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**RIO BLANCO COUNTY**  
**COMMUNITY SURVEY**  
**2009**

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P R E P A R E D F O R

*Rio Blanco County*

P R E P A R E D B Y

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## Introduction and Methodology

Between February and March 2009, Rio Blanco County conducted a survey of residents and property owners to evaluate opinions on a variety of current issues and how the County is progressing into the future. A combination of mail and Web-based surveys was conducted by RRC Associates of Boulder, Colorado. The surveys were designed to evaluate respondents' level of satisfaction with respect to a full range of services and to gather opinions on selected issues currently facing the County, such as jobs, infrastructure needs, quality of life, and other topics.

The survey effort was based on a mailed cover letter and survey form sent to approximately 2,689 households in Rio Blanco County. A Web link and individually assigned password (one per household) were included in the cover letter, in order to allow recipients to complete the survey online, should they prefer. Completed surveys received as of March 13 totaled 506, representing a very good response rate of approximately 18.8%. Based upon the total sample size of 506 responses received, overall results have a margin of error of approximately +/- 4.4 percentage points calculated for questions at 50% response<sup>1</sup>. In order to increase awareness of the survey, radio interviews were conducted reminding community members to fill out the survey they received or to complete it online.

Throughout this report, the analysis includes responses from the mail and web surveys. Open-ended comments (that is, hand written comments in response to certain questions) from all surveys are summarized in the results and a full set of comments are provided as an appendix to this report. Cross-tabulations (i.e., breakdowns that segment responses to the survey into subgroups such as results by length of residency, respondent age, etc.) of all results are also provided as an appendix.

## Demographics and Respondent Characteristics

Characteristics of survey respondents are summarized below (and shown in the following figure), providing a basis for the cross-tabulations used throughout this report and analysis.

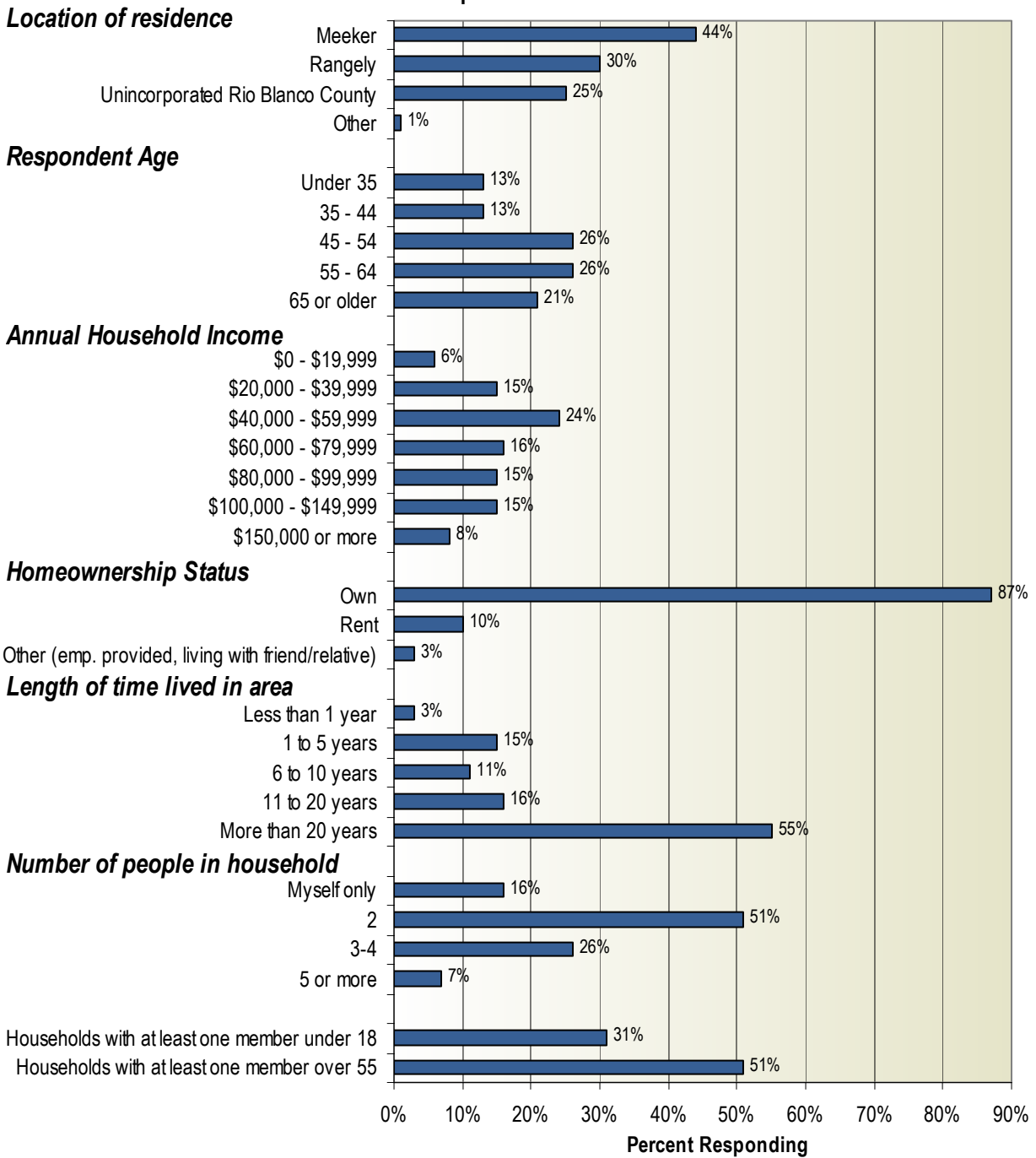
- Forty-four percent of respondents' homes or property are located in Meeker, 30 percent in Rangely, and 25 percent live in the unincorporated portions of Rio Blanco County.
- More than half of respondents (55 percent) have lived or owned property in Rio Blanco County for more than 20 years, 27 percent have been in the County between 6 and 20 years, and 18 percent have been in the County for five years or less. The majority of respondents (87 percent) own their home, while 10 percent are renting.
- Twenty-six percent of respondents are under the age of 45, while 52 percent are between 45 and 64 years old, and 21 percent are 65 years or older, with an average age of 53.3 years. Approximately 31 percent of the responding households have someone under the age of 18 living at home.
- Twenty-one percent of respondents have annual household incomes of less than \$40,000, while 40 percent are between \$40,000 and \$79,999, 30 percent between \$80,000 and \$149,999, and 8 percent with incomes \$150,000 or more.

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<sup>1</sup> For the total sample size of 506, margin of error is +/- 4.4 percent calculated for questions at 50% response (if the response for a particular question is "50%"—the standard way to generalize margin of error is to state the larger margin, which occurs for responses at 50%). Note that the margin of error is different for every single question response on the survey depending on the resultant sample sizes, proportion of responses, and number of answer categories for each question. Comparison of differences in the data between various segments, therefore, should take into consideration these factors. As a general comment, it is sometimes more appropriate to focus attention on the general trends and patterns in the data rather than on the individual percentages.

- The majority of working respondents travel by personal vehicle to work. The median round-trip commuting distance of respondents was 4 miles, with an average of 22 miles, indicating that while a proportion of respondents drive a substantial distance to work (to areas such as Craig, Rifle, Grand Junction, and Utah), the majority work very close to their home. Many respondents work in the same community of which they live, with 81 percent of Rangely respondents working in Rangely, 81 percent of Meeker respondents working in Meeker, and 47 percent of unincorporated County residents working in rural parts of the County and 47 percent in Meeker. Almost half of respondents overall work in Meeker (50 percent), 28 percent work in Rangely, and 21 percent in work rural Rio Blanco County.

