively.
- Increasing community connectiveness and investing in local neighborhoods rated substantially higher for local residents and substantially lower with business owners.

1 Introduction

The Wheeling Area Strategic Plan included a process for public involvement. Originally, it was to have involved holding open forums and in-person stakeholder meetings. The sessions had been scheduled for early Spring, but they were delayed and eventually cancelled because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Instead, we conducted a web-based survey to gather ideas and opinions from people from across the region. It was available from mid-July until the end of August.

The web-based survey was open to all residents in the region, and thus was not designed to be representative of the region as a whole. For the purposes of the strategic plan, however, the potential self-selection bias is not a problem as the normal means of public engagement generally suffer from similar issues.

The questions for the survey were developed after reviewing existing plans for communities in the study region (specifically the comprehensive plans for Wheeling and Steubenville) as well as widely available reports about the area. General information, such as industrial classifications and types of education, also informed question development.

The survey was made available through WVU and was promoted by the Wheeling Area Chamber of Commerce. Media contacts and media appearances were made to inform people about the survey. Information about the effort also was sent to each Extension Office in the eight-county region; those offices promoted the effort through their respective channels and connections.

2 Respondents

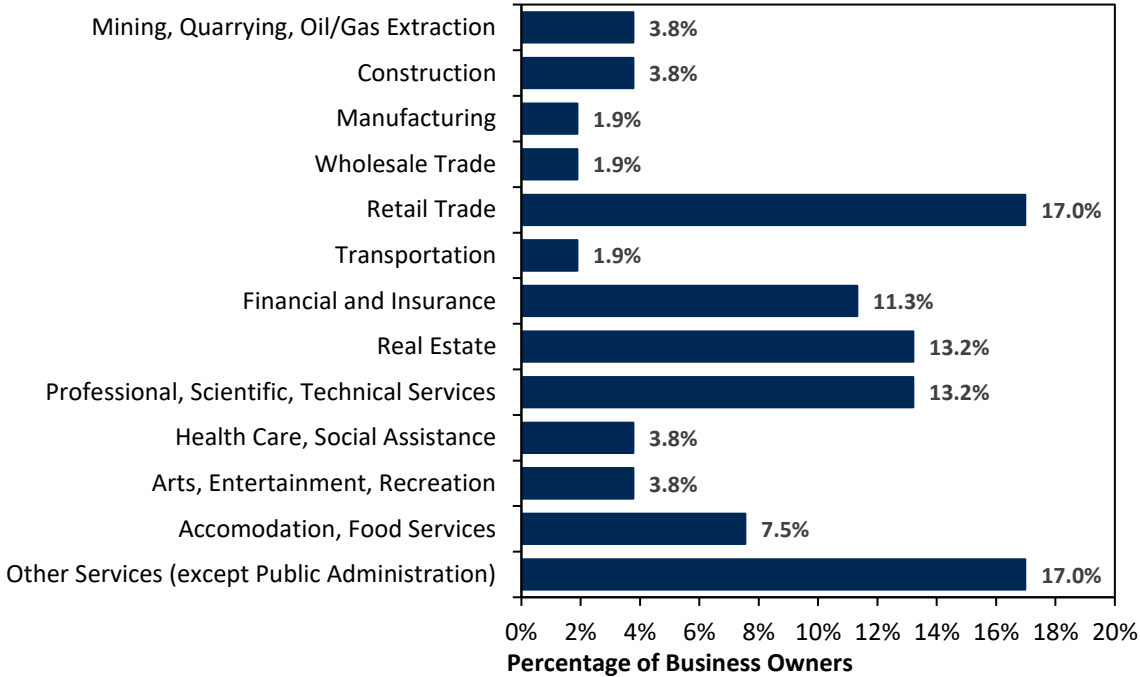
A total of 365 people started the survey. Most questions had between 286 and 294 usable responses. The number of completed survey responses was comparable to higher estimates of the number of participants that would have participated in the public forums.

The survey began by asking respondents if they wished to participate in the survey (one individual elected out of taking the survey at that point). It then collected some information from the respondents about their residence and their connection to the region. As shown in Figure 1, more than two-thirds of respondents identified themselves as “local residents” (250 or 68.5 percent). It appears that most of the responses came from “ordinary” individuals – as opposed to those who might have a direct interest in the strategic plan, such as business owners, community leaders, and government officials. Getting such input was the intent of the public forums, so on this measure, the survey worked well.

Figure 1: Distribution of Respondents

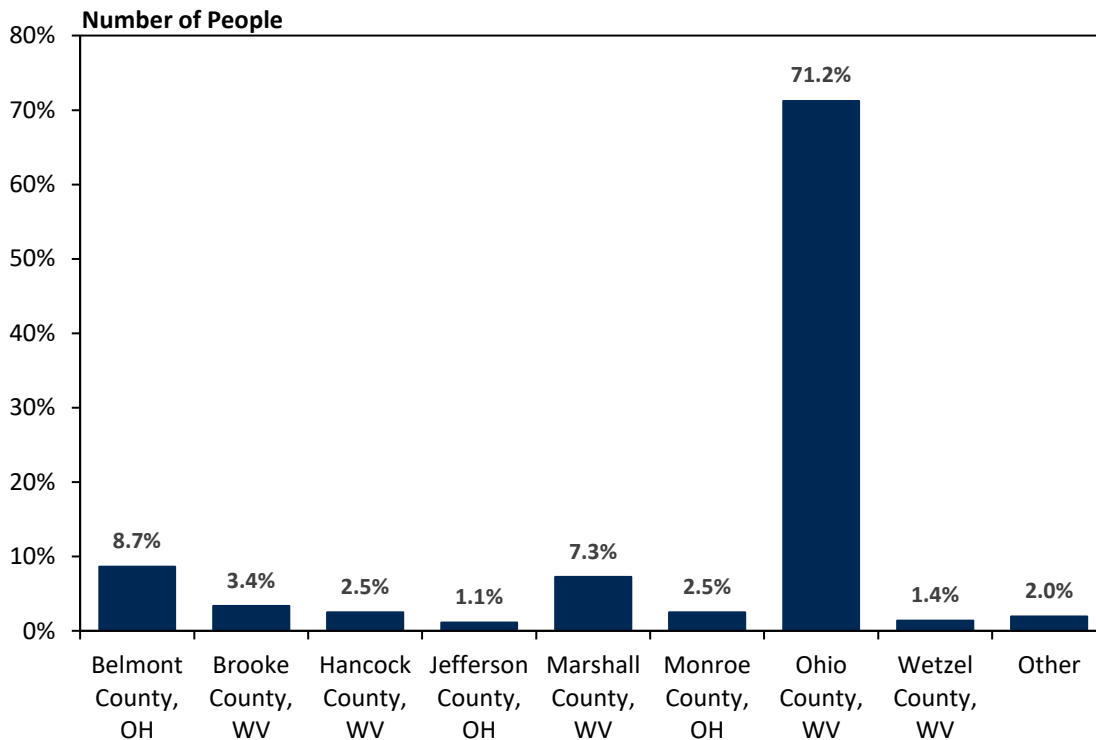
The only other identifier selected by more than one-tenth of the respondents was “business owner” (53 or 14.5 percent). As shown in Figure 2, the most common types of businesses represented are retail trade (9 or 17.0 percent of businesses), other services (9 or 17.0 percent of businesses), real estate, rental, and leasing (7 or 13.2 percent of businesses), and professional scientific, and technical services (7 or 13.2 percent).

Figure 2: Distribution of Business Sectors



Conversely, Figure 3 highlights that the geographic distribution of respondents was concentrated. More than two-thirds of respondents said they lived in Ohio County, WV, the county in which Wheeling is located (255 or 69.9 percent). Upon review, this should not be too surprising as both the plan and the survey began with “Wheeling” – meaning that people who were from the area around the city may have been more interested in completing the survey. Just over one-quarter of respondents said they lived in the other seven study area counties (95 or 26.0 percent). Slightly more respondents reported living in the four other West Virginia counties (52 or 14.2 percent) than the three Ohio counties (43 or 11.8 percent) in the region. There were also a few responses (10 or 2.7 percent) from persons outside the region from who either had been former residents or who appeared to have interests in the region as well as a few responses (5 or 1.4 percent) that did not include location information.

Figure 3: Distribution of Respondents by County



The proposed public forums would have occurred in different places throughout the region (see Figure 3). But it is unknown to what degree the geographic distribution of participants would have been different. Additionally, the surveys allowed each individual respondent to have their opinions and ideas heard; such an equal level of participation would probably not have occurred using the public forums. For these reasons, we believe the survey results provide valuable data on which to base the Strategic Plan’s conclusions.

3 Survey Results

The main body of the survey had questions that sought to gain insights on the assets and areas for improvement for the region. It featured two types of questions. One type asked the respondents to rate their opinion on various criteria using a standard five-point scale from “strongly negative” to “strongly positive.” These responses were converted to numeric scores with the higher number meaning the more positive result for analysis.

