

Local Voices



Local Perspectives

Leadership and Influence in Coahoma County, Mississippi

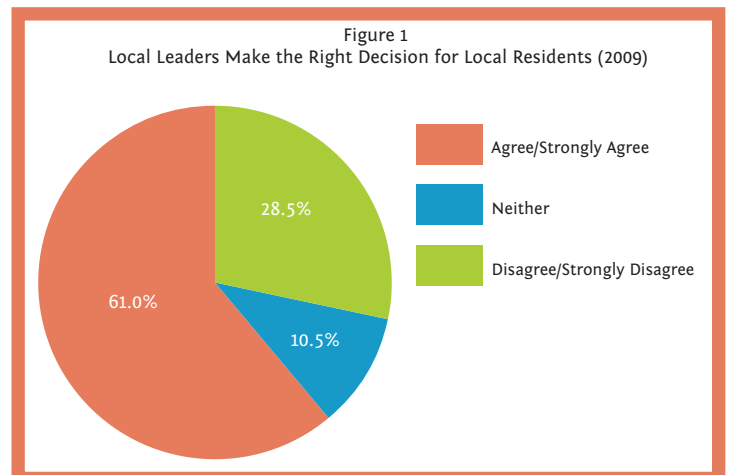
Taking a peek at the public's view of the local leadership in Coahoma County, in this report we explore how well local leaders facilitate the engagement of others who may want to have input on community decisions and plans. It features such topics as how much people trust local leaders, how well they keep people informed, and whether they provide an environment that encourages others to become involved in the community.

Trust Local Leaders?

Trusting the decision that leaders make on behalf of residents is critical. So, knowing Coahoma County residents' response to the following statement: "Most people in the country trust their local elected officials to

make the right decisions for those who live here" is important. Regarding trust, residents responded the following in a 2009 survey (Figure 1):

- The majority of residents (61 percent) stated they agreed with this statement while less than 30 percent disagreed.
- Coahoma County residents with less than high school were more likely than those with a bachelor's or more to agree with this statement (70.6 percent versus 55.2 percent).
- Female residents also were more likely to agree with this statement compared to males (65.8 percent versus 54.9 percent).



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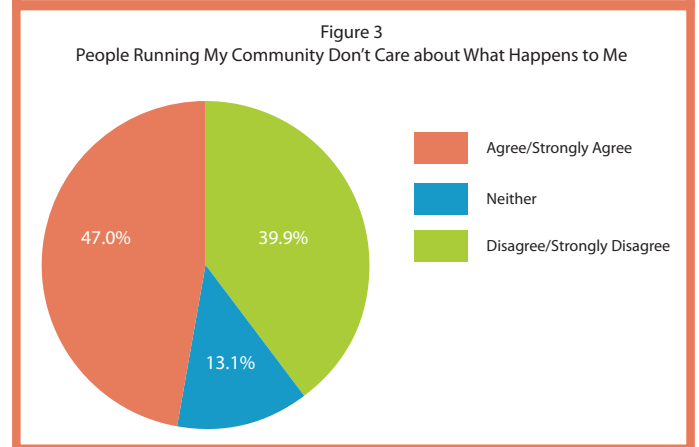
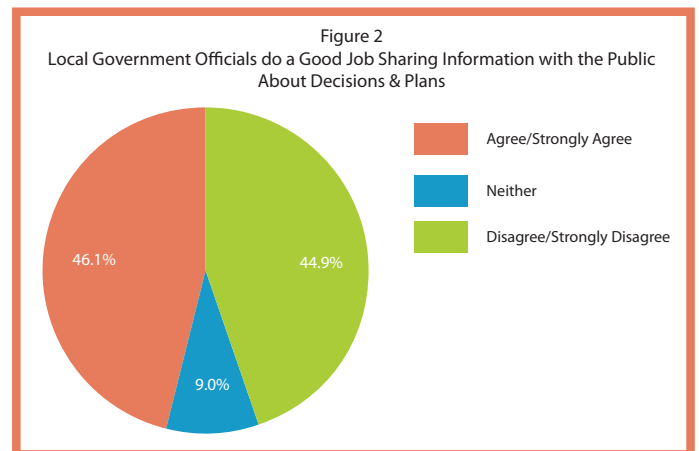
Do Leaders Keep Local Residents Informed? Care about Them?

In addition to wanting their local government officials to communicate their ideas and plans for addressing issues, most people also expect their leaders to be transparent—open about issues being discussed. When asked to respond to the statement that “local government leaders do a good job keeping the public informed on issues and how they plan to address the concerns,” residents were about evenly split on this issue. About 46 percent agreed with this assertion while about 45 percent of residents indicated they disagreed (Figure 2).

Opinions on this issue did not vary much by the educational status or age of the respondents. But, race did make a difference. For example, white residents were more likely to agree with this statement compared to African Americans (50.5 percent versus 44.6 percent).

A related issue is whether those who are involved in running the community care about their fellow residents. When local residents were asked to share their reactions to the statement, “The people running my community don’t really care about what happens to me,” they gave the following answers (Figure 3):

- About 47 percent of residents felt that the people running the community did care about people like them, but another 40 percent felt that they did care about what happens to local residents.
- African American respondents were more likely than white respondents to believe that local leaders did not care about what happened to them (50.2 percent versus 40 percent). Residents between 18-44 years of age were more likely to agree with this statement compared to those 65 years of age and over (49.2 percent versus 42.2 percent).