**Figure 1  
Respondent Profile**

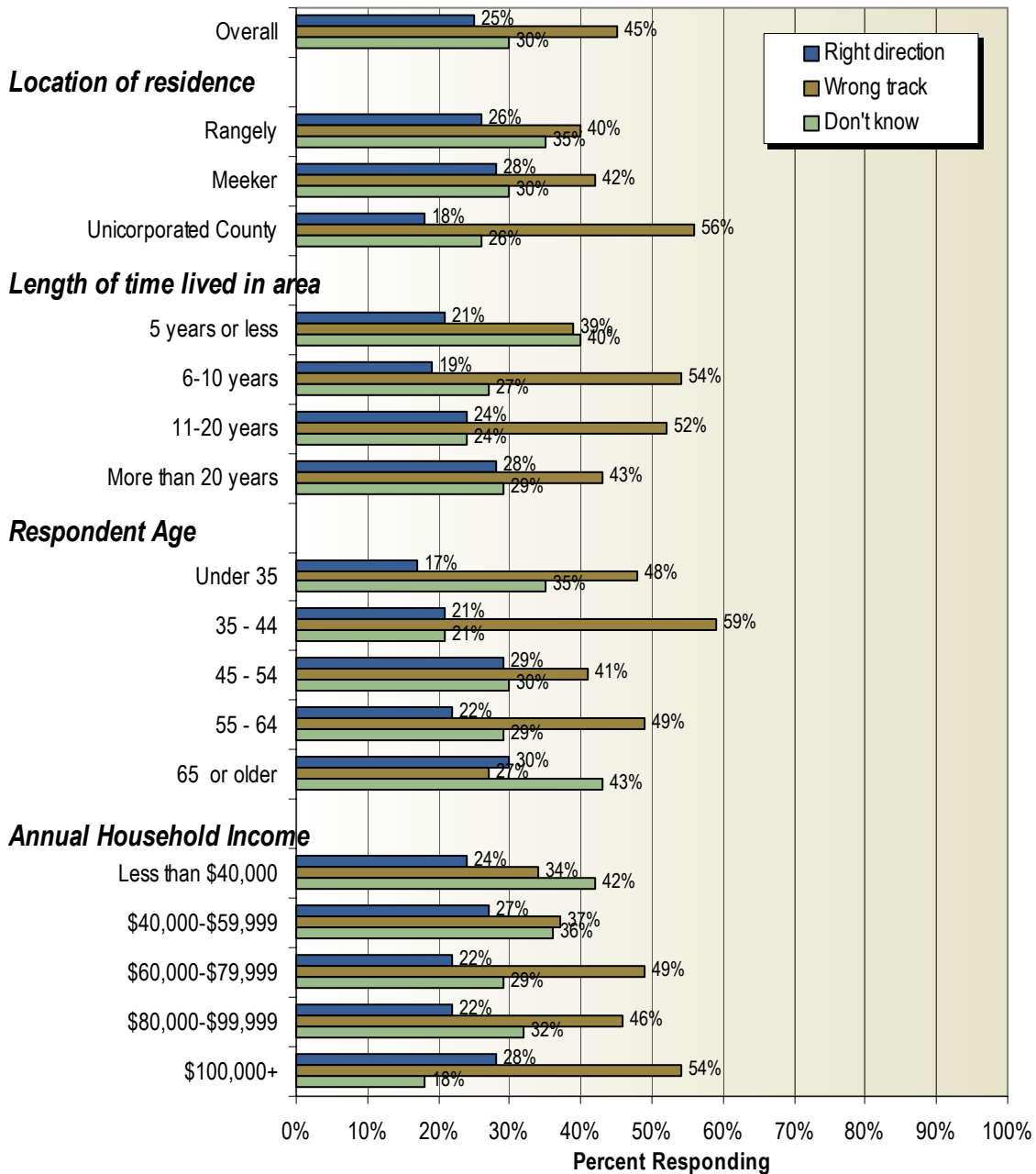


**General State of Rio Blanco County**

Sense of Direction. Respondents were asked whether they felt things in Rio Blanco County were progressing in the “right direction” or have they got off on the “wrong track.” While 25 percent of respondents feel the County is going in the right direction, 45 percent indicated that it was on the wrong track, and 30 percent said they “did not know.” Results varied somewhat by household income levels, length of time respondents had lived in the County, and what area they specifically live in.

- Respondents who live in the unincorporated portions of Rio Blanco County were more likely to indicate that the County is on the wrong track (56 percent of unincorporated County residents vs. 45 percent of overall respondents).
- Respondents who have lived in the County for more than 5 years were generally more likely to feel that the County was on the wrong track, while respondents who have been in the County for 5 years or less indicated a higher proportion of “don’t know” responses.
- Respondents of households with annual incomes of \$60,000 or more were also more negative about the direction in which the County is progressing.

**Figure 2**  
**Sense of Direction**



Further probing of those that feel the town is on the “wrong track” suggest that there are a variety of concerns held by this group. A review of open-ended responses shows that the cost of living, desire for a more diversified economy, increased infrastructure needs, how the County has dealt with oil and gas extraction and how the boom/bust effects the community, and lack of progressive and proactive leadership are frequently at the heart of responses. A sampling of comments from respondents who indicated “right track,” “wrong track,” and “don’t know” are shown below and a complete breakdown of responses is provided in the appendix.

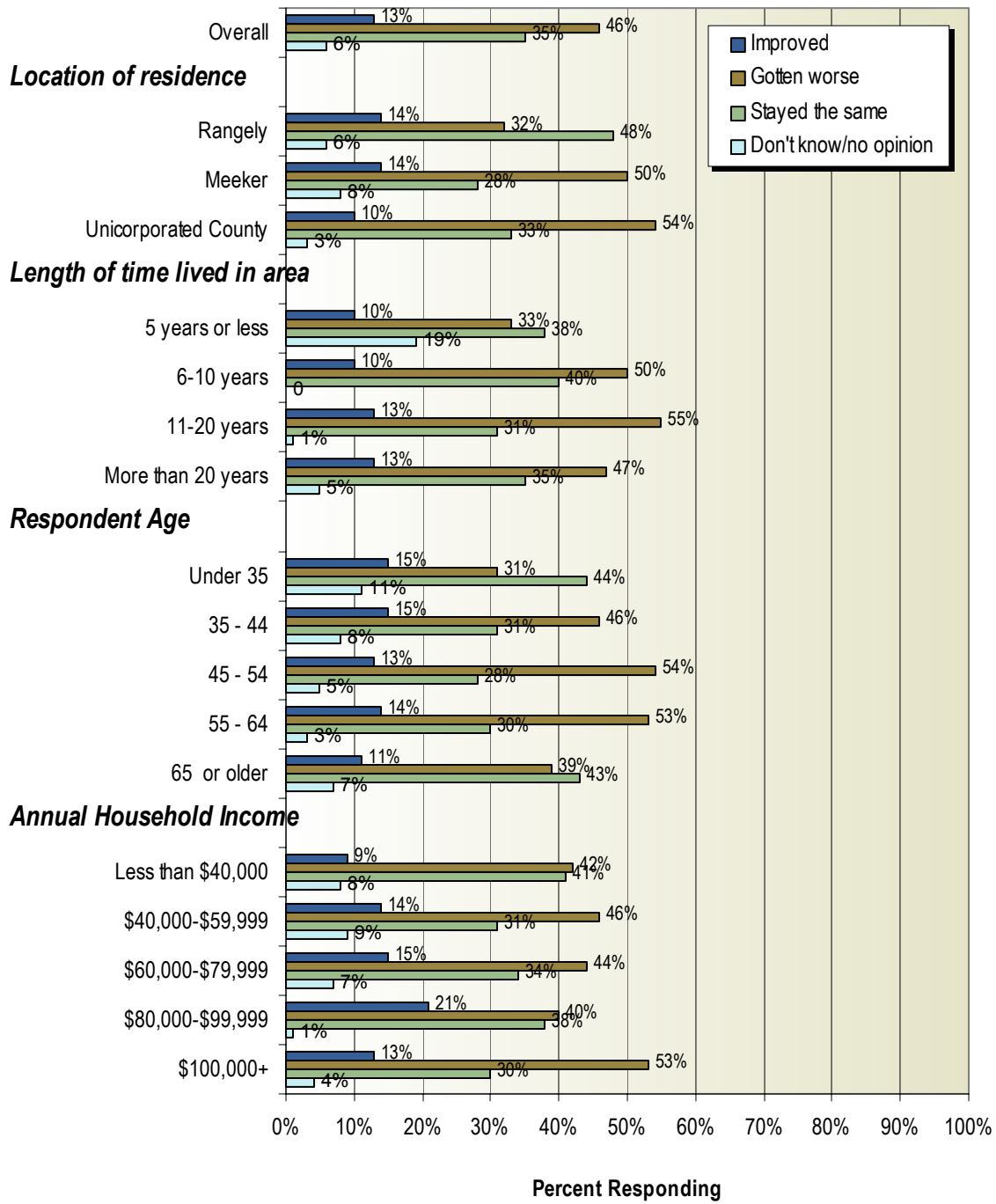
- Right track *I believe it to be on the right track, however I am still concerned with the roads, in that the amount of heavy truck traffic and the effect it has on the roads.*
- Right track *I think putting in a year round rec center was a start. If the daycare that was built would actually open that would also be helpful progress.*
- Right track *I think that developing our natural resources is the right thing to do. Yes, we need to do it wisely but we also need to make sure that we don't make it to difficult and too costly to do business here.*
- Right track *More growth in the area has been better for County and has been nice*
- Right track *Other than the recent economic downturn, I think the County has done quite well given the resources available to us*
- Wrong track *All Meeker no Rangely*
- Wrong track *Cost of living only allows large income families to move in (not allowing people we need such as teachers etc.)*
- Wrong track *County budget has grown without explanation, accountability, and oversight-- why?*
- Wrong track *For a community of this size we have too large of a government.*
- Wrong track *Greed is going to ruin the County economy if not controlled*
- Wrong track *I believe the locals are being over-regulated and the big companies under regulated. The town is being trashed by people who don't care.*
- Wrong track *I feel we have not worked well with the oil and gas business and have not benefited from their presence in Meeker as a result*
- Wrong track *Lack of progressive leadership has caused RBC to fall behind the industry growth curve*
- Wrong track *Meeker has too few businesses currently. There simply is not enough supply, and Meeker remains far enough away from other communities to require these businesses to be competitive. Case in point -- Watt's and Meeker Drug. These businesses simply would not survive in a more competitive market. They are overpriced, and in the case of Meeker Drug, poorly staffed and stocked.*
- Wrong track *Need more diversification, focus on additional opportunities, lack of business/variety*
- Wrong track *Need to be stricter with developers/builders*
- Wrong track *Need to protect agricultural industries or the landscape will begin to change very rapidly*
- Wrong track *Not enough housing and support for the increase of population*
- Wrong track *Oil and gas exploration/development is out of control in Piceance Basin and is negatively impacting the entire County and our way of life.*
- Wrong track *Our County needs better infrastructure and room for continued growth within our communities*
- Wrong track *Raised prices on everything due to oil and gas, but if you live here already you can't afford it*
- Wrong track *RBC has been taxing wrong people to raise money - their impact fees aren't getting oil companies - they're getting the residents*
- Wrong track *RBC is not addressing the issues of oil and gas as proactively as they should be*
- Wrong track *Taxing people out of the County*
- Wrong track *The roads are deteriorating and with oil and gas causing most of the damage, they should be the one's footing the bill. The cost of living for permanent residents has dramatically increased as a result of the supply/demand for housing/goods/services has adversely effected those who live and work in the area, that are not oil and gas related.*
- Wrong track *Too much growth too fast. Not prepared for the development in Piceance Basin and the effect it has had in RBC.*

Wrong track	<i>We need projects that will encourage tourism, development that doesn't involve subdividing irrigated hay ground, and a less prohibitive fee schedule for building permits, etc. The energy companies are already paying their share and more, and private people with regular jobs can't get a start in this real estate market.</i>
Wrong track	<i>We've lost some common sense approaches to building and growing - need prevention not crisis management</i>
Don't know	<i>At times I have hope - they must be more progressive and smarter</i>
Don't know	<i>I feel Meeker is a good town but I believe that the prices of general needs are out of control</i>
Don't know	<i>Relying too much on gas companies (sic)</i>
Don't know	<i>Sometimes good, sometimes bad - but areas of concern often can not be "fixed" by the County - city building requirements, state highways</i>
Don't know	<i>We were sold that Oil will pay for hospital, rec-center, schools... Now who is going to pay for all these tax increases since oil is declining.</i>

Quality of life. Respondents were asked whether they felt the quality of life in Rio Blanco County has improved, gotten worse, or stayed the same over the past two years. Responses were relatively divided with 46 percent saying it has gotten worse, 35 percent indicating the quality of life has stayed the same, 13 percent who feel that it has improved, and 6 percent who did not know or did not have an opinion. Results again varied somewhat by respondent type, as shown below:

- Residents of Meeker and the unincorporated portions of the County were more likely to say the quality of life had gotten worse, while Rangely residents were more likely to say it had stayed the same.
- Respondents who have lived in the County for more than 5 years were more likely to feel the quality of life has gotten worse, while respondents who have been in the area 5 years or less were more likely to say it has stayed the same.
- Respondents between the ages of 45 and 64 were more likely to feel the quality of life has gotten worse, while those under 35 and over 65 feel it has stayed the same.

