

Civic Trust on the Frontlines: Lessons from Michigan's Rural Local Governments

Findings from the Spring 2025
Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS)
April 20, 2026

The Michigan Public Policy Survey

- **A census survey** –
all 1,856 Michigan counties, cities, villages, and townships
- **Local government respondents** –
top elected and appointed officials
- **Administered** –
online and via hardcopy
- **Topics** –
examples include fiscal health, government operations and budget policies, elections, infrastructure, energy and environment, civic health, and much more.
- **Response rate** – 70%

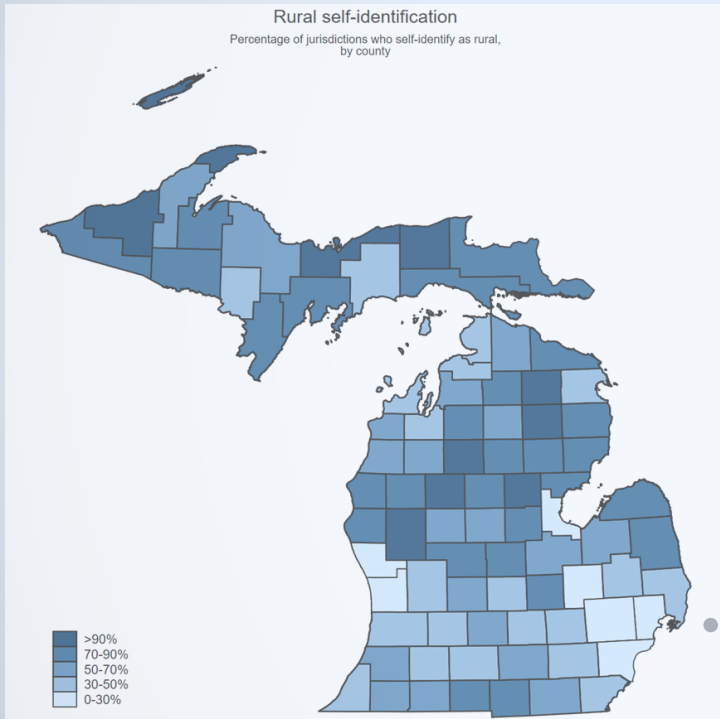


MPPS and rural Michigan

- **CLOS-R-UP:**

- ~ Responses from around 600 rural jurisdictions every wave (~ 50% of respondents)

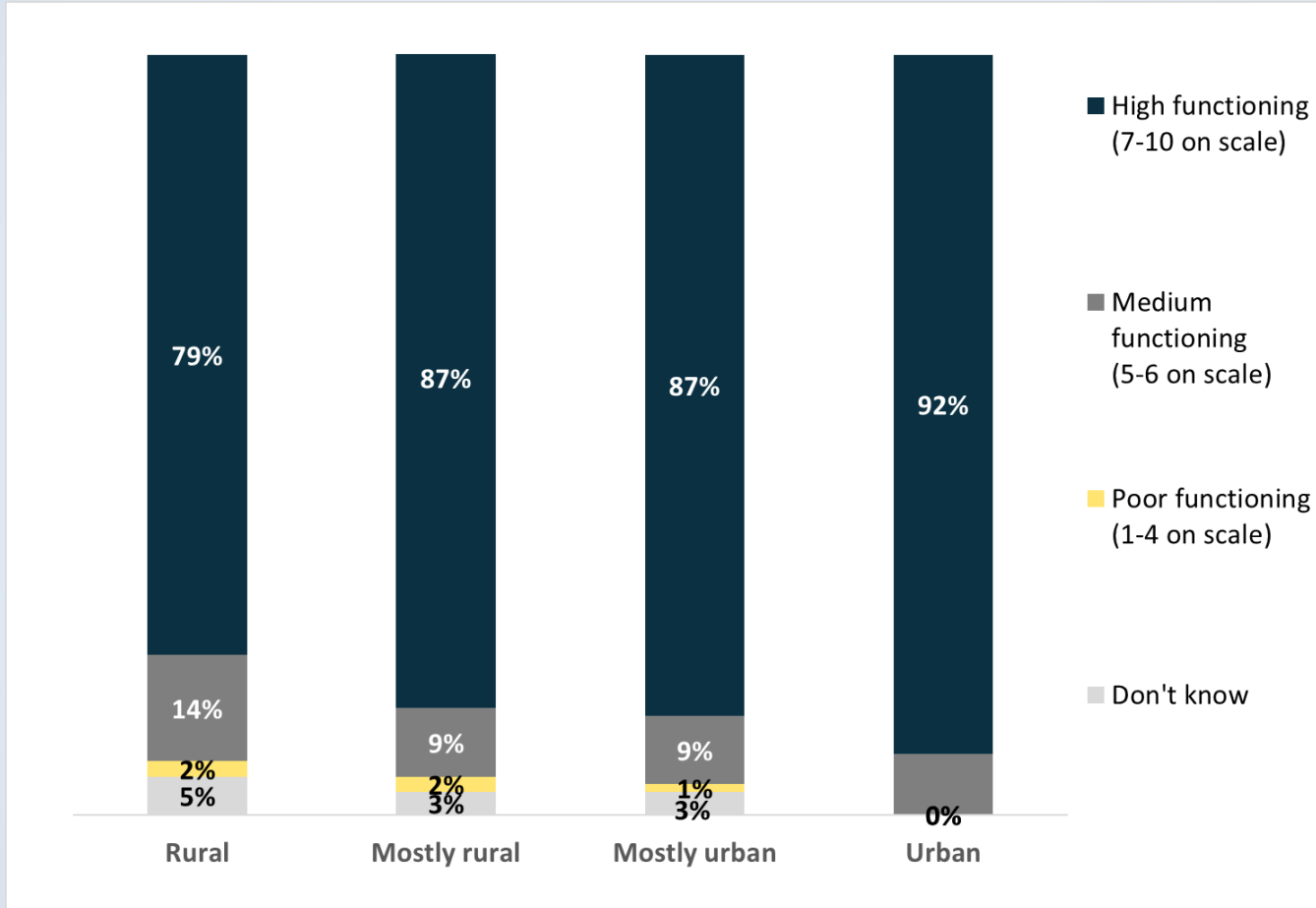
- ~ Also hear from around 400 mostly rural jurisdiction (~ 30% of respondents)