The other type asked the respondents to select items they considered important from a list. Depending on the question, the number of items that respondents can select may be numbered or may be unlimited. The quantity of the responses – both overall and within each group – formed the basis for the analysis of these items.

3.1 Strengths and Weaknesses

The first ratings questions asked respondents to rate 15 characteristics of the region as to what degree they consider them to be a strength or a weakness. The potential answers ranged from “major weakness” (scored as a 1) to “major strength” (scored as a 5). The midpoint was “not a strength or a weakness” (scored as a 3).

Five of the categories stood out from others. For the most part, the higher-rated characteristics described quality of life topics rather than matters related to economic issues and general demographic characteristics.

The two highest-rated characteristics related to Wheeling’s geography: the region’s proximity to other places and historic surroundings both had an average score greater than 4.0. Three other characteristics dealing with well-being averaged higher than 3.8: outdoor recreation, cost of living, and crime rate/safety (see Figure 4). No other category had an average score above 3.5. These five characteristics would be considered the strongest assets for the region to consider as part of development efforts.

Six categories had an average score below the midpoint. This included four categories with an average of less than 2.5: age of residents, health care, per capita real income, and employment opportunities. These characteristics could be considered the potential areas of improvement or at least characteristics. The appearance of health care on this list is not surprising, given the recent hospital closures in the region. The characteristics related to income level and job options point to the need for continued economic development. Those activities could also help with the perceived negatives related to the age distribution as improvement in the economic climate it could make the area more attractive for those wanting to remain in or relocate to the region.

Figure 4: Relative Rating of Wheeling Characteristics (All Groups)

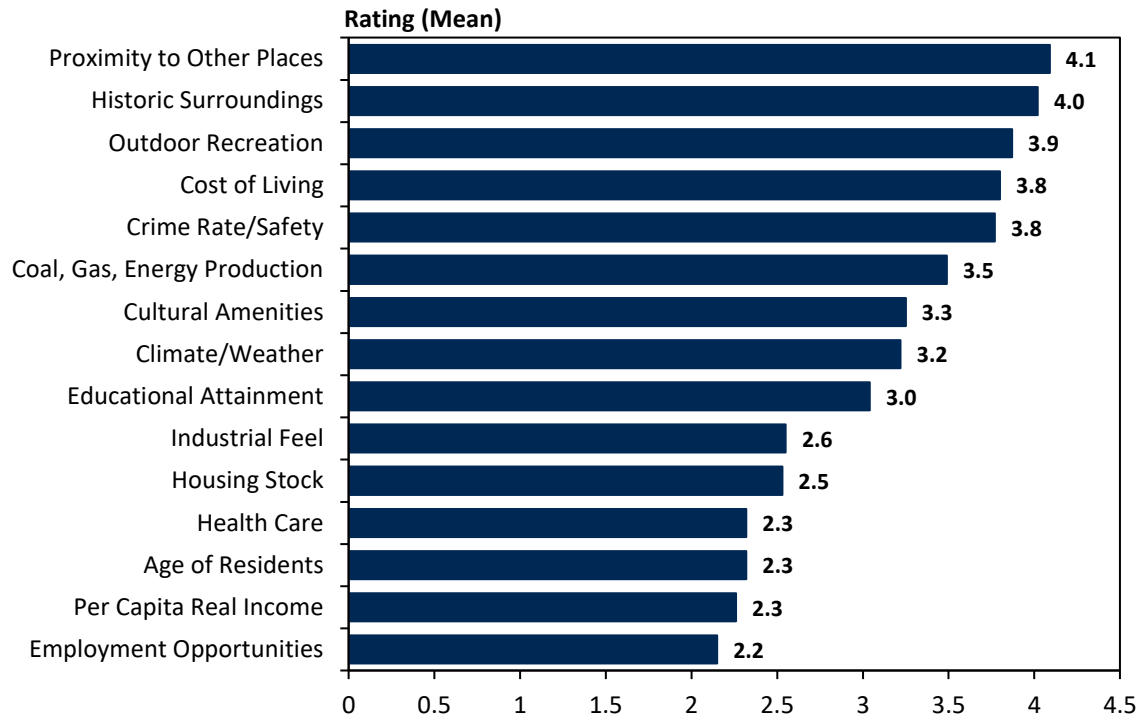
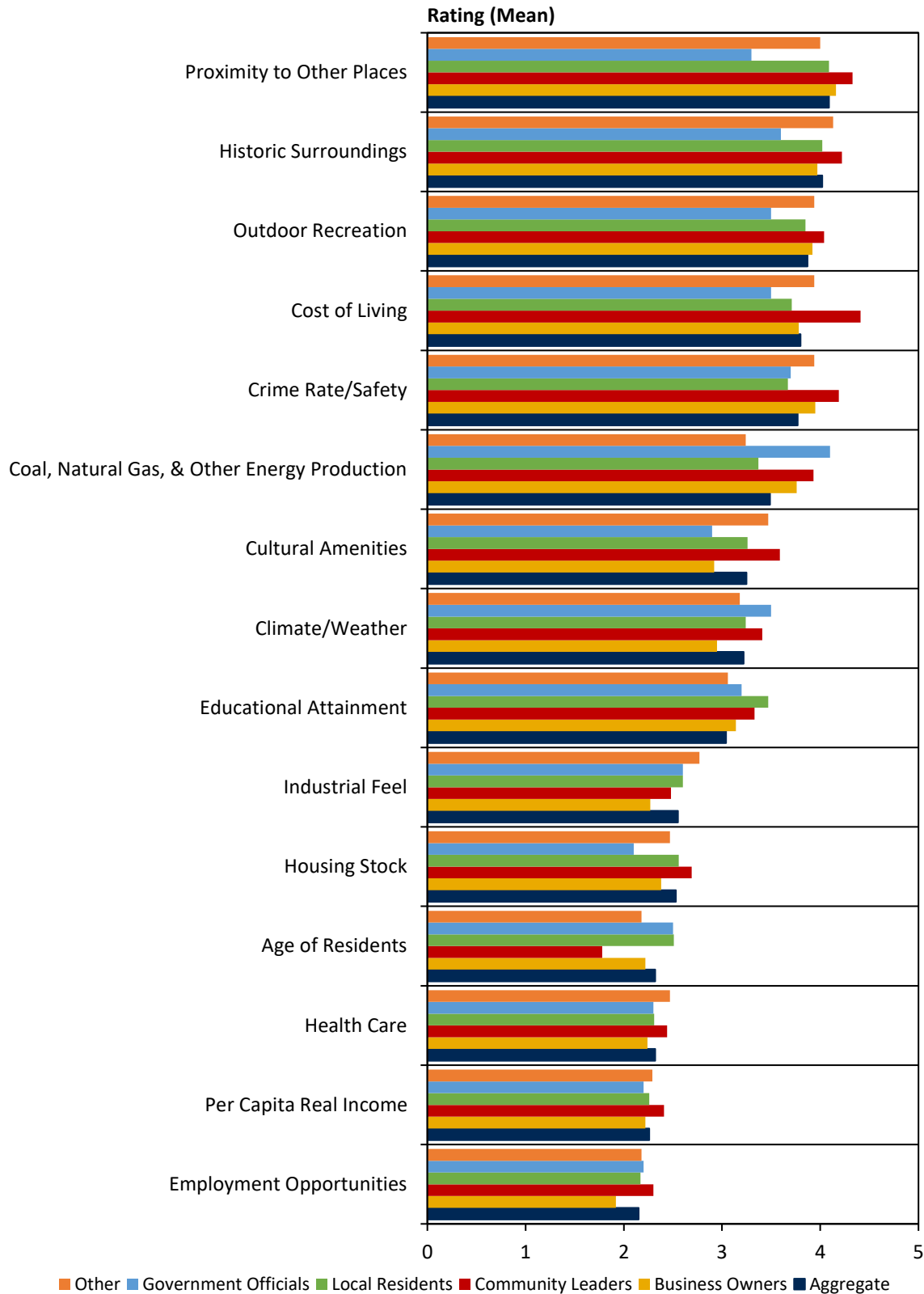


Figure 5 highlights the meaningful differences based upon the location or type of respondent. Most notably, Ohio County respondents rated three of these top characteristics as even more of a strength than those who reported living elsewhere: proximity to other places, outdoor recreation, and crime rate/safety. They also felt that cultural amenities and residents' educational attainment as strengths for the region but felt less positively about energy production.

Examining the responses by stakeholder groups sometimes provided both confirmatory and contradictory results. Respondents who described themselves as local residents rated the characteristics of energy production, cost of living, and crime rate/safety lower than the other stakeholder groups. The first result is consistent with the general findings and agreed with the ratings of the Ohio County respondent. However, the feelings of local residents on the other two issues went counter to the general findings and their feelings about expressed by all respondents (and specifically by respondents from Ohio County for crime rate/safety). This indicates that local residents view matters related to how costly and how safe the region is somewhat differently than decision-makers.