**Figure 3**  
**Over the past two years, how has the quality of life changed?**

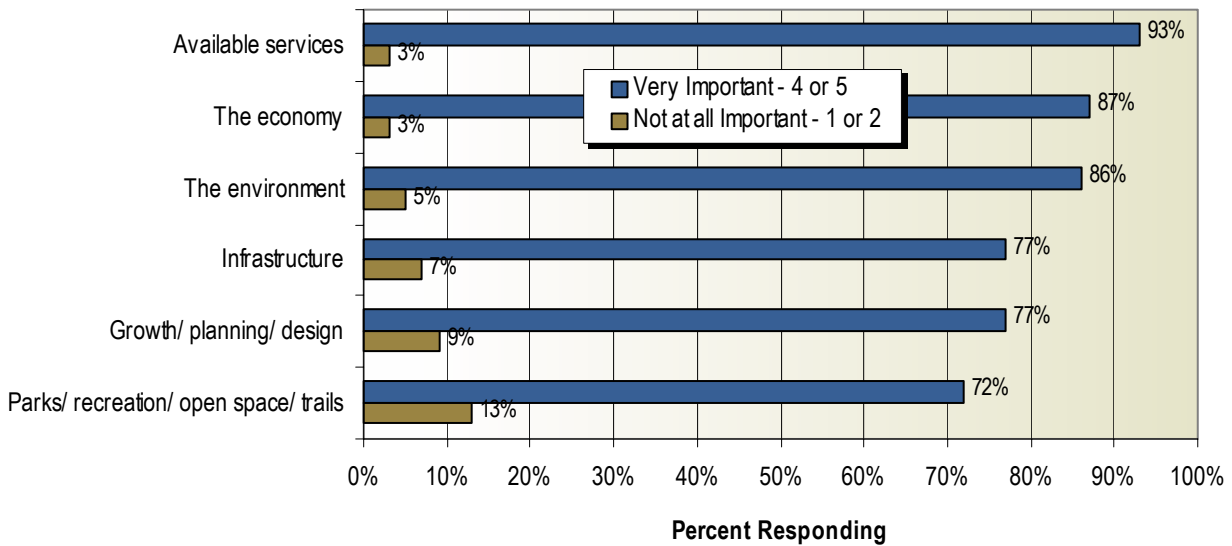




### Importance Ratings

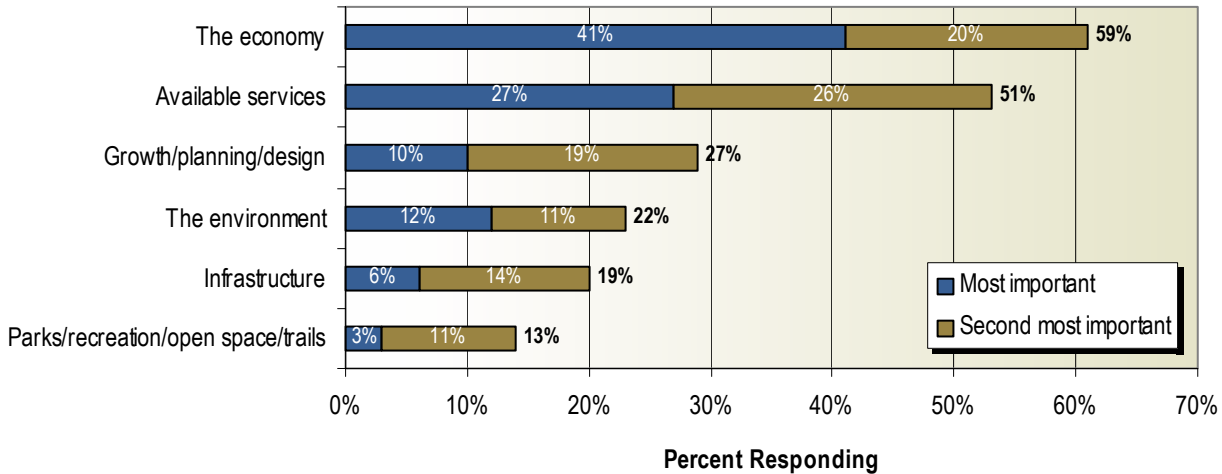
The survey addressed the importance of various services and issues, which are summarized in the following two graphs. When asked “how important are the following to you and your household?” using a “1” to “5” scale, the results show high importance particularly of available services, the economy, and the environment. Rated slightly lower were infrastructure and growth/planning/design, followed by parks / recreation / open space / trails, although still rated very important by the majority of respondents. As illustrated below, the overall message is that residents consider all areas (topics) that were identified to be important.

**Figure 4**  
**Rate the importance of the following issues to you and your household**



Respondents were then asked to indicate which issues, from the list above, were most important to themselves and their household. This provides the opportunity to not only see which issues are important to respondents, but also to get an idea of their prioritization and how the same issues are viewed in relation to each other. Overall, the economy emerged as the clear top priority (41 percent of respondents indicated it is the “most important” issue and 59 percent indicated it is one of the two most important issues), followed by available services (27 percent indicated it is the most important issue and 51 percent indicated it is one of the two most important issues), notably, these two topics were identified significantly more frequently than others.

**Figure 5**  
**Which two broad types of issues are most important to you and your household?**



**Priority of Future Issues.** Respondents were asked to rate (on a “1” to “5” scale) the importance of issues facing Rio Blanco County in the next five years.

**Most important issues**

(“very important” 4 or 5 ratings)

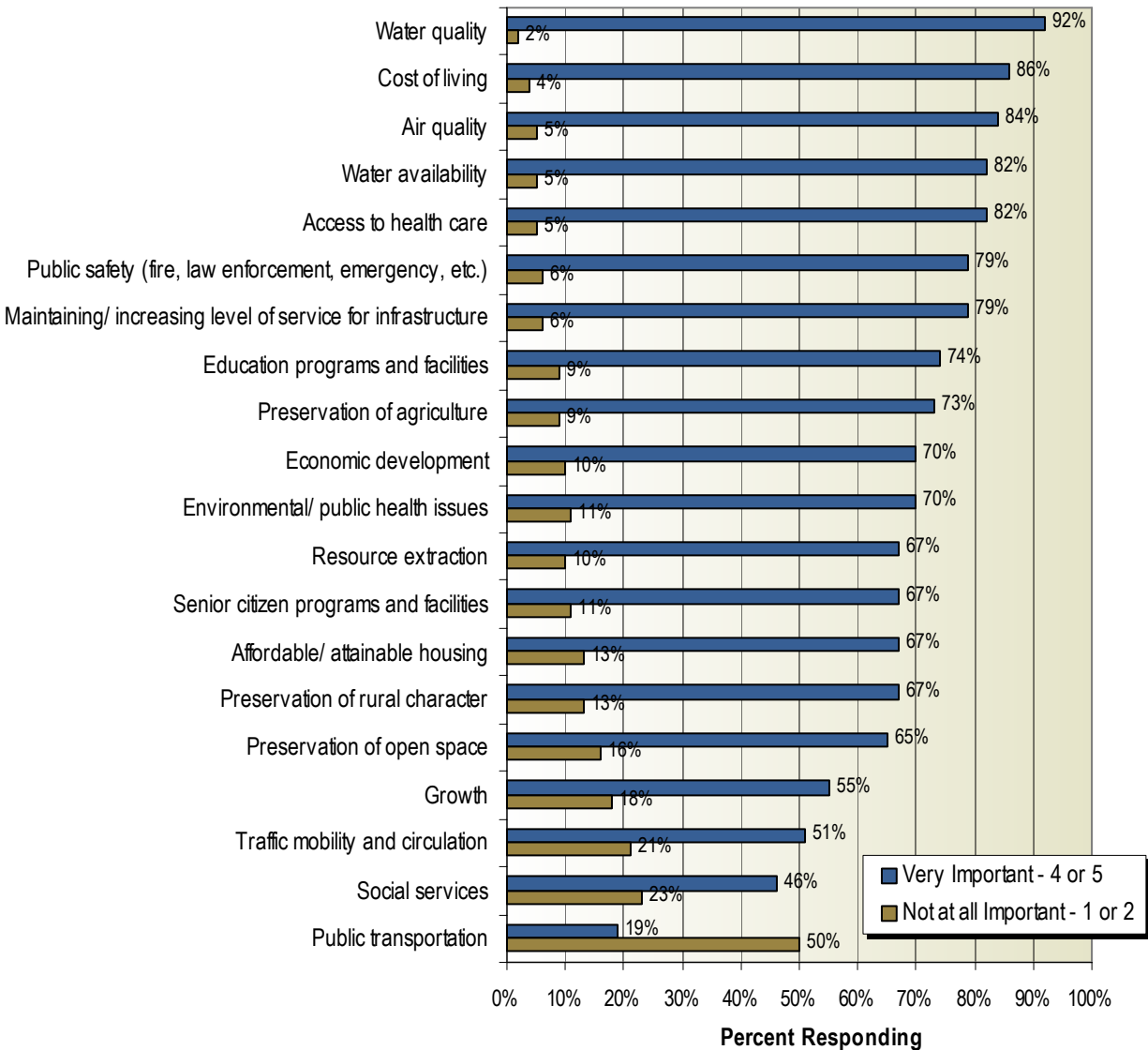
- Water quality (92 percent)
- Cost of living (86 percent)
- Air quality (84 percent)
- Water availability (82 percent)
- Access to healthcare (82 percent)
- Public safety (79 percent)
- Maintaining/increasing level of service for infrastructure (79 percent)