- **Measuring rural**

- ~ Respondents self-identify as: rural, mostly rural, mostly urban, or urban

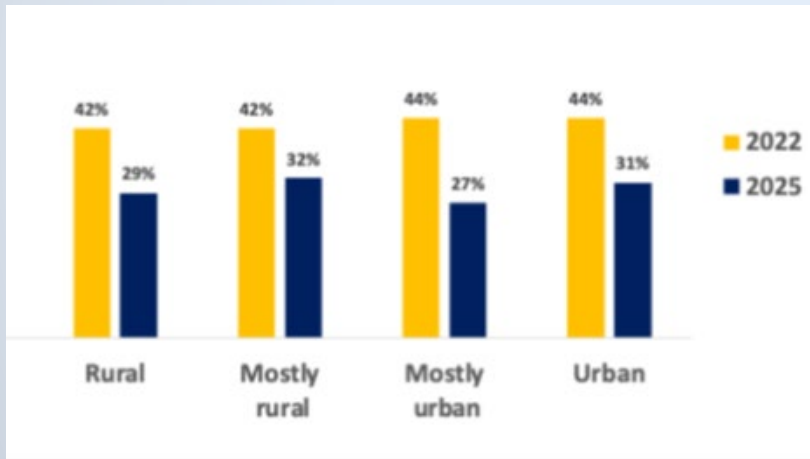
Optimism about the health of local democracy



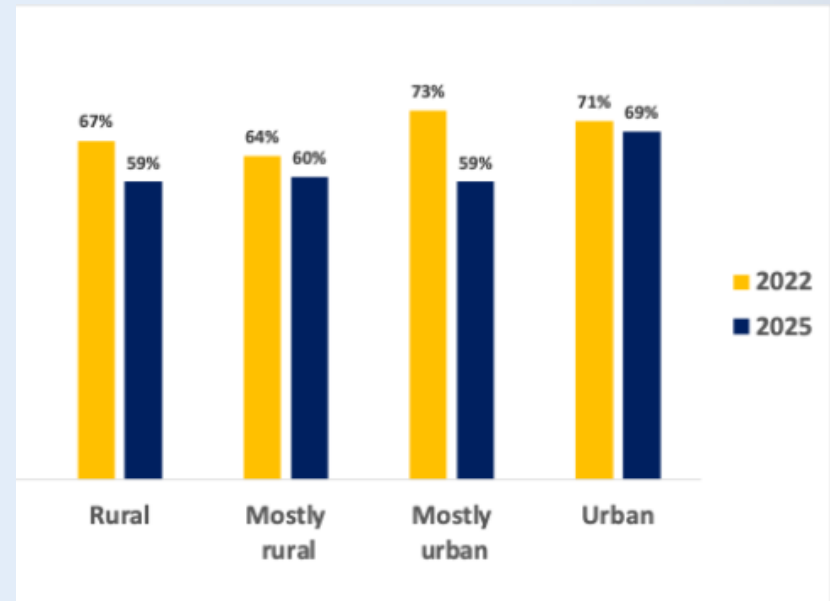
“Now we’re asking more broadly about your opinion of the state of our democracy as a system of government. ...On a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 is a total breakdown of democracy and 10 is perfectly functioning democracy, how would you rate the functioning of democracy today in your jurisdiction”