There were two other stakeholder-based differences when comparing results to all respondents. Local residents rated the age of residents more positively while business owners rated climate less positively.

Figure 5: Relative Rating of Wheeling Characteristics



Overall, these differing perceptions will need to be accounted for as part of any planning process. With stakeholder groups wanting different matters stressed as part of a plan, there will need to be a balancing act. It may also be necessary to further explore these differing results to discern their true meaning; that result can also help determine the best course of action for the plan related to these matters.

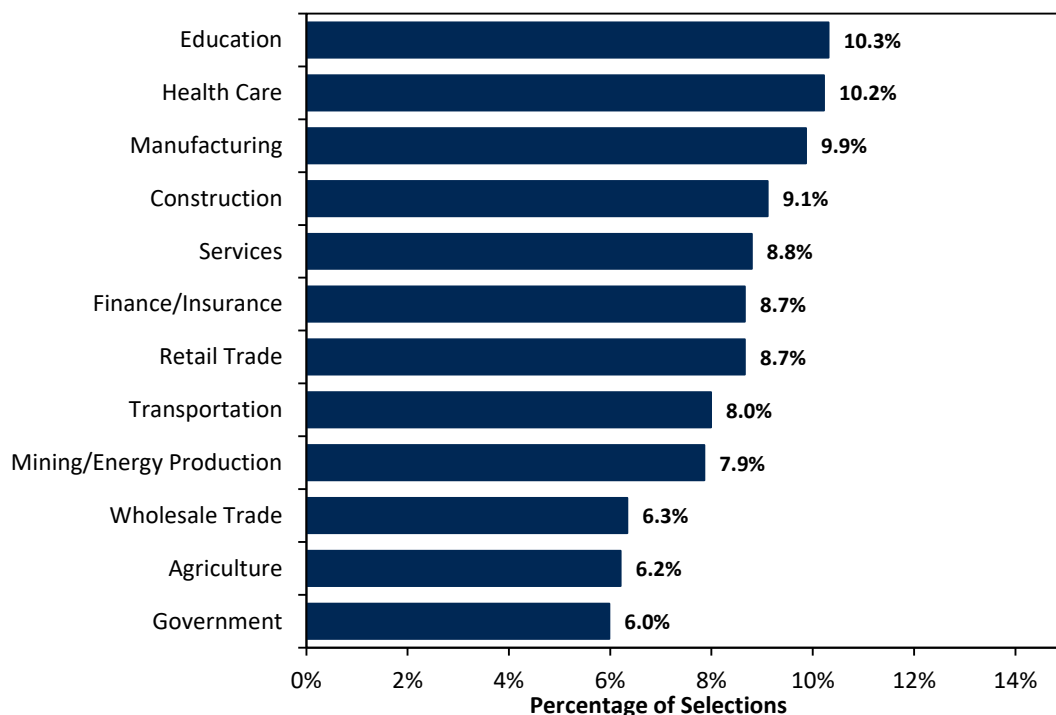
3.2 Development

There were several questions that explored potential development direction for the region. In each case, respondents were provided a list of possibilities and asked to make selections from a list (see Figure 6).

The first question asked all respondents to select which of 12 industries (industrial sectors) they felt would be appropriate for the region. Respondents could select as many of the items as they wanted. The average respondent selected more than seven industries as appropriate for the region.

Overall, the high volume of responses makes it challenging to interpret the interpretation of the data. Three industries were selected as being appropriate for the region by more than three-quarters of respondents: education (78.6 percent or 10.3 percent of all selections¹), health care (77.9 percent or 10.2 percent of selections), and manufacturing (75.2 percent or 9.9 percent of selections). These appear to be industries respondents thought should be emphasized in direct development efforts.

Figure 6: Most Appropriate Industry Types for the Wheeling Region (All Groups)



¹ The percentage of respondents or selections equals the number of times an issue was selected as a share of the number of people who responded or the total number of responses, respectively.

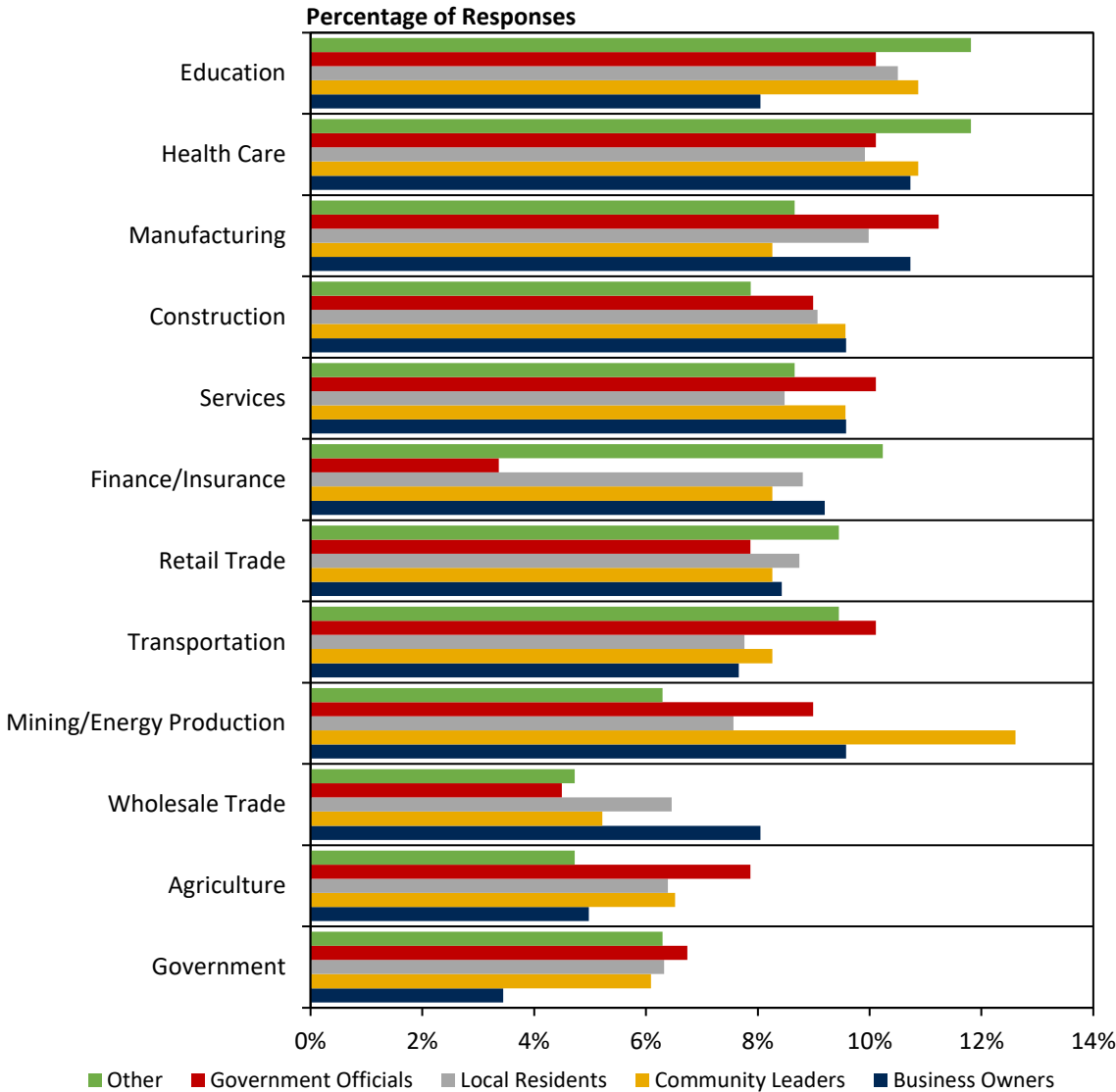
Rated close to these on the second tier are several industries listed by about two-thirds of the respondents. They were construction (69.4 percent or 9.1 percent of selections), services (67.0 percent or 8.8 percent of selections), retail trade (66.0 percent or 8.7 percent of selections), and finance, insurance, and real estate (66.0 percent or 8.7 percent of selections). These industrial sectors represent needed activities which that would support other development activities. Additionally, these other areas could be the focus of such activities if the opportunity presented itself, however.

It is important to note that based on the responses, almost every industry is thought to be at least somewhat appropriate for the region. In addition to those sectors noted above, two others were selected by about three-fifths of respondents. What may be most telling though is that three industries were not selected as appropriate by at least half the respondents: wholesale trade (48.3 percent or 6.3 percent of selections), agriculture (47.3 percent or 6.2 percent of selections), and government (45.6 percent or 6.0 percent of selections). These are probably the only industries which residents think should not be pursued as development activities, even if the situation presented itself to do so.

Looking at different types of respondents, Ohio County respondents were less likely to select transportation/communications/utility as an appropriate industry than would be expected. Similarly, business owners were less likely to select education or government than would be expected (Figure 7).