**Least important issues**

(“very important” 4 or 5 ratings)

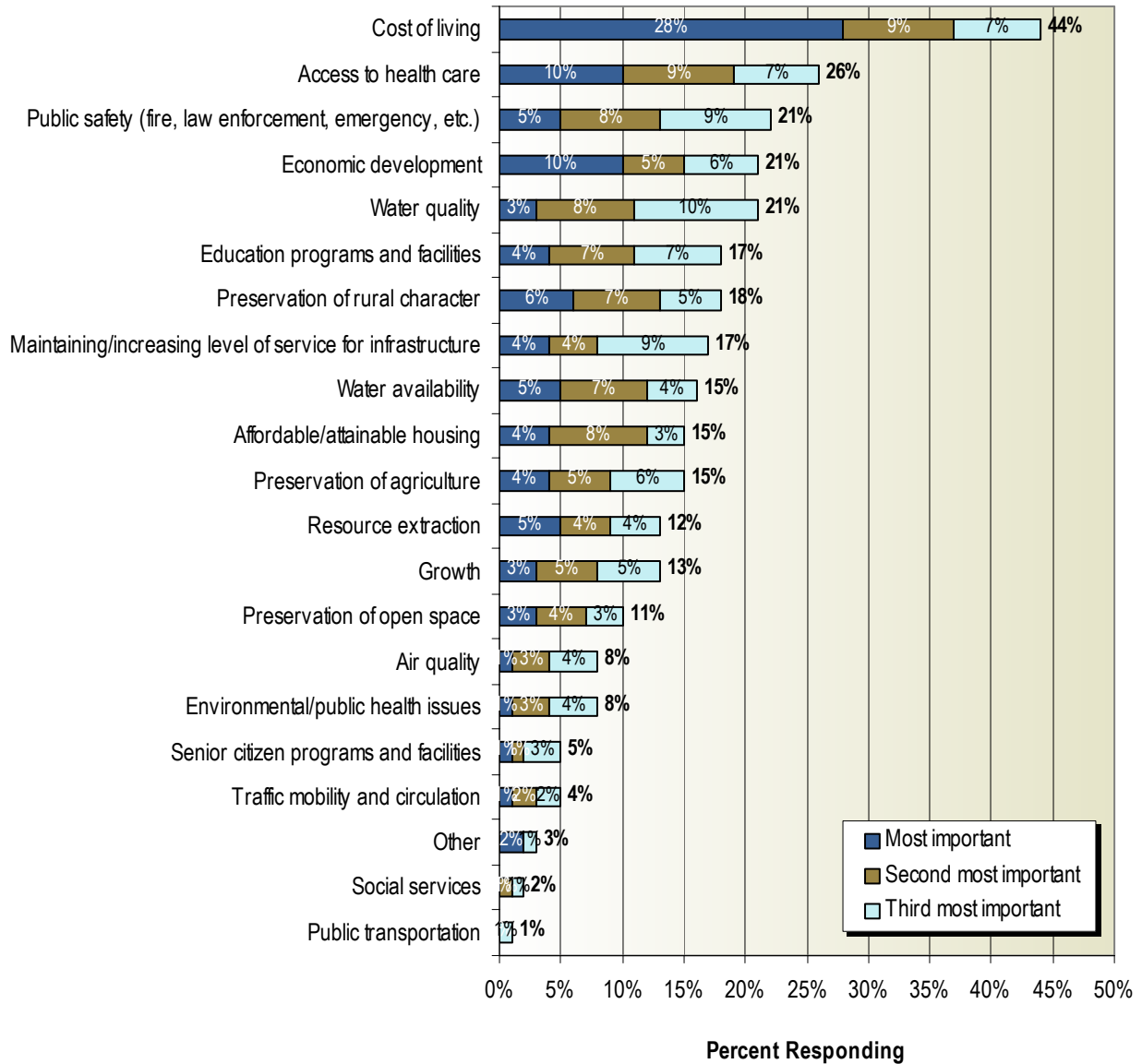
- Public transportation (19 percent)
- Social services (46 percent)
- Traffic mobility / circulation (51 percent)
- Growth (55 percent)

**Figure 6**  
**What are the most important issues facing Rio Blanco County in the next five years?**



When respondents prioritized this same list into the two most important issues facing their household, many of the issues listed above remained as the top priorities. However, cost of living became the clear top priority (28 percent of respondents indicating it as the most important and 44 percent of respondents indicating it as one of the three most important). Also important were access to health care, public safety, economic development, and water quality.

**Figure 7**  
**Which two issues are most important to you and your household?**



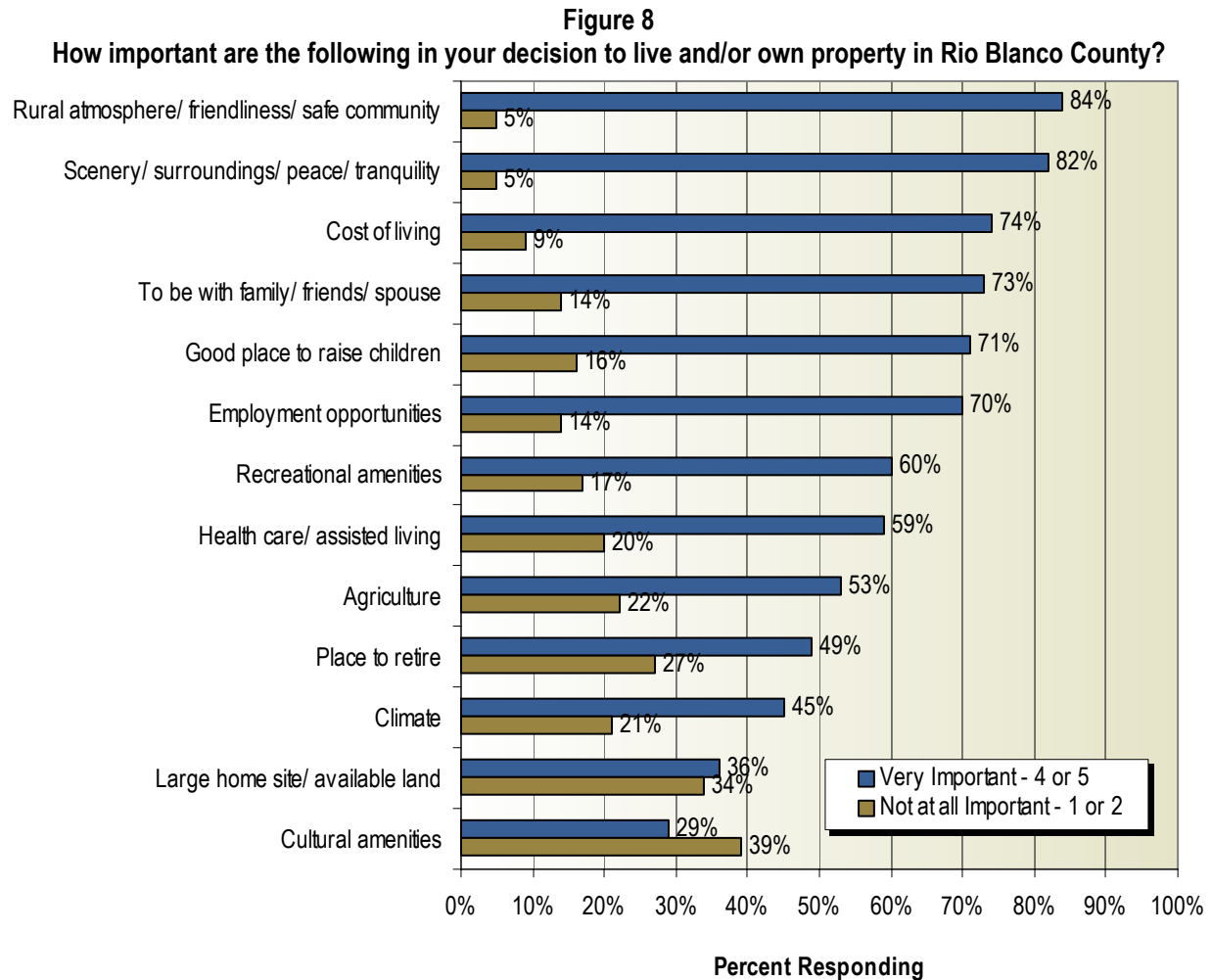
**Importance of factors in decision to live in Rio Blanco County.** Respondents were asked to rate (on a “1” to “5” scale) the importance of a number of factors in their decision to live and/or own property in the County. Rural atmosphere / friendliness / safe community was rated the highest with 84 percent of respondents indicated it was very important (rating of 4 or 5) followed by scenery / surroundings / peace / tranquility (82 percent).

