

What We Heard

Community Surveys Report 2026

Introduction

Throughout the summer of 2026, the Felix E. Martin Jr. Foundation invited community members and key partners to help shape a shared vision for Muhlenberg County: a thriving place to live, work, and raise a family.

As we chart the Foundation's direction for the next five to seven years, we asked a simple set of questions. What ideas do you have to strengthen our community? What needs attention? And what opportunities can we help create for the people who call this place home?

We received input from more than 600 community members as answers came through surveys, interviews, and focus groups, and we are grateful for every one of them. This report shares key themes from what we heard, specifically the community's **assets and strengths** and its **challenges and barriers**. These themes will guide the work we take on in the years ahead. There is still much work to do, but we are encouraged by the vision you have shared. Thank you for helping make Muhlenberg County the remarkable place it is today, and for helping us build an even brighter future.

What We Heard: Community Assets and Strengths

Across surveys, interviews, and focus groups, people described Muhlenberg County as a place whose greatest strength is its people. Residents here value the close-knit, small-town way of life and the way neighborhoods rally together in hard times. We also heard that strong schools, quality healthcare, natural beauty, and a rich cultural heritage are also foundations we can all continue to build upon. Many of the folks we heard from also noted early signs of progress, including new businesses, downtown improvements, and more community activity.

- **A Close-Knit, Caring Community**
 - Rural, tight-knit community known for friendly neighbors and people helping one another
 - Residents consistently come together in times of crisis, such as after the 2021 tornado
 - Warm and welcoming to newcomers
 - Small-town character, safety, affordability, and a quiet, slower pace
 - *"Neighbors help neighbors."*
 - *"It's home."*
- **Strong Schools and Pathways for Young People**
 - Public schools viewed as one of the county's greatest assets
 - Early childhood education and local education initiatives that support children and families
 - Career discovery labs in elementary and middle schools
 - Community college annex and the West Kentucky Workforce Training Center
- **Quality Healthcare Close to Home**
 - Strong regional hospital and healthcare system
 - Potential to attract more healthcare professionals to the area

- **Natural Beauty and Outdoor Recreation**
 - Lake Malone, the Green River, and local parks
 - Parks and trail improvements noted by residents in recent years
 - Opportunity to draw more visitors to these spaces
- **Rich Heritage and Local Identity**
 - Musical heritage, coal history, and a unique cultural identity
 - Local history and lifelong family roots
 - Pride in the county's identity and a desire to honor it while moving forward
- **Local Businesses and Economic Building Blocks**
 - Strong presence of small, locally owned businesses
 - Community-minded banks and financial institutions
 - Local food pantry and farmers' market
 - Industrial park and an airport with room to expand aviation training
 - Recent growth, including new businesses, downtown development, and greater support for local shops
- **Committed Leaders and Strong Relationships**
 - Deep commitment among local leaders to improving the county
 - Strong working relationships among schools, healthcare, economic development partners, and community organizations
- **Location and Growing Community Activity**
 - Central location with access to larger regional centers like Nashville
 - More community events, arts and entertainment, and youth activities
 - Greater willingness to come together and help others

What We Heard: Community Challenges and Barriers to Progress

We at the Foundation appreciate how candid everyone was identifying what stands in the way of the future they want for Muhlenberg County. The county continues to adjust to the loss of coal-era revenue and jobs while preparing for new industry, as housing, local infrastructure, and workforce readiness all remain under pressure. The folks we heard from also noted longstanding community divisions, a shortage of new and forward-thinking leaders, and a dip in civic participation as worth attending to.

- **Economic Transition and Opportunity**
 - Loss of coal severance funds and TVA-related jobs and revenue
 - Persistent, generational poverty
 - Limited job opportunities for some residents, even as new industry begins to arrive
 - Difficulty moving beyond historic dependence on coal and other extractive industries
 - Some feel recent improvements have not reached every part of the county
 - *"We've been waiting around for something to happen for a long time, and it's finally happening now."*
- **Workforce Readiness**
 - Concern that the local workforce is not yet prepared to fill newly created jobs
 - Worry that workers may live and spend money in neighboring counties
 - Need for skilled trades training, adult education, and credentials
 - Need for clearer paths from high school into local careers or higher education
- **Housing**
 - Limited and aging housing supply
 - Rising home prices, land costs, and cost of upkeep
 - Few paths to homeownership and little workforce housing for incoming workers and families

- Blighted and dilapidated properties, and properties that are not maintained
- Concern that the county is not prepared for anticipated population growth
- **Infrastructure and Transportation**
 - Limited sewer, water, natural gas, electric, and broadband capacity
 - Long distances between towns, jobs, services, and amenities
 - Local governments struggle to maintain existing infrastructure and facilities
 - *“Shore up what assets we have already built and invested in.”*
- **Division and Competition Among Communities**
 - Longstanding tension between local communities
 - Competition has contributed to duplicated services and infrastructure
 - Fragmentation makes it harder to compete for countywide funding and to build a shared vision
 - Hope for a more unified vision which promotes “One Muhlenberg”
- **Limited Long-Term Coordination**
 - No clear, countywide vision guiding decisions
 - Organizations working on similar issues do not always coordinate
 - Housing, tourism, transportation, workforce, and economic development are often planned separately
- **Leadership and Civic Engagement**
 - Few young and diverse leaders in prominent civic roles
 - Existing leadership structures do not always make room for new voices
 - Declining volunteerism and participation, especially since COVID-19
 - *“Engage the unengaged.”*
 - *“People like to complain but don’t want to be part of the solution.”*
- **Community Mindset and Pride**
 - Resistance to change and reliance on “old ways of thinking”
 - Limited optimism among some residents about the county’s future, and declining pride and sense of ownership
 - Survey results were mixed: about 45% optimistic, 25% neutral, and 30% pessimistic
 - *“People want change, but don’t want to change themselves.”*
 - *“We aren’t going to see the changes we want unless we change the way that people see our community.”*
- **Youth, Education, and Poverty**
 - Students dropping out, particularly since COVID-19
 - Limited support for neurodivergent students
 - Few safe, engaging places for young people to go
 - “Benefit cliffs,” where families risk losing food, disability, or other benefits when income rises
 - *“Nowhere for [young people] to be.”*
 - *“It’s like my son graduated from high school and his life just stopped.”*
- **Health and Family Well-Being**
 - Need for mental health services, substance use prevention and treatment, and healthcare access
 - Need for family wellness and support for families in poverty or instability
 - Needs among older adults, grandparents raising children, people with disabilities, and people experiencing homelessness
- **Quality of Place and Community Safety**
 - Downtown and gateway improvements, parks, and gathering spaces
 - Animal control, shelters, and emergency preparedness
 - Public safety, including support for volunteer fire departments