The results with respect to education warrant special attention since that industry ranked highest overall. But it garnered the support of just over half of those who identified themselves as business owners (51.7 percent), compared to more than four-fifths of others (81.7 percent). This shows that a meaningful stakeholder group may be more reluctant to support development efforts focused on that industry, which will have to be addressed before the region can undertake efforts in that direction.

Figure 7: Most Appropriate Industry Types for the Wheeling Region



3.3 Development Focus

The next question on the survey asked all respondents what they felt should be the focus of development activities (see Figure 8). Respondents could only select up-to-three of the eight choices (one of which was an “other” category). More than nine-tenths of respondents chose the maximum three items (91.8 percent) with the average selections per respondent being just under that (2.88).

More than two-thirds of persons selected business retention and expansion (68.7 percent or 23.9 percent of all selections) while more than three-fifths selected infrastructure improvement (62.6 percent or 21.7 percent of selections). There was a large gap between these two areas and the other issues. The next tier included two issues selected by between one-third and two-fifths of the respondents: community enhancement (38.8 percent or 13.5 percent of selections) and workforce development (38.1 percent or 13.2 percent of selections). Conversely, the two least selected focus areas

were selected by about one-fourth or fewer respondents: industrial recruitment (25.2 percent) and retail expansion (17.0 percent). Together, these show a preference from respondents to focus efforts on improving the existing situation in the region rather than seeking new enterprises from outside the region.

Figure 8: Perceived Importance of Possible Development Activities in the Wheeling Region (All Groups)

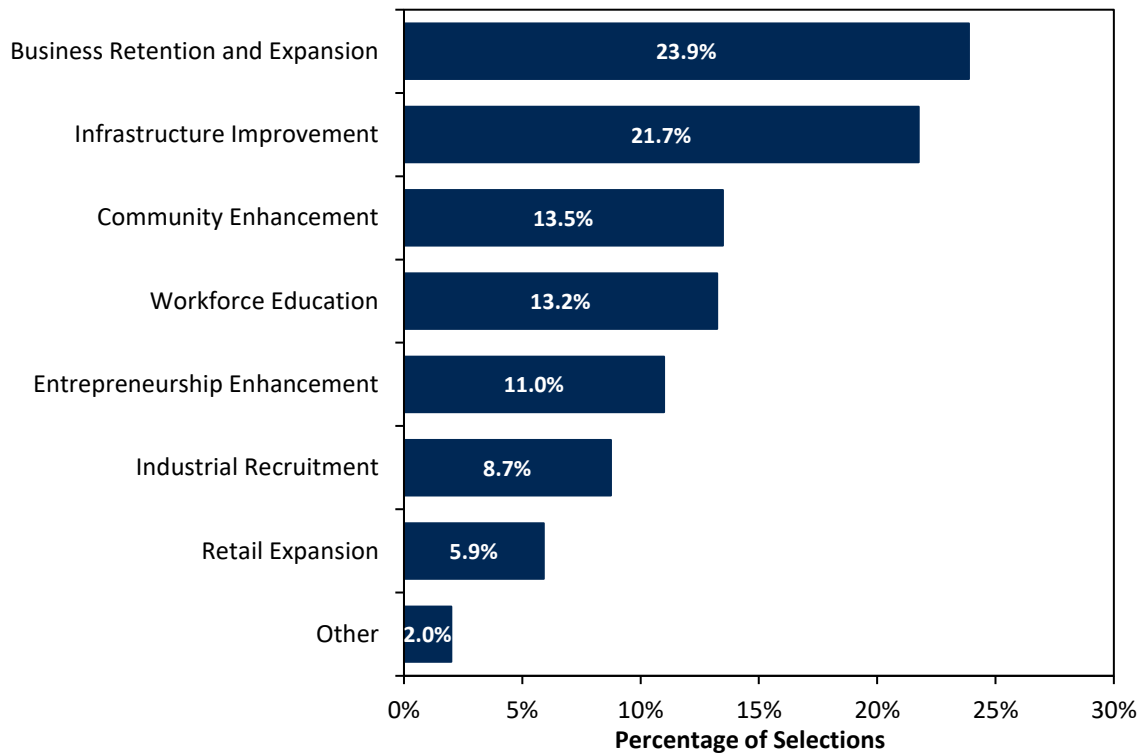
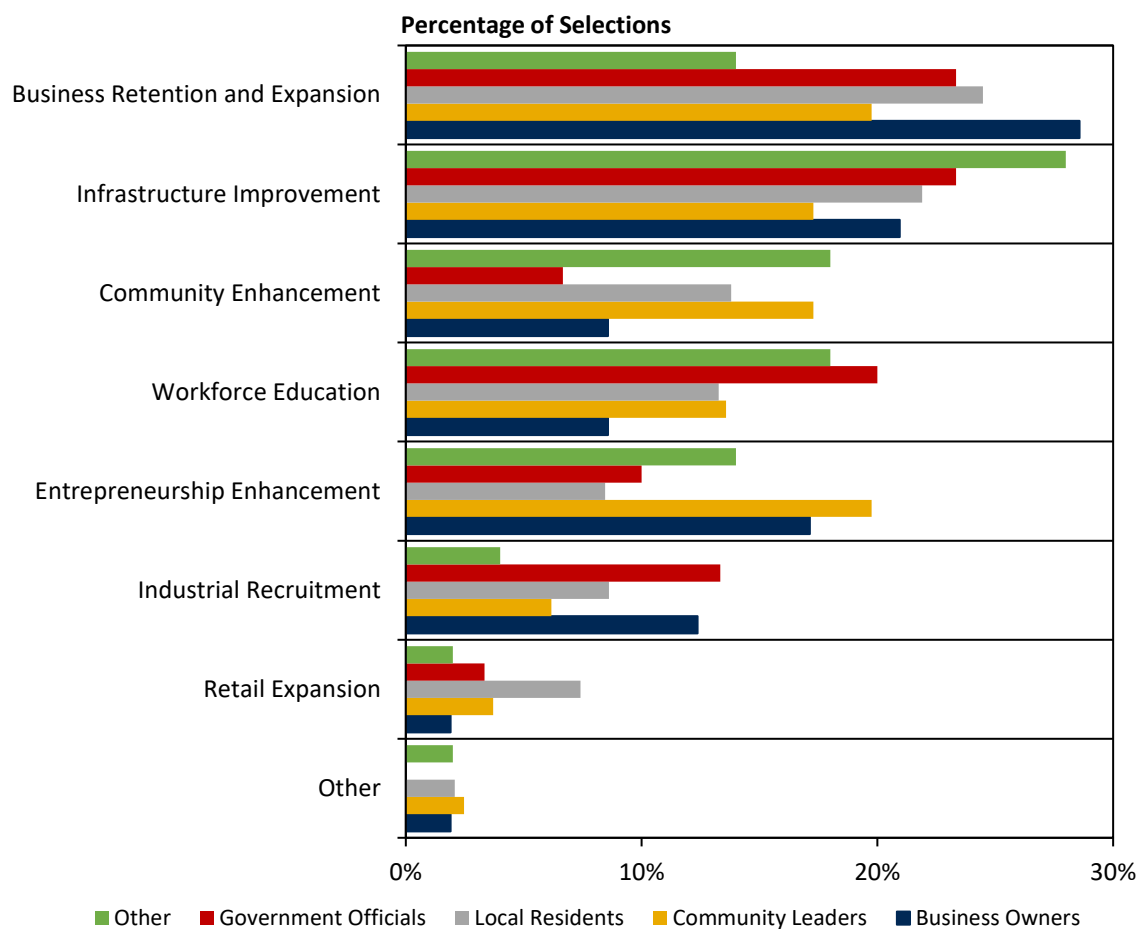


Figure 9 highlights any meaningful variation among groups that both concurred with and ran counter to the general findings. Respondents from Ohio County expressed more support for business retention and expansion activity than would be expected. Meanwhile there was divergence between business owners and local residents. Business owners expressed less than the expected level of support for retail expansion but were more supportive of entrepreneurial enhancement; local residents showed the opposite trends as they were more supportive of retail expansion and less supportive of entrepreneurial enhancement).