Other important factors include:

- Cost of living (74 percent rating “very important” 4 or 5)
- To be with family/friends/spouse (73 percent)
- Good place to raise children (71 percent)
- Employment opportunities (70 percent)

The least important factors include:

- Cultural amenities (39 percent rating “not at all important” 1 or 2)
- Large home site / available land (34 percent)



**Factors which might cause you to leave the County.** Respondents were then asked which factors might cause them to leave Rio Blanco County in the next five years. Overall, 14 percent of respondents indicated that they do not intend to leave the region or that none of the factors resonated with them. A breakdown of the factors which might cause the other respondents to leave are listed below:

“Definitely” a factor in potentially leaving the region (rating of 4 or 5 on 5-point scale) included:

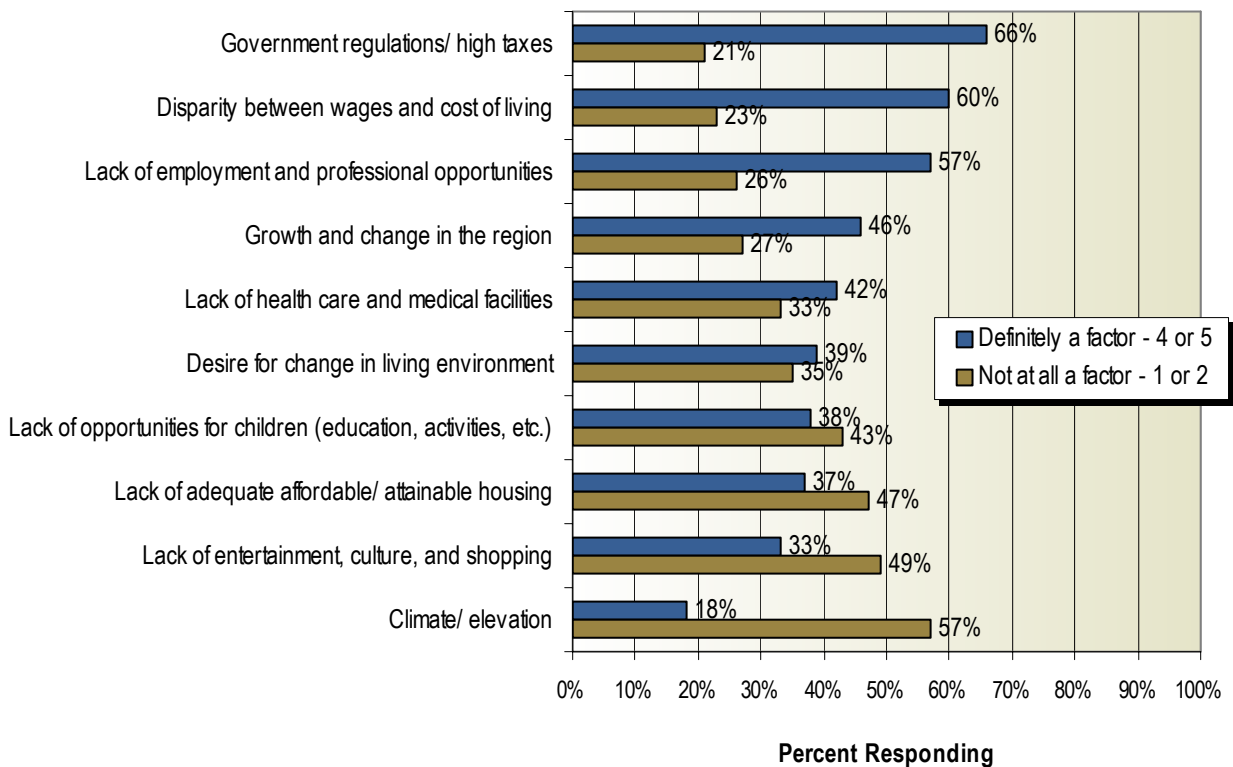
- Government regulations / high taxes (66 percent rating “definitely a factor” 4 or 5)
- Disparity between wages and cost of living (60 percent)
- Lack of employment and professional opportunities (57 percent)
- Growth and change in the regions (46 percent)

“Not at all a factor” in potentially leaving the region (rating of 1 or 2 on 5-point scale) included:

- Climate/elevation (57 percent rating “not at all a factor” 1 or 2)
- Lack of entertainment/culture/shopping (49 percent)
- Lack of adequate affordable/attainable housing (47 percent)
- Lack of opportunities for children (43 percent)

Younger respondents and household with children were more likely to list “lack of employment and professional opportunities” and “lack of opportunities for children” as factors which might cause them to leave the County, while older respondents were more likely to list “lack of health care and medical facilities” as a factor (57 percent of respondents over 65 years old rated it “definitely a factor” vs. 42 percent of overall respondents).

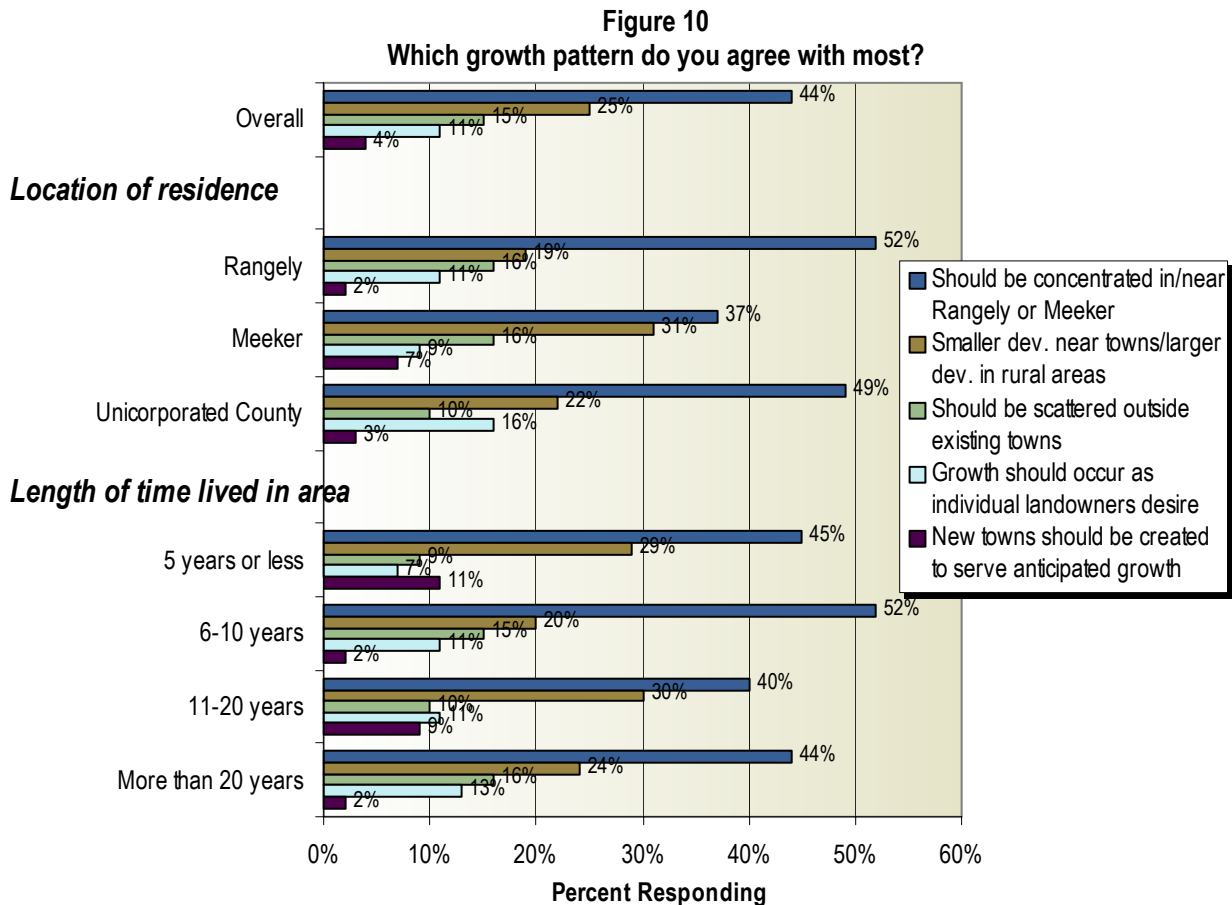
**Figure 9**  
**What factors might cause you to leave Rio Blanco County in the next five years?**



## Growth

Opinion of growth patterns. Different future growth patterns result in varying consequences to the County. A recent report sponsored by the Associated Governments for Northwest Colorado states that “Because the existing municipalities may not be able to absorb the anticipated growth, much of the future growth is assigned to unincorporated County areas.” The survey was conducted as part of an overall planning effort. Planning can help Rio Blanco County prepare for the anticipated growth, if an as desired by residents. The survey outlined a number of statements regarding growth patterns and asked respondents to indicate which statement they agreed with most.

- 44 percent of respondents feel growth should be concentrated in or near the incorporated towns of Rangely or Meeker. Agreement with this statement was greater among respondents who live in Rangely and the unincorporated County.
- 25 percent of respondents feel growth should be addressed by a combination of smaller lot developments near towns, and large lot developments in rural areas. Agreement with this statement was greater among respondents who live in Meeker.
- 15 percent of respondents feel growth should continue to occur in the existing pattern of development in scattered small and large lot development outside existing towns.
- 11 percent of respondents feel growth should occur as individual landowners desire without any overall direction.
- 4 percent of respondents feel new towns should be created to serve anticipated growth from the energy industry.