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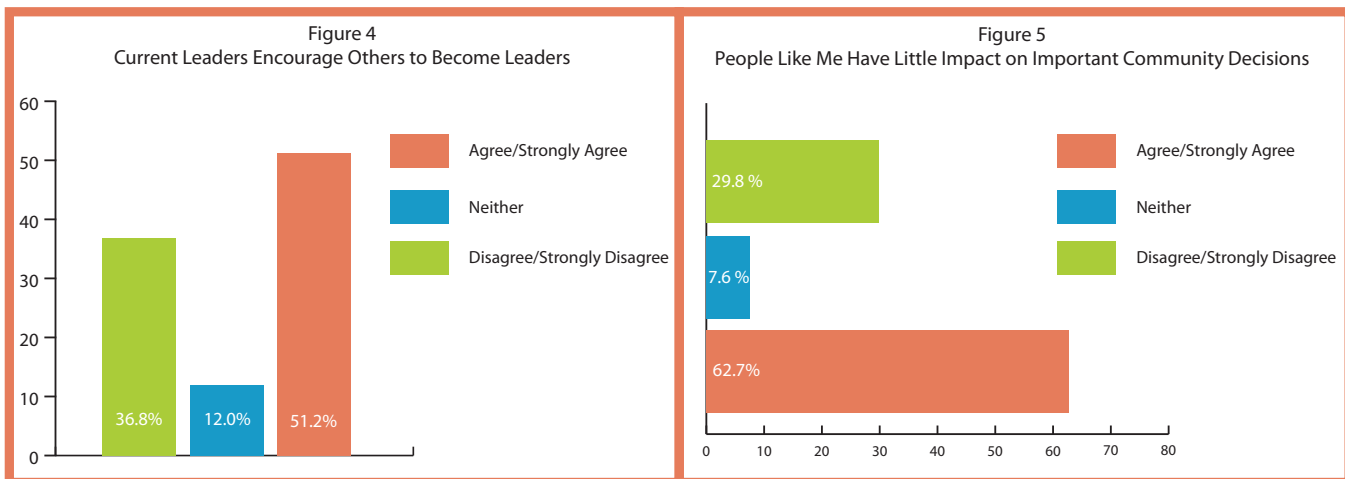
Do Leaders Encourage Others to Become Leaders?



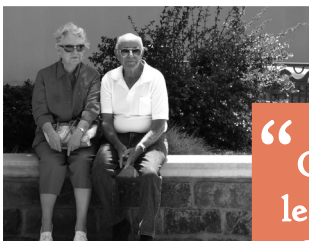
In order to remain vibrant, communities must expand the number of local residents who are serving in leadership roles. This is not to say that current leaders are not doing a good job, but rather, that the demands of being a community leader can result in “burnout” without enough people willing to accept leadership responsibilities.

But, the degree to which new people are encouraged to take on more leadership roles can be supported or implied by those now serving in local leadership positions. Thus, survey participants were asked to respond to the following statement: “Current community leaders in Coahoma County encourage others to become leaders as well.” As Figure 4 reveals, more than half of residents answered in the affirmative while nearly 37 percent disagreed with this statement. Additional findings on this topic include the following:

- Residents with less than high school were more likely than those with a bachelor’s or more to agree that present leaders are supportive of others becoming leaders (65.3 percent versus 43.9 percent).
- Senior citizens were more likely than individuals 45- 64 years old to agree that present leaders are supportive of others becoming leaders (57.6 percent versus 46.2 percent).



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What Impact Do Citizens Have on Local Matters

It is always important to have community leaders that local people can trust and who are making decisions that are in the best interest of the locality. At the same time, strong communities depend on citizens who believe they have a role to play in shaping and guiding decisions on public issues about which they care deeply.

When participants in the countywide surveys were asked if they agreed or disagreed with the following statement, “Overall, people like me have little impact on important community decisions,” they replied the following (Figure 5):

- Almost 63 percent of the respondents agreed, while less than 30 percent disagreed.
- Those most likely to embrace the view that they have little influence on local decisions had less than a high school degree, were female, and were 65 years of age or over.

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Concluding Comments

Results of the 2009 survey suggest that people trust their elected officials to make the right decisions and that they are encouraging others to become leaders. On the other hand, Coahoma County residents have mixed views about how well local elected officials are doing communicating important information on local issues and plans to county residents. Furthermore, about half of the residents feel leaders do not really care about what happens to them. Finally, better than 60 percent of the residents feel they can have little impact on important community decisions. So what do these results offer in terms of recommendations? Two come to mind:

- Maintaining the trust of local residents will require efforts by local officials to communicate plans and proposals on an ongoing basis. Exploring new channels for communicating with citizens—ones that take full advantage of information technologies and social networking resources remains an important task.
- Prior to voting or deciding on important local matters or pursuing community-wide plans, community leaders might host forums, roundtables, focus group meetings, or other appropriate activities in a variety of places that will attract and engage a diversity of local citizens. By doing so, residents will feel they have been given the opportunity to offer their input on upcoming community decisions.

For More Information:
Contact the Southern Rural
Development Center at
662-325-3207
Or visit us online at
<http://srdc.msstate.edu>



About these Surveys

The surveys used for this brief were conducted in the fall of 2007 and 2009. Telephone interviews with adult respondents from households in the target counties were conducted using a random digital dialing sampling procedure for telephone numbers.

A total of 800 respondents (two counties) participated in 2007 and 1,279 respondents (three counties) participated in 2009. The surveys were weighted based on gender, educational attainment, and age groups to ensure they were representative of the communities.

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