Figure 9: Perceived Importance of Possible Development Activities in the Wheeling Region

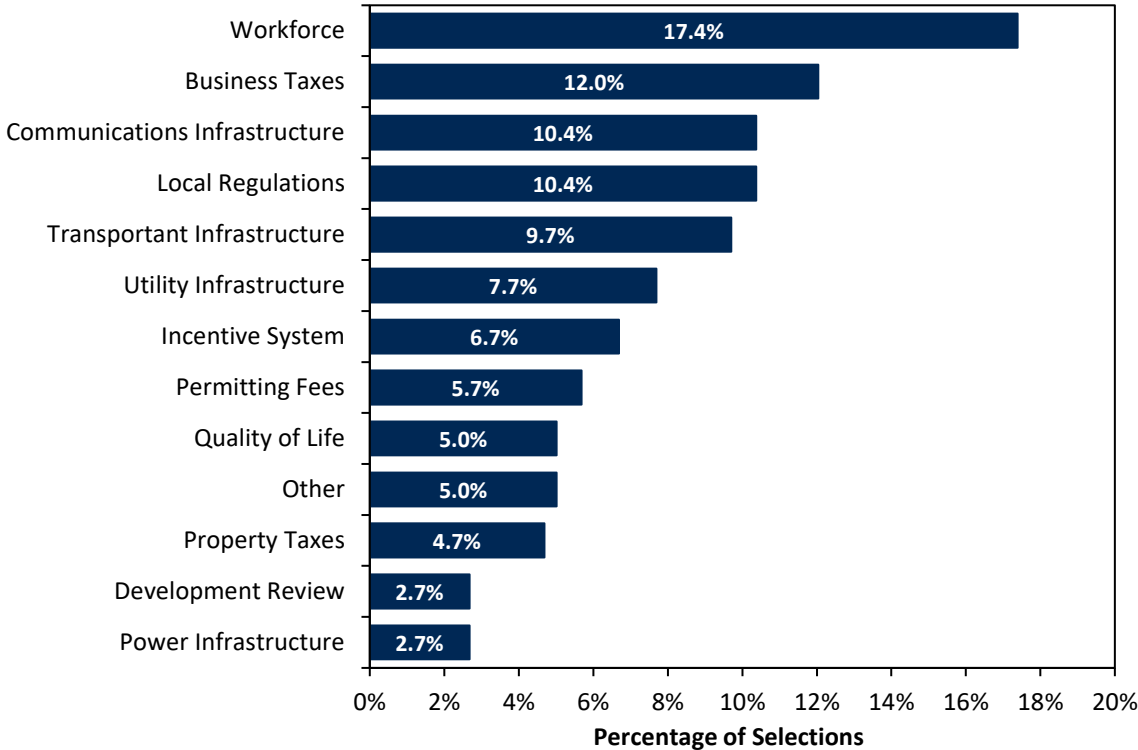


3.4 Development Impediments

Those who identified as business owners, government officials, and community leaders were asked about impediments to business and economic development in the region (see Figure 10). Respondents could select all categories that applied. The survey had 13 choices, the last of which was an “other” category. The number of categories selected by respondents averaged just under four (3.99), and no one selected more than nine. This relatively low level of response (especially compared to the previous question on development focus) may indicate that there are fewer problems than opportunities for development activities in the region.

Among those issues selected, the region’s workforce was viewed as an impediment by more than two-thirds (69.3 percent) of respondents (or 17.4 percent of all sections). The strength of this response, especially when compared with the other items, indicates that this is an area that should be addressed in any regional development plan.

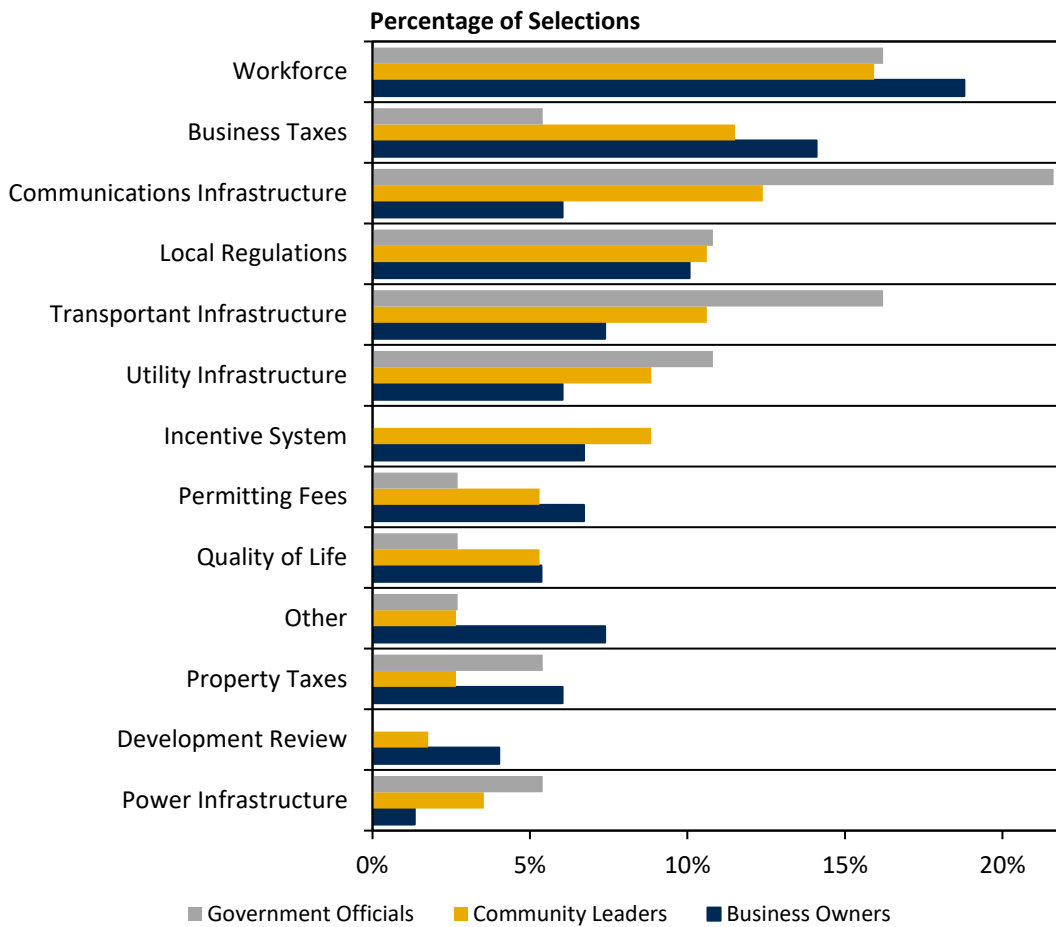
Figure 10: Most Important Impediments to Business and Economic Development in the Region (All Groups)



Four other issues were selected by between one-half and one-third of respondents: business taxes (48.0 percent or 12.0 percent of selections), community infrastructure (41.3 percent or 10.4 percent of selections), local regulations (41.3 percent or 10.4 percent of selections), and transportation infrastructure (38.7 percent or 9.7 percent of selections). Meanwhile, five categories were selected by no more than one-fifth of the respondents: other (20.0 percent or 5.0 percent of selections), quality of life (20.0 percent or 5.0 percent of selections), property taxes (18.7 percent or 4.7 percent of selections), development review (10.7 percent or 2.7 percent of selections), and power infrastructure (10.7 percent or 2.7 percent of selections). Among the other category responses, no additional issue was listed by more than three respondents and several referred to provided choices (which may or may not have also been selected by the respondent). Combined, these results show that there are varying perspectives on what is important to address – other than workforce-related issues.

There were a few meaningful results when looking at differences between groups of respondents (see Figure 11). Respondents from Ohio County listed business taxes more often than expected. Meanwhile, business owners listed communications infrastructure less often and the other category more often than would have been expected. These point to variations in local situations and in perspectives. They are noteworthy because they indicate differences in perceptions surrounding the second-tier issues, such as where and to whom they might be more salient and thus more in need of being addressed as part of a plan.

Figure 11: Most Important Impediments to Business and Economic Development in the Region



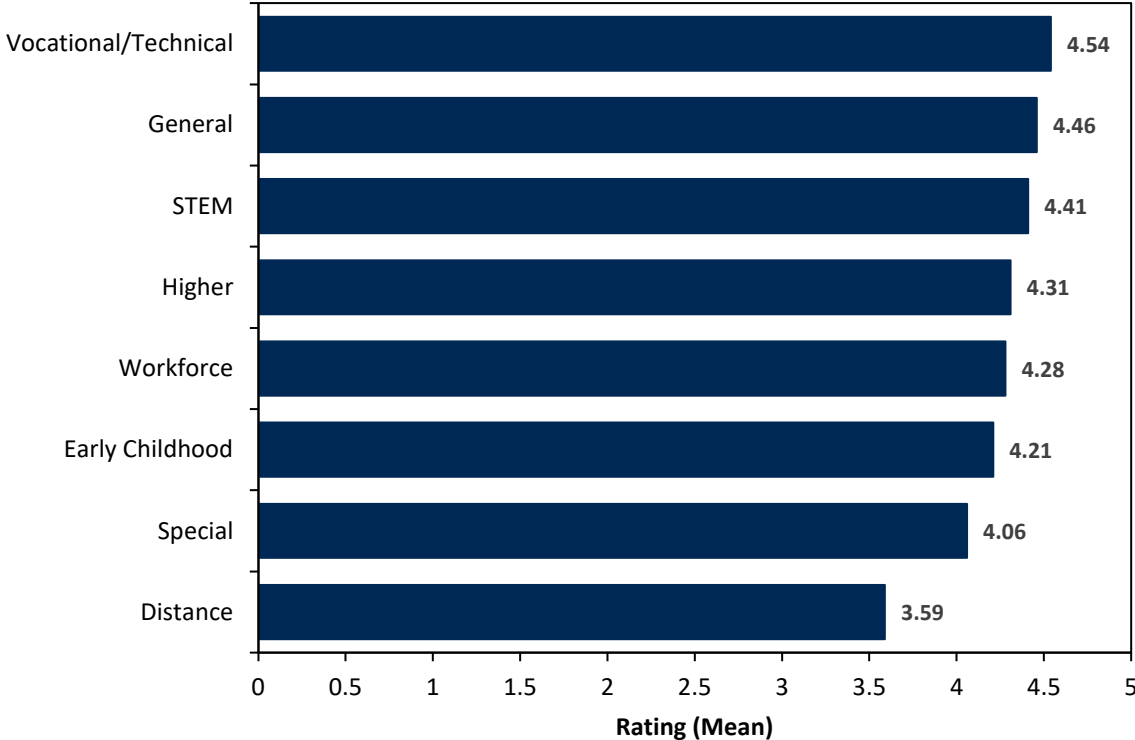
3.5 Educational Priorities

The next series of questions, presented in Figure 12, examined the importance of different types of education. Overall, every education category had high average score, with seven of the eight types of education coming in greater than 4.0 on the five-point scale.