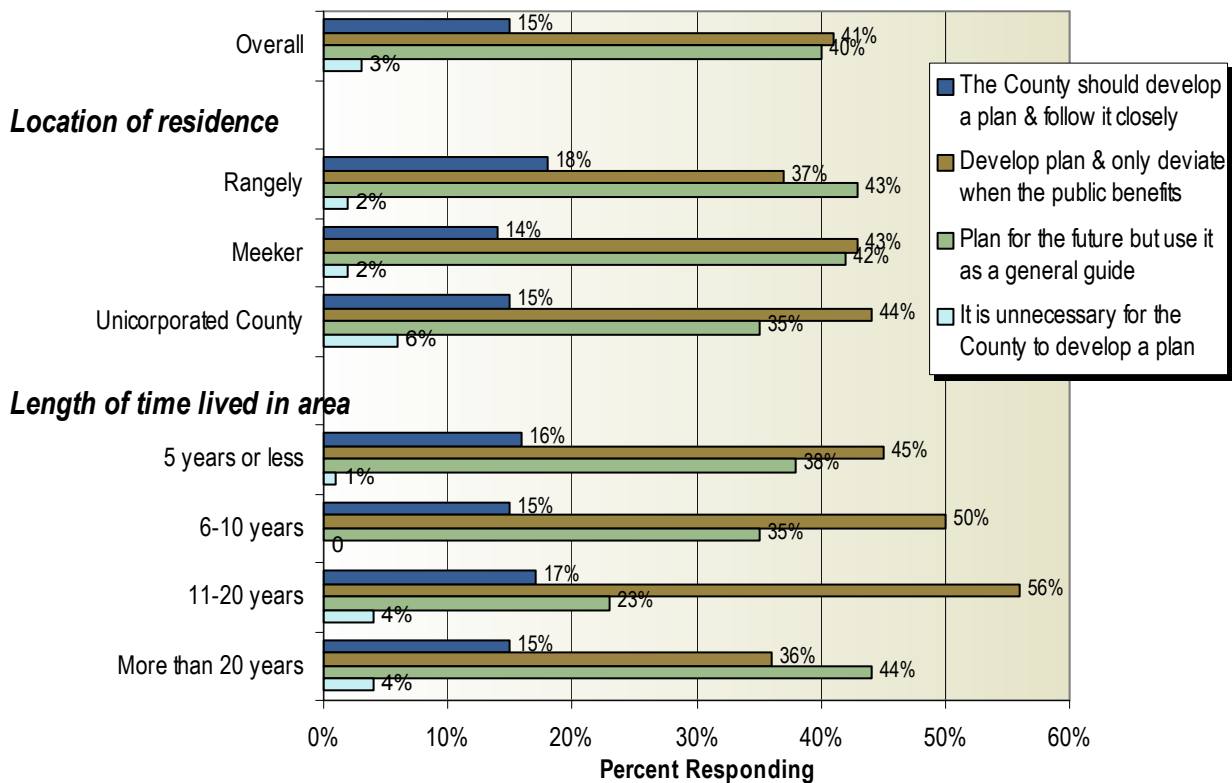


Develop an overall plan for Rio Blanco County. While there are differing opinions on how closely the County should follow an overall plan, there is consensus that the development of an overall plan for the County is necessary (97 percent of respondents feel it is necessary). Forty-one percent of respondents feel the County should develop a plan and only deviate from it if there is a public benefit as a result, while 40 percent of respondents indicated that the County should use the plan as a general guide but not something on which to base decisions, and 15 percent said the County should develop a plan and follow it closely.

- Residents of the unincorporated portions of the County and respondents who have lived in the County 20 years or less were more likely to want a plan to be developed and only deviate from it when the public benefits.
- Residents of Rangely and respondents who have lived in the County for more than 20 years were more likely to indicate a desire to plan for the future but use it only as a general guide and not something on which to base decisions.

Based on the survey responses, it appears that the intended use and expectation for planning documents that will be developed through the planning process should be further explored.

**Figure 11**  
Should the County develop an overall plan, and if so, how closely should it be followed?

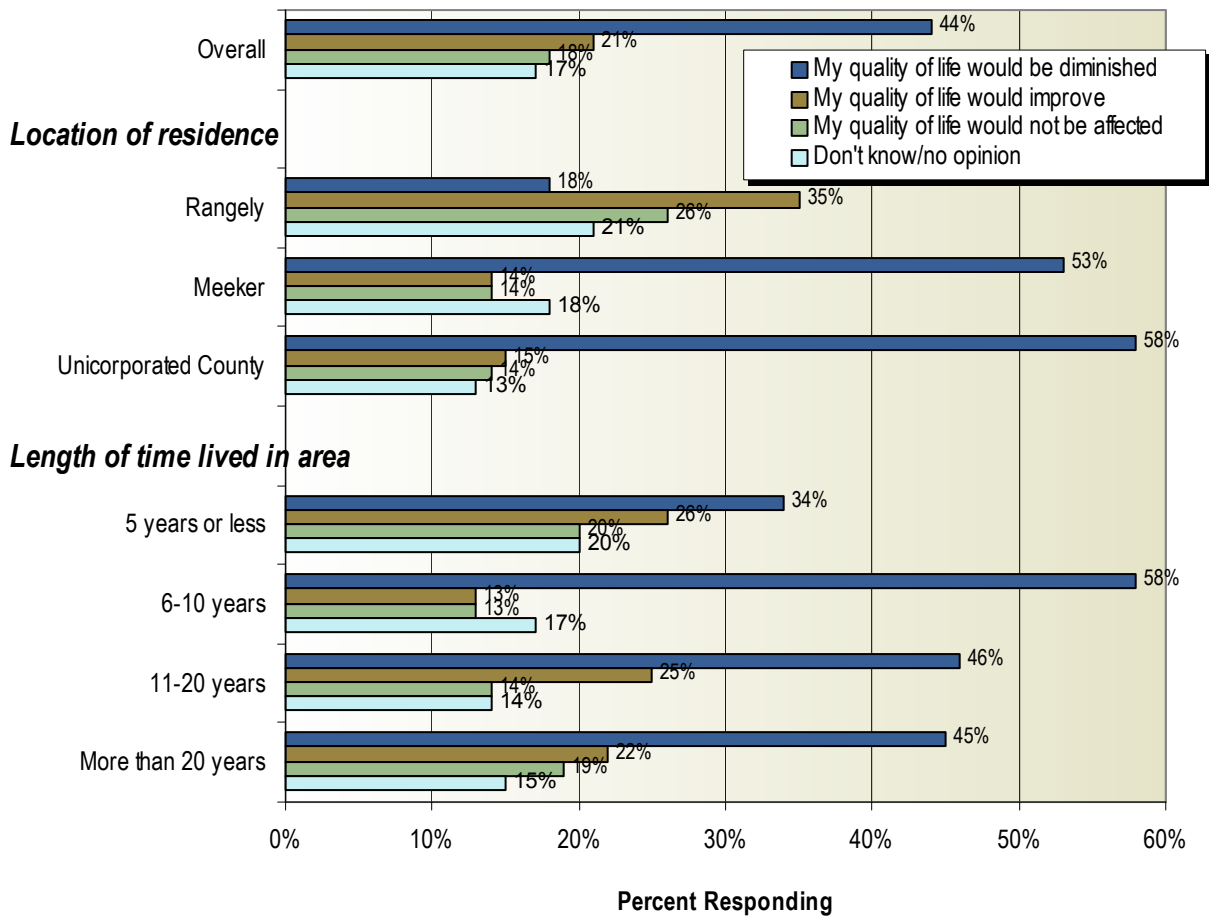




Affect of population growth on quality of life. The 2007 population of Rio Blanco County was estimated to be 6,434. A recent report sponsored by the Associated Governments for Northwest Colorado estimates that the population of Rio Blanco County could reach 39,013 by 2035 with the increase of natural gas and oil shale production, representing a 6.6 percent compound annual growth rate. Respondents were asked how this increase in population would affect their quality of life in Rio Blanco County.

- Overall, 44 percent of respondents indicated that their quality of life would be diminished due to the population increase, while 21 percent said it would improve, and 18 percent said it would not be affected.
- Residents of Meeker and the unincorporated areas of the County had even higher proportions of respondents who feel their quality of life would be diminished by the population increase while the greatest proportion of Rangely residents (35 percent) feel their quality of life would be improved by the population increase.

**Figure 12**  
**Affect of population growth on quality of life**

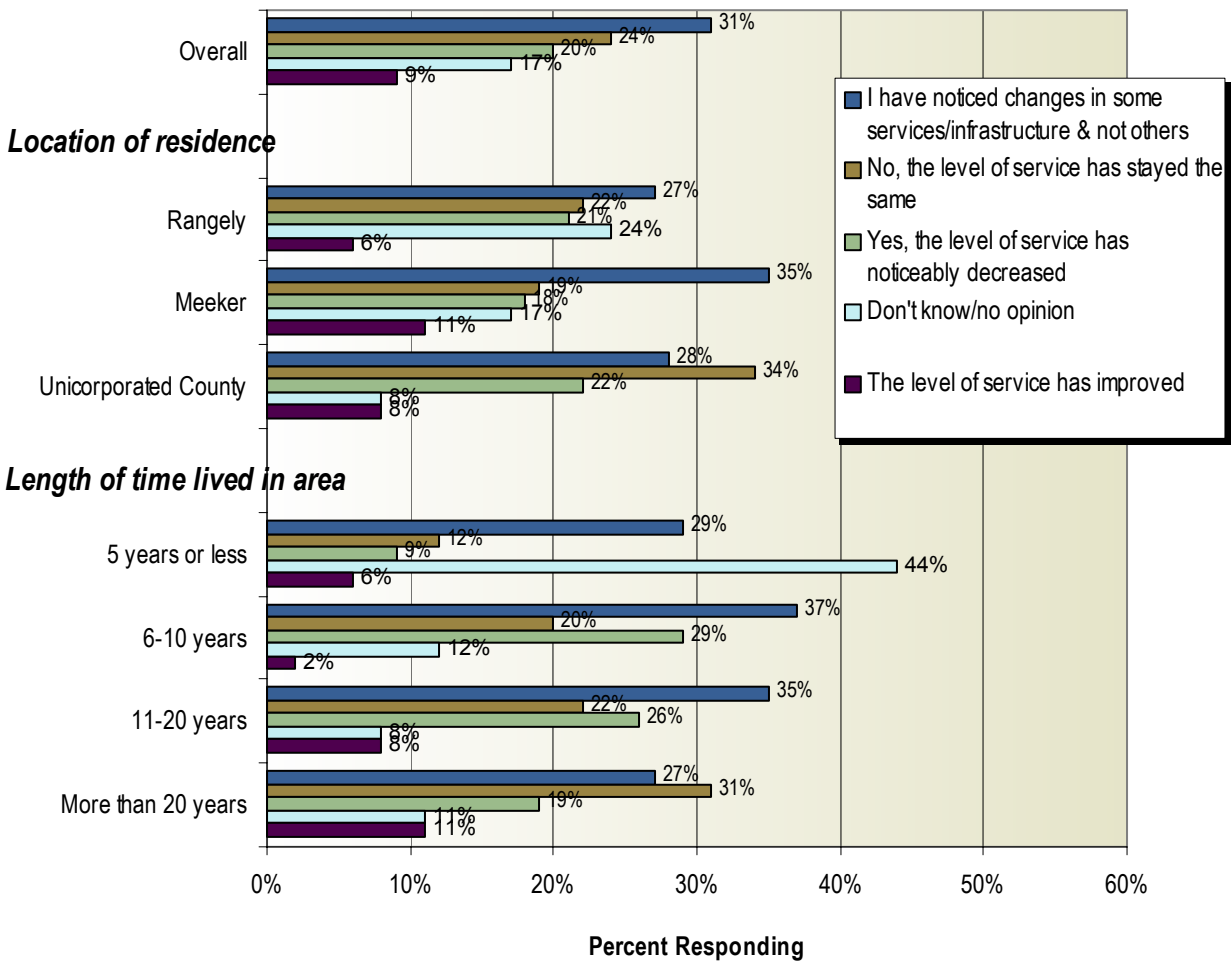


**Level of service.** Level of service (LOS) can be described as the quality of government services and infrastructure that are provided to the citizens of Rio Blanco County (outside incorporated towns). When new growth occurs, the demand for services such as law enforcement, fire, roads, and sanitation increases. Respondents were asked if they have noticed a change in the LOS in unincorporated Rio Blanco County in the last five years.