Deterioration in tone of public discourse

Among residents (% who say discourse is primarily constructive)

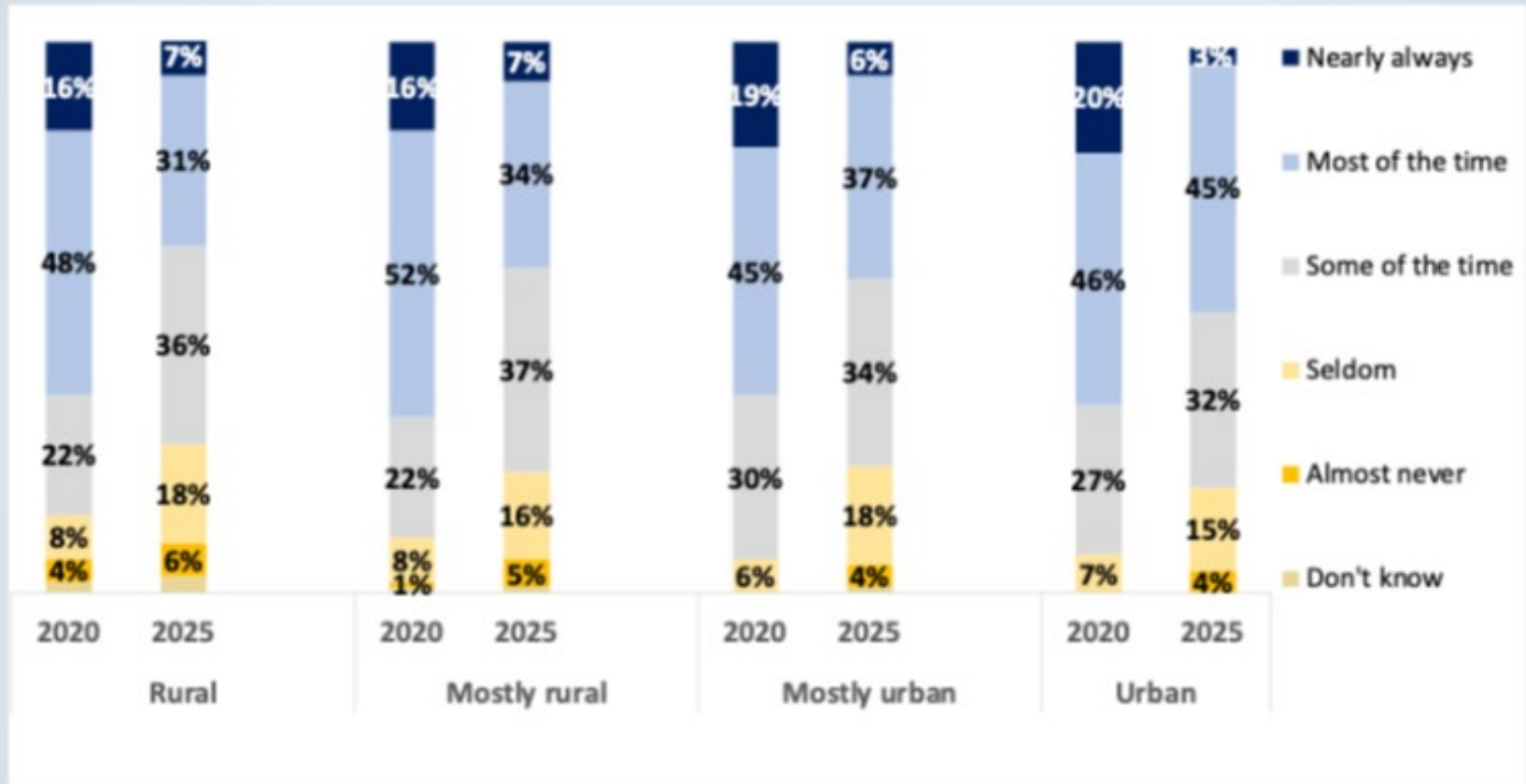


Between residents and elected officials:



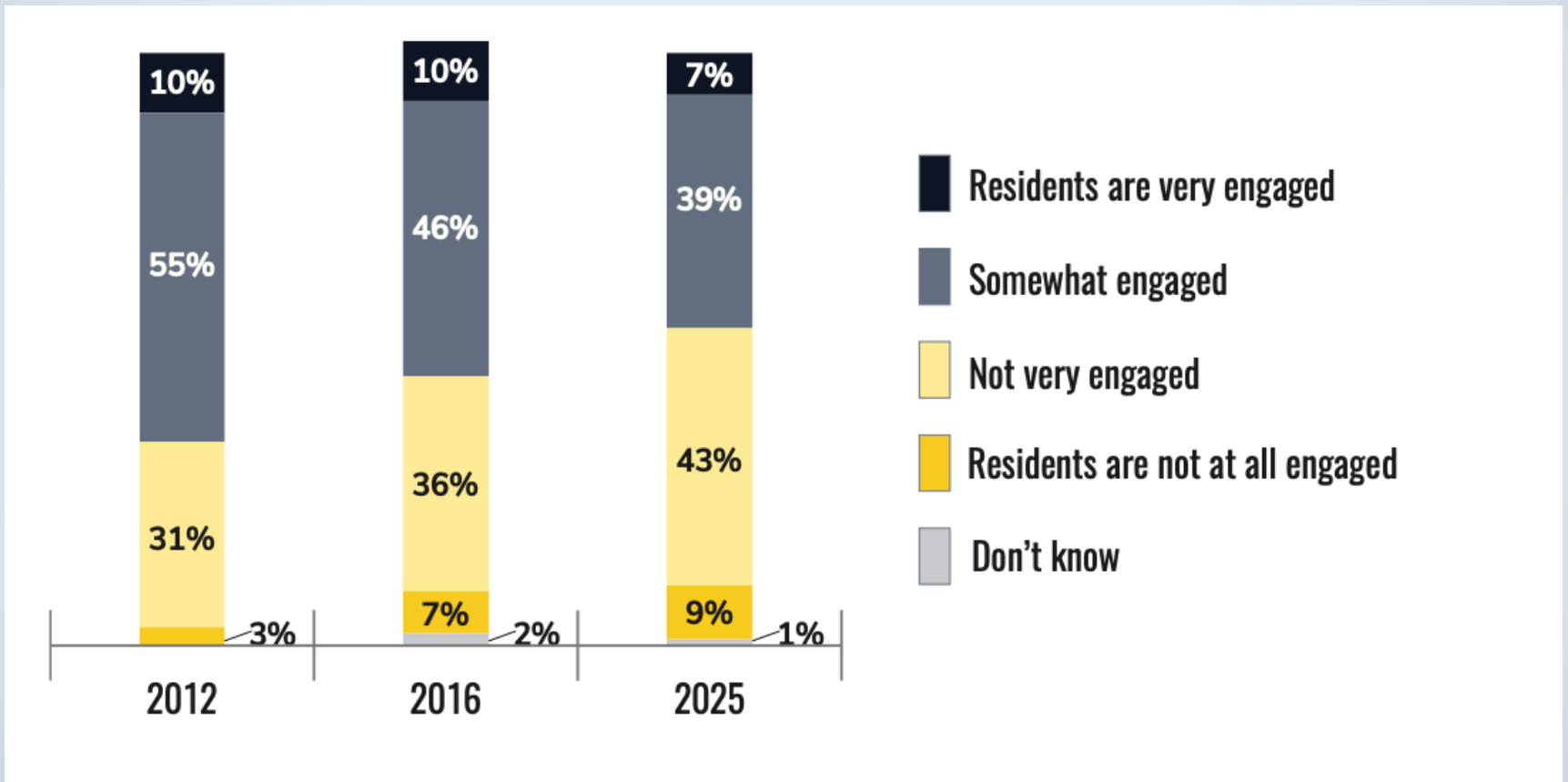
“Thinking generally about the tone of discussion and communication that takes place around local policy issues, how would you describe the general state of public discourse within your jurisdiction between...?”

Rural leaders' trust in their residents also declined significantly