Among these high scores, three categories still stood out. Vocational education had an average score greater than 4.5, and general (primary and secondary) education and STEM education each had an average score between 4.4 and 4.5. The only differentiation found in these categories was that Ohio County respondents rated general education slightly higher than those from other places.

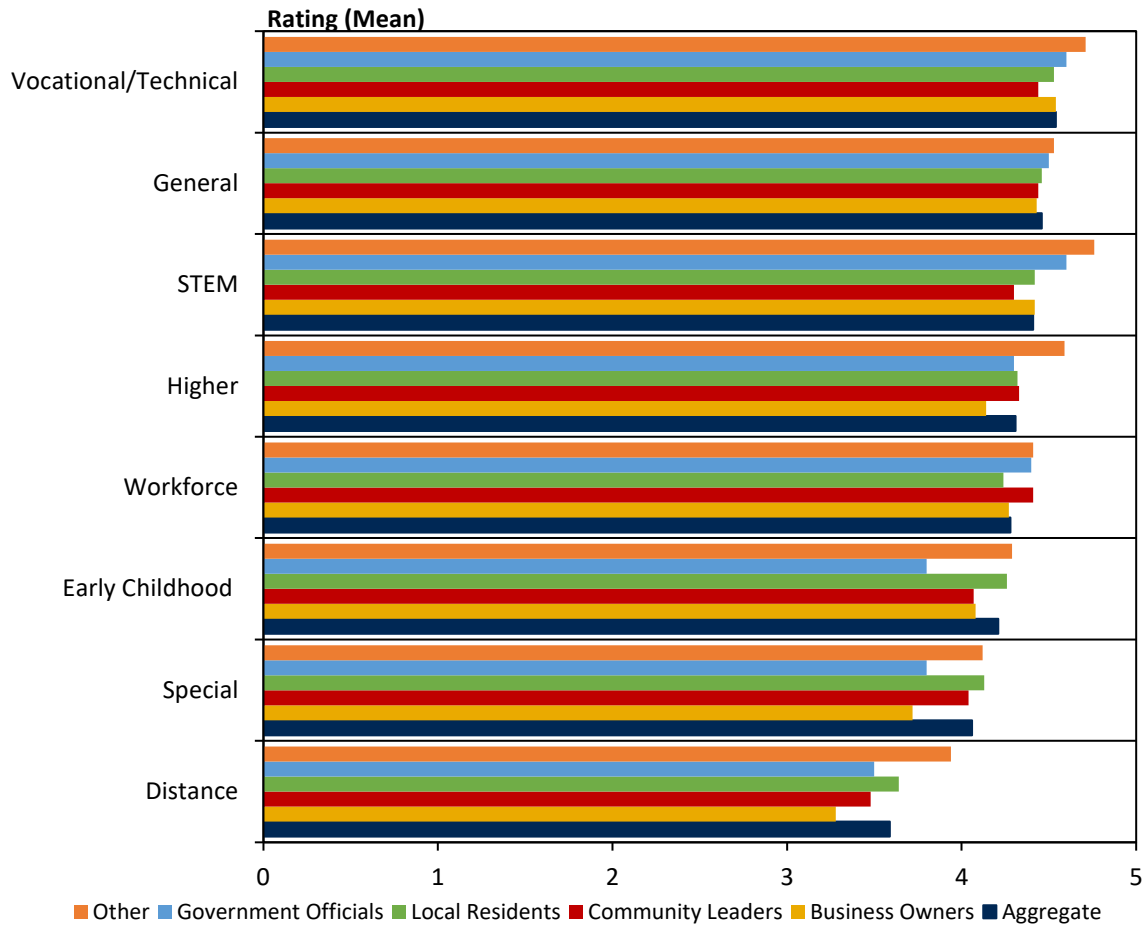
Conversely, the only relatively low-ranked education category was distance education which had an average score of just under 3.6. However, even this relatively low score was still above the mid-point of the scale. Given the emphasis that has been placed on that learning mode during the pandemic, it may be that respondents felt it had received enough attention or may reflect fatigue with such computer-based learning methods and a desire to return to more traditional in-person modes of instruction.

Figure 12: Relative Rating of Education in the Wheeling Region (All Groups)



There was little variation in these average scores based upon the type of respondent (see Figure 13). The only meaningful difference was that business owners rated special education substantially lower than the other respondents. It is worth noting here that special education had a slightly higher score with local residents than other respondents. It is likely these variations are related but it is unclear as to their importance.

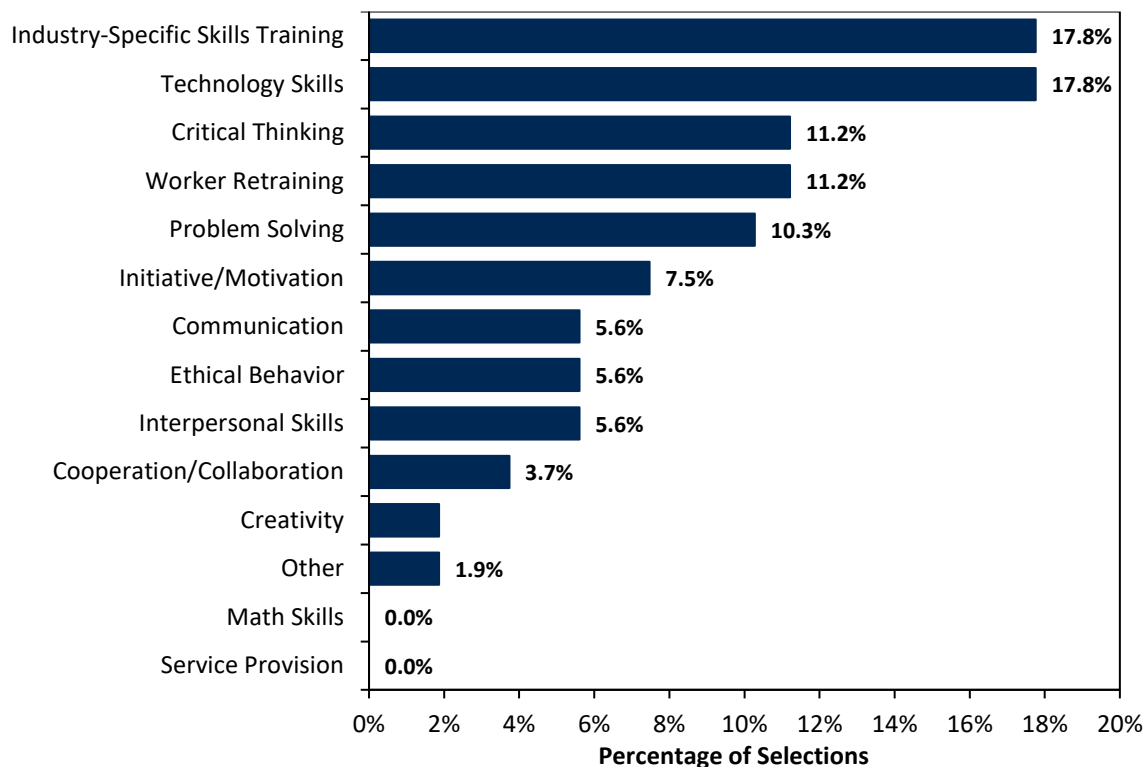
Figure 13: Relative Rating of Education in the Wheeling Region



As a follow-up question, business owners were specifically asked for ideas about the focus of workforce education efforts in the region (see Figure 14). They could select up to three choices from a list of 14 areas which included an “other” category.