- 31 percent have noticed changes in some services/infrastructure and not others
  - 24 percent said the level of service has stayed the same
  - 20 percent said the level of service has noticeably decreased
  - 17 percent don't know or have no opinion
  - 9 percent said the level of service has improved
- Residents who live in the unincorporated County or who have lived in the County for more than 20 years were the most likely to say the level of services has stayed the same.

**Figure 13**

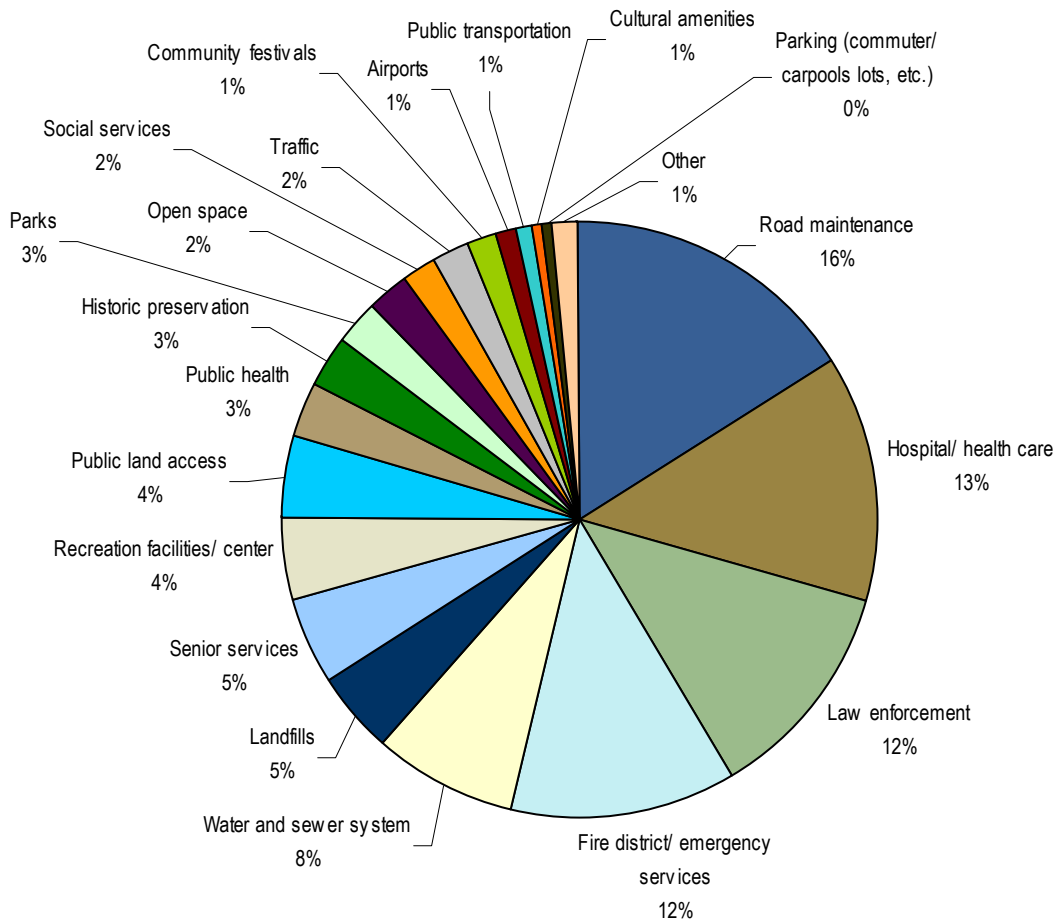
**Have you noticed a change in the level of service in unincorporated Rio Blanco County in the last five years?**



**Infrastructure**

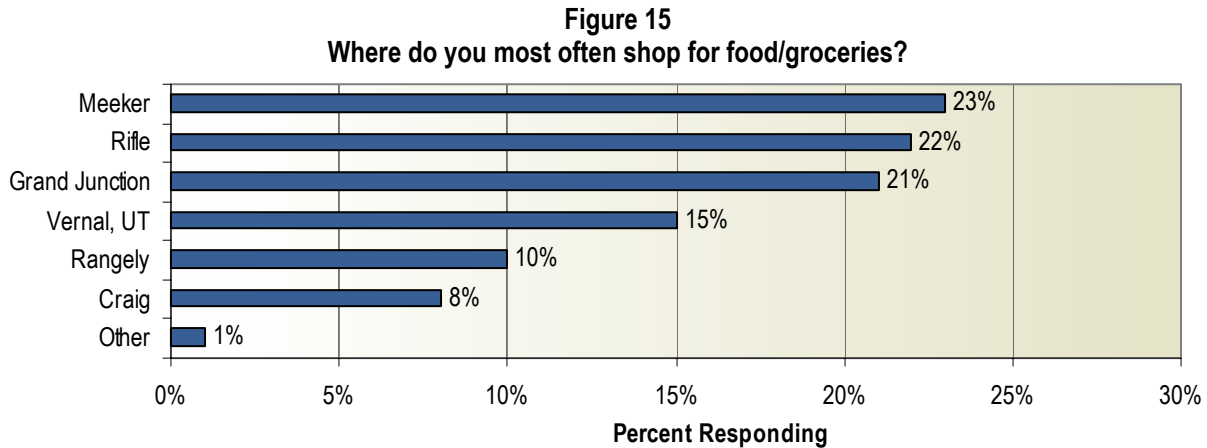
Financial Decisions (Priorities for Budgeting Taxpayer Revenue) – The survey asked respondents, “If you were responsible for budgeting \$100 of taxpayer revenue, how would you spend it?” As illustrated in the following figure, residents distributed the greatest share to road maintenance —\$16 or 16% of their total \$100 allocation. After road maintenance, residents allocated \$13 (13 percent) each to hospital / health care and law enforcement, \$12 to fire district / emergency services, \$8 to water and sewer system, \$5 each to landfills and senior services, and \$4 each to recreation facilities / center and public land access. This allocation of priorities is similar to that seen in other rural areas, emphasizing the essential services that residents have come to expect from local government (such as health care, law enforcement, fire/emergency services, etc.), although with a greater importance placed on road maintenance.

**Figure 14  
Revenue Allocation**



**Economic/Commercial Development**

When asked where they shop for the majority of their food/groceries, respondents most often shopped in Meeker (23 percent of respondents), Rifle (22 percent), and Grand Junction (21 percent), specifically naming City Market, Sam’s Club, Wal-mart, Watt’s Ranch Market, and White River Market as the stores they shop at most.



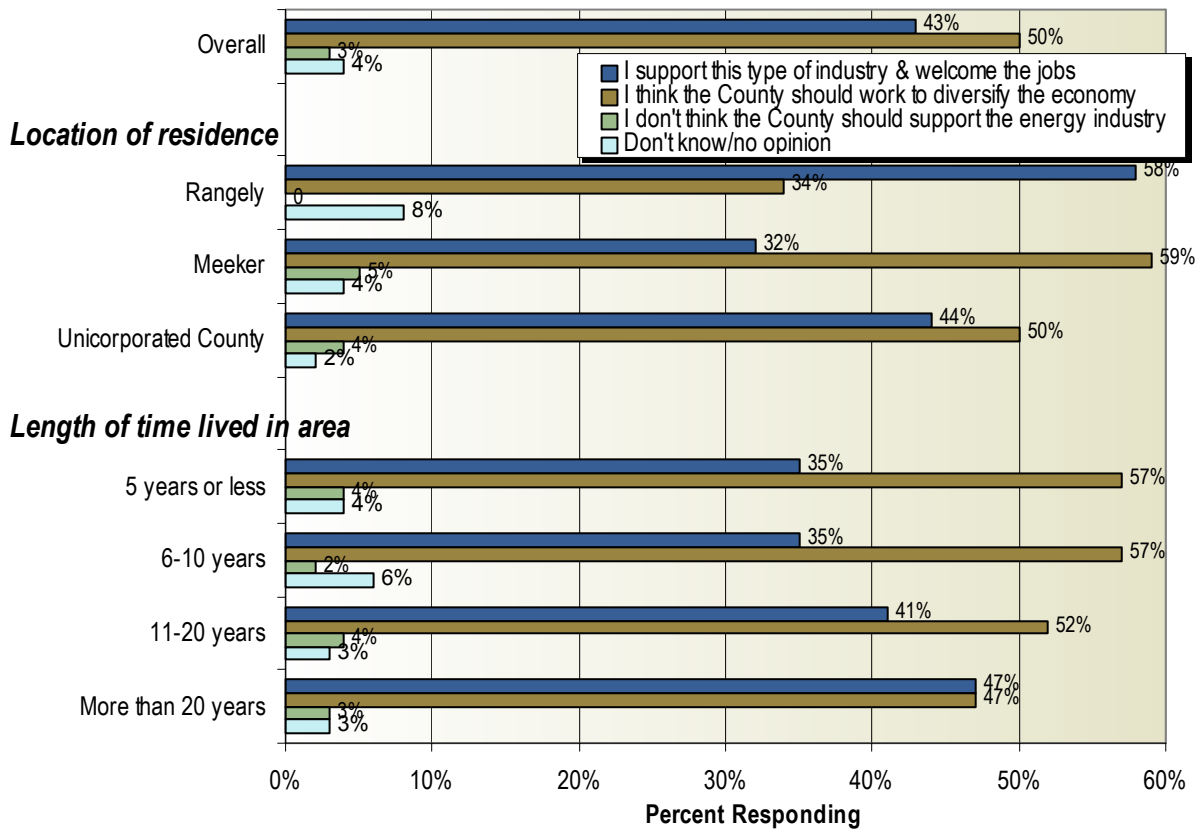
Use of agricultural lands for industrial/commercial activities. The expanding energy development in Rio Blanco County will increase demands for use of rural agricultural lands for storage, worker housing, pipelines, and industrial space. Respondents were asked how they feel about the use of agricultural lands for industrial/commercial activities.