Two areas received the most support as industry specific skills (51.4 percent or 17.4 percent of total selections) and technology skills (51.4 percent or 17.4 percent of selections) were each selected by more than half of the respondents. The next tier had three other categories listed about three-tenths of the time: critical thinking (32.4 percent or 11.2 percent of selections), worker retraining (32.4 percent or 11.2 percent of selections), and problem solving (29.7 percent or 10.3 percent of selections).

Figure 14: Most Important Focus of Future Workforce Education Efforts in the Wheeling Area (Business Owners)

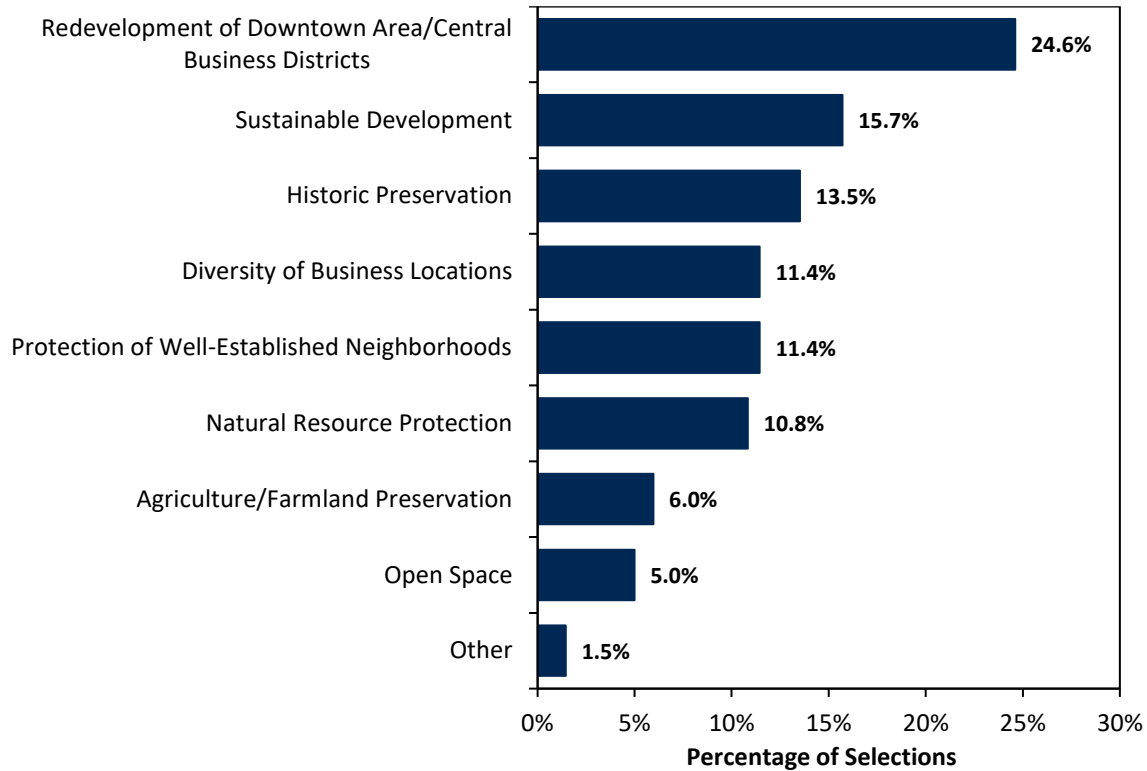


At the other end of the spectrum, four areas were selected two or fewer times: other (5.4 percent or 1.9 percent of selections), creativity (5.4 percent or 1.9 percent of selections), math (0.0 percent), and service provision (providing services) (0.0 percent). Also, the two other responses just expanded upon selections made by their respective respondents.

3.6 Land Use

The next question looked at land use issues because they can be an asset or an impediment to development (see Figure 15). Respondents were asked to select up to three items from a list of nine issues, including an “other” category. The most common response was downtown redevelopment which was selected by more than two-thirds of respondents (68.7 percent or 24.8 percent of all selections). Two issues selected by about two-fifths of respondents made up the second tier of responses: sustainable development (43.9 percent or 15.7 percent of selections) and historic preservation (37.8 percent or 13.5 percent of selections). And three issues selected by between three-tenths and one-third of respondents made up a third tier: diversity of business locations (32.0 percent or 11.4 percent of selections), protection of well-established neighborhoods (32.0 percent or 11.4 percent of selections), and natural resources protection (30.3 percent or 10.8 percent of selections).

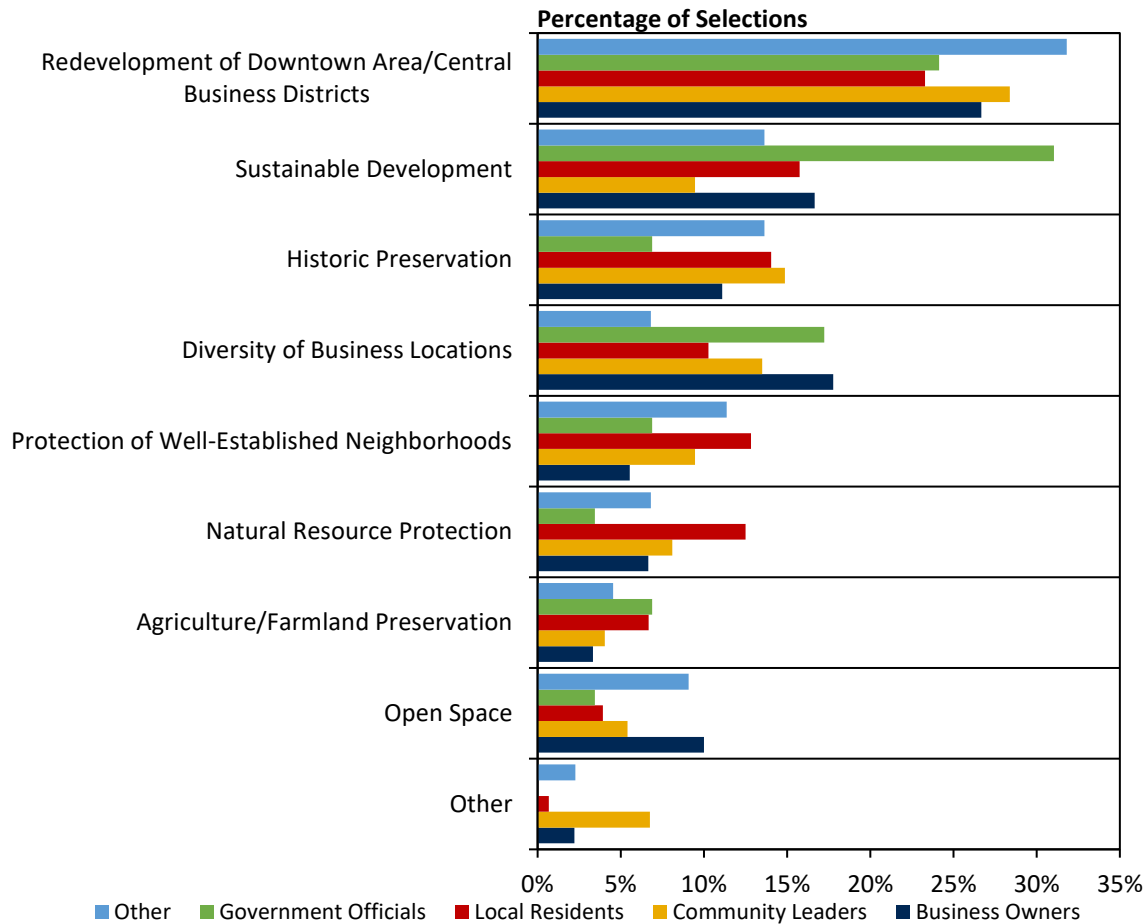
Figure 15: Most Important Land Use Issues for the Region (All Groups)



From these results, it is apparent that revitalization is the most important issue and one that should receive prominent attention in the regional development plan. Also, many of the other issues that received at least some support are related to protection and preservation, which aligns well with a redevelopment focus.

Overall, Figure 16 highlights that there was broad consensus among all types of respondents that redevelopment was the most important issue as well as on the other highly-rated issues. Differences between stakeholder groups arose only in the third-tier and lower land use issues. The biggest divergence was that difference was that local residents selected protection of well-established neighborhoods more often than would have been expected while business owners selected neighborhood protection less often than expected. Additionally, open space was selected more often by Ohio County respondents would have been expected and natural resource protection was selected more often by local residents. Finally, business owners listed items in the other category more often than would have been expected more.

Figure 16: Most Important Land Use Issues for the Region



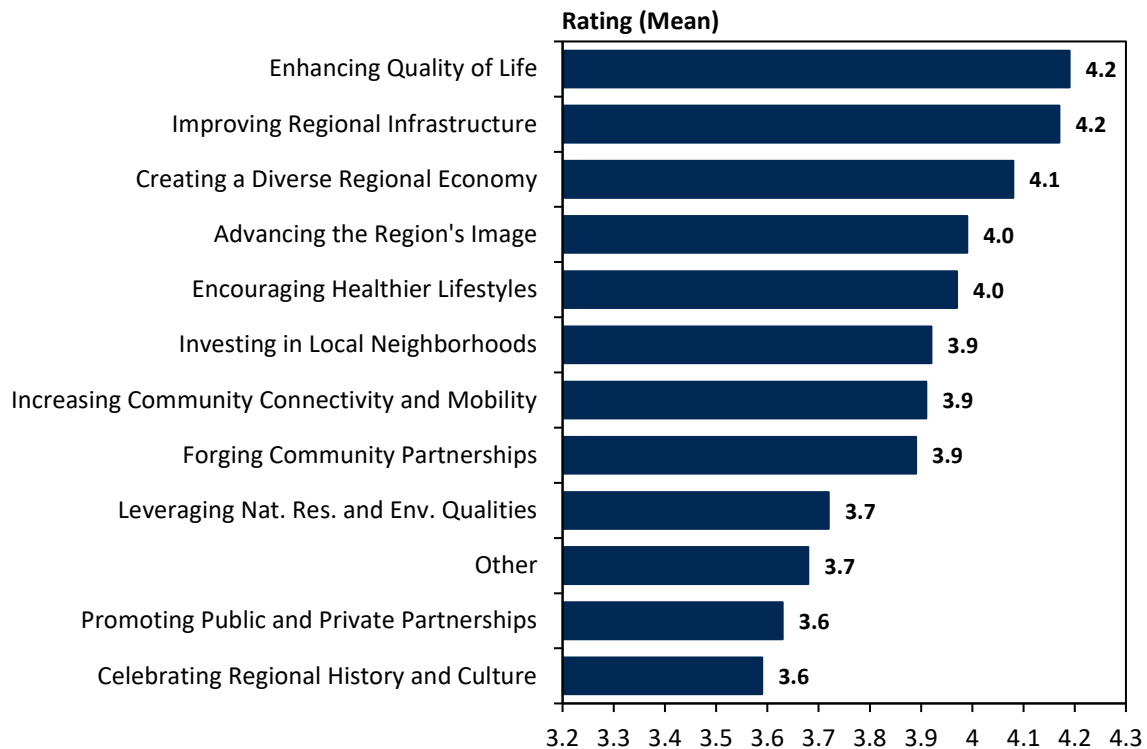
3.7 Initiatives

The final question asked respondents to rate 11 potential initiatives for the region (see Figure 17). All the choices rated higher than the midpoint of the scale. Three of the proposed focus areas stood out above the others: quality of life, regional infrastructure, and regional economy. Each had an average score greater than 4.00 (which was “very important” on the rating scale).

The high ranking for quality of life initiatives is consistent with other findings, particularly the assessment of strengths of the region discussed above. Also, respondents from Ohio County and respondents who said they were local residents rated this initiative substantially higher than respondents from other places or from other stakeholder groups respectively.

Similarly, regional initiatives being highly ranked makes sense given the focus of this plan is a regional area, though the third such initiative, regional image, was rated slightly lower than the other two proposed activities.

Figure 17: Relative Importance of Development Focus in the Wheeling Area



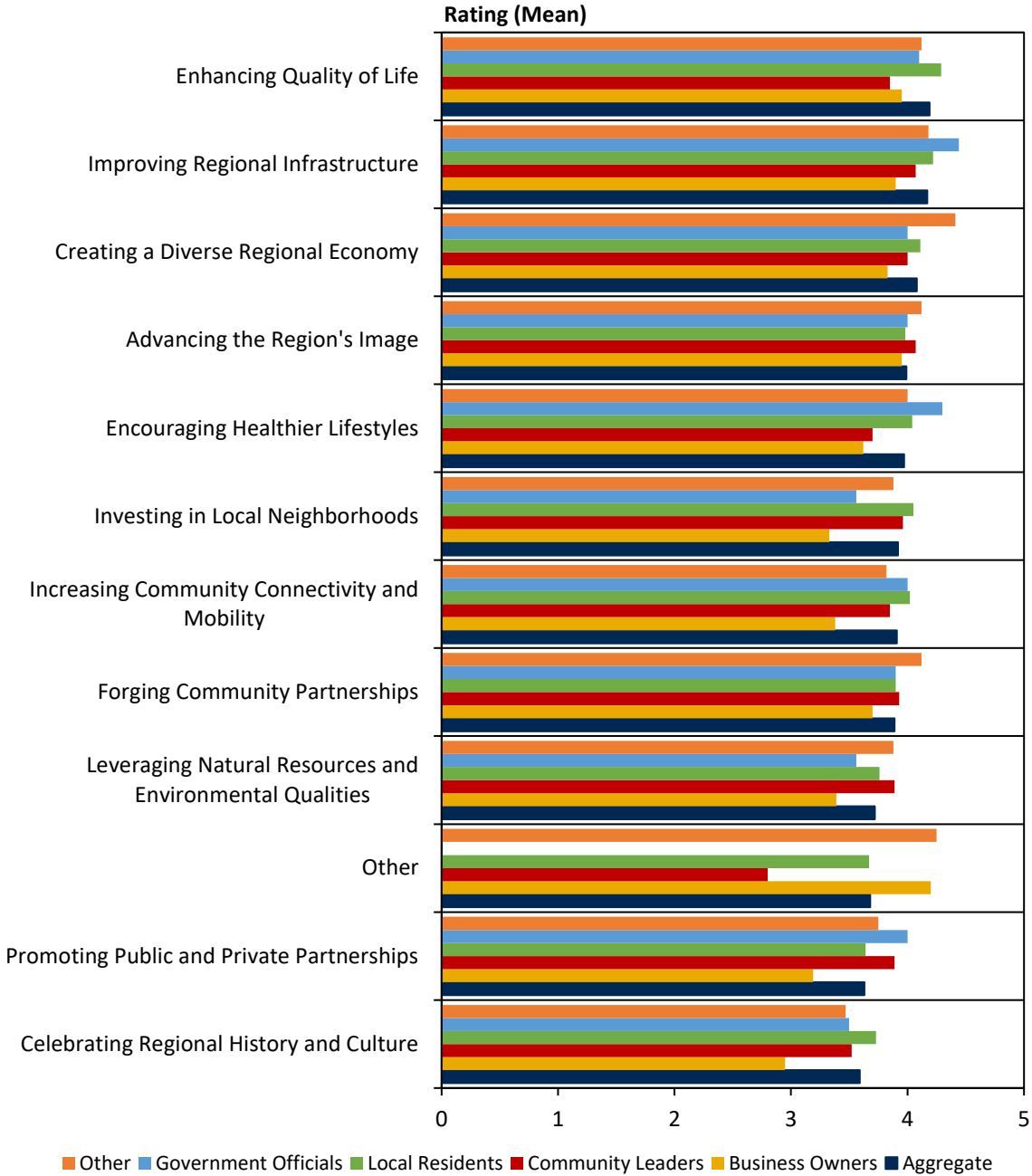
Three proposed initiatives rated somewhat lower than the others: leveraging natural resources, promoting public private partnerships, and celebrating regional history and culture. Each had an average score less than 3.75.

The relatively low rating for leveraging natural resources may be indicative of the industrial history and emphasis in the region. The relatively low rating for promoting public private partnerships could represent a limited desire on the part of respondents to enter into such arrangements. This may be why business owners rated this initiative substantially lower than other stakeholders.

The lowest ranked of these was celebrating regional history and culture. This was somewhat surprising, considering it could potentially be associated with the top-ranked initiative of enhancing quality of life. Also, it had a regional focus and other such initiatives rates highly. But even this item had an average score greater than 3.5. Interestingly, there was divergence among the stakeholder groups as local residents rated it substantially higher than others while business owners rated it substantially lower than others.

There were some notable differences between groups for the other proposed initiatives as well (see Figure 18). Increasing community connectiveness and investing in local neighborhoods rated substantially higher for local residents and substantially lower with business owners.

Figure 18: Relative Importance of Development Focus in the Wheeling Area



It should be noted that business owners rated 6 of the 11 proposed initiatives substantially lower than other stakeholder groups. Many have an explanation based on the specifics of the initiative. However, given the consistency of this stakeholder group rating potential initiatives lower than others, there might be other factors at work with respect to business owners. For example, this group may have a different perspective on the concept of importance. This could be a general interpretation or could be specific to the examination of the future of the region. Regardless of its cause, this will need to be considered during the planning process.

3.8 Concluding Remarks

The survey results outline a general direction to move the Wheeling Region forward. The primary focus should be in actions and investments that protect and promote what already exists in the region while also working to incorporate new firms and entities that fit within those parameters. To that end, the region should use its location and setting to its benefit while seeking expansion of knowledge-based economic activity for the 21st century. At the same time, opportunities associated with the traditional focus of the region should not be ignored when they arise; but they should be evaluated as to whether they will enhance or detract from the long-term economic goals of the region.

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