- Overall, 55 percent of respondents feel these uses should be regulated and limited to specific areas to minimize impacts to agricultural lands.
- 21 percent said these uses should be restricted to existing industrial areas/utility corridors and not be permitted on agricultural lands.
- 19 percent the County should be very flexible and allow these uses wherever they are requested.
- 5 percent of don’t care or have no opinion.

**Energy production employment.** The report sponsored by the Associated Governments for Northwest Colorado also states that energy production employment (gas-related only) will account for 80% of the jobs in Rio Blanco County by 2035. Respondents were asked to indicate their opinion in regards to the County's economy and if the County should support the energy industry.

- 50 percent of overall respondents think the County should work to diversify the economy so residents are insulated from the boom/bust cycle of the energy industry.
- 43 percent support this type of industry and welcome the jobs into the community.
- 3 percent don't think the County should support the energy industry.
- Residents of Rangely were the most supportive of the energy industry, while residents of Meeker were significantly more supportive of diversifying the economy.
- The longer respondents have lived in the area, the more supportive they are of the energy industry, while respondents who have lived in the area 10 years or less would prefer the County diversify the economy.

**Figure 16**  
**Support of energy industry**



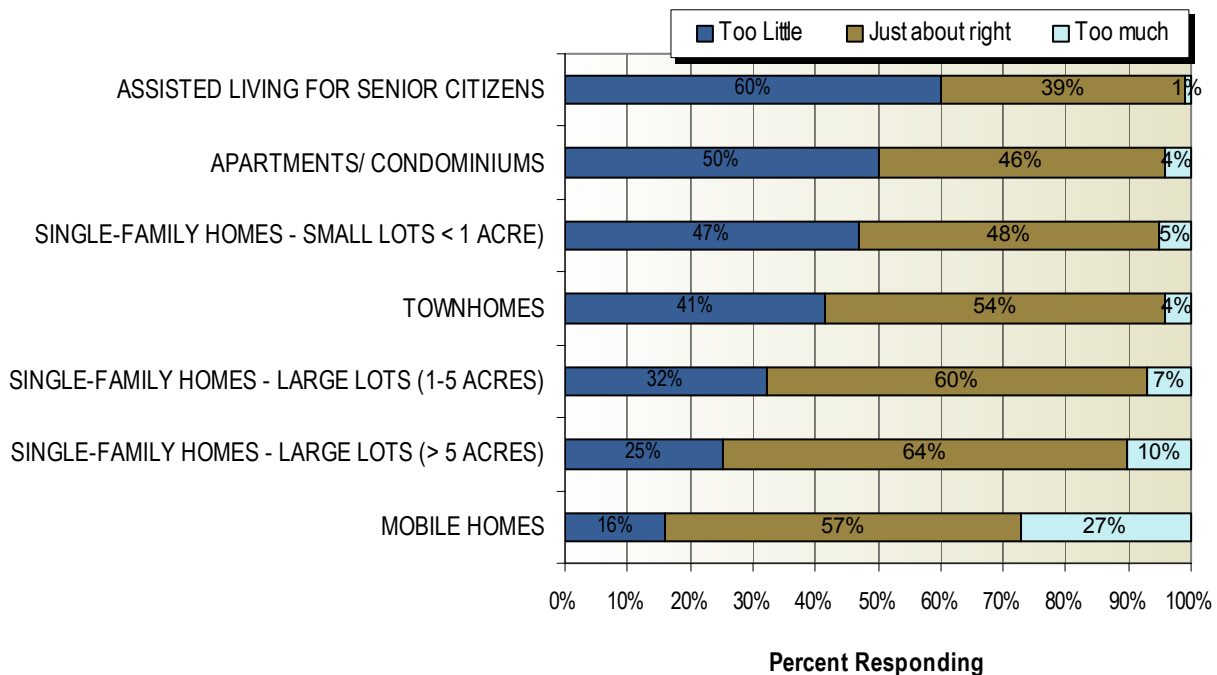
## Housing

**Need for more affordable housing.** More than half of respondents indicated that affordable housing is needed in Rio Blanco County. Respondents were provided with four statements regarding affordable housing in the County and were asked to indicate which ones they agreed with most.

- 53 percent said affordable housing is needed in Rio Blanco County,
- 20 percent said Rio Blanco County should take aggressive efforts to provide housing that is affordable,
- 20 percent said the County should not concern itself with affordable housing issues, and
- 8 percent said Rio Blanco County has enough affordable housing.

**Current supply of housing types.** Respondents were asked to indicate whether they feel Rio Blanco County has too much or too little of a variety of housing types. Results provide an indicator as to how community members view the current housing supply available throughout the County. Overall, the many respondents feel the availability of single-family homes on lots of an acre or more is just about right (60 to 64 percent of all respondents feel the current supply of each is “just about right”). The results show strong consensus among respondents that there is not enough assisted living for senior citizens (60 percent indicated there is not enough), as well as apartments/condominiums (50 percent), single family homes on small lots (47 percent), and townhomes (41 percent). The only type of housing respondents feel there is relatively too much of are mobile homes (27 percent of respondents indicated there is too much, and 57 percent indicated the amount is just about right).

**Figure 17**  
Opinion of current supply of housing types in Rio Blanco County

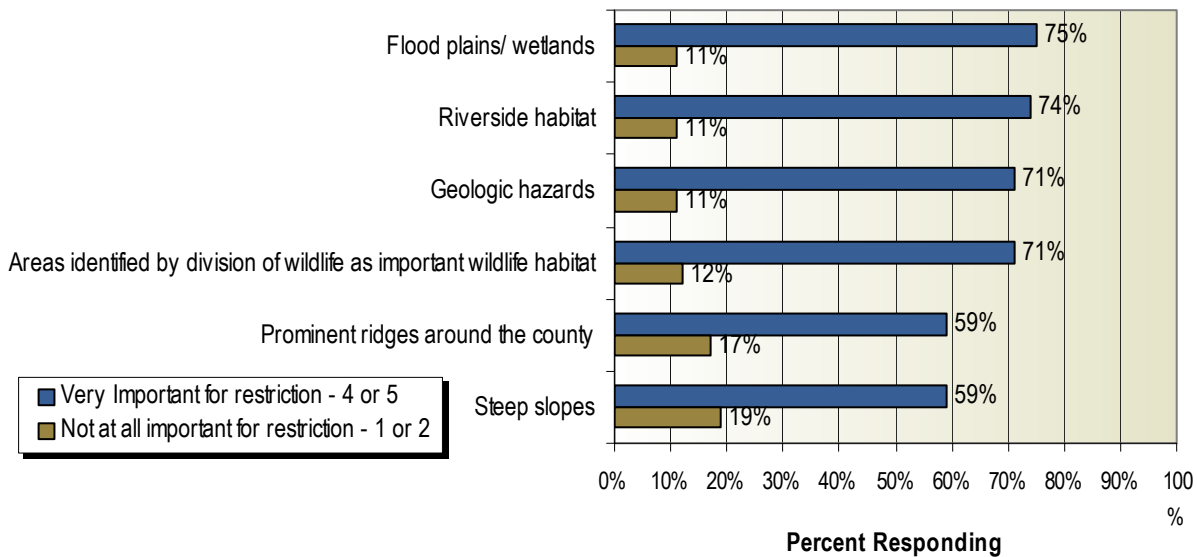


**Environmental**

Local features that should be preserved from development impacts. While environmental impacts of development are of great importance to members of any community, respondents were asked which local features should specifically be preserved from development impacts. Natural and man-made features listed by respondents included downtown Meeker and the historic buildings (museum, courthouse, Meeker Hotel), the Meeker massacre site, the White River, and scenic byways. A full list of these local features can be found in the comments section of the appendix.

Restriction of development in certain areas. Most respondents indicated a high importance of restricting development in most environmentally sensitive areas, with particular importance on flood plains and wetlands (75 percent of respondents indicated that it was very important for restriction), followed by riverside habitat (74 percent), geologic hazards (71 percent), and areas identified by division of wildlife as important wildlife habitat (71 percent).

**Figure 18**  
**Importance of restricting development in certain areas**



Preserving types of land for open space. Respondents were asked how important it was to preserve various types of land as open space in Rio Blanco County. Overall, respondents indicated the most important types of land to preserve for open space are river/stream corridors and wetlands (82 percent of respondents indicated it was “very important”), followed by wildlife habitat (78 percent), and cultural and historical sites (74 percent). Other types of land also important for preservation include agricultural properties/ranches (71 percent), mountain slopes and peaks (70 percent), prominent land features (66 percent), and geologic features (65 percent).

**Figure 19**  
**Importance of preserving types of land as open space in Rio Blanco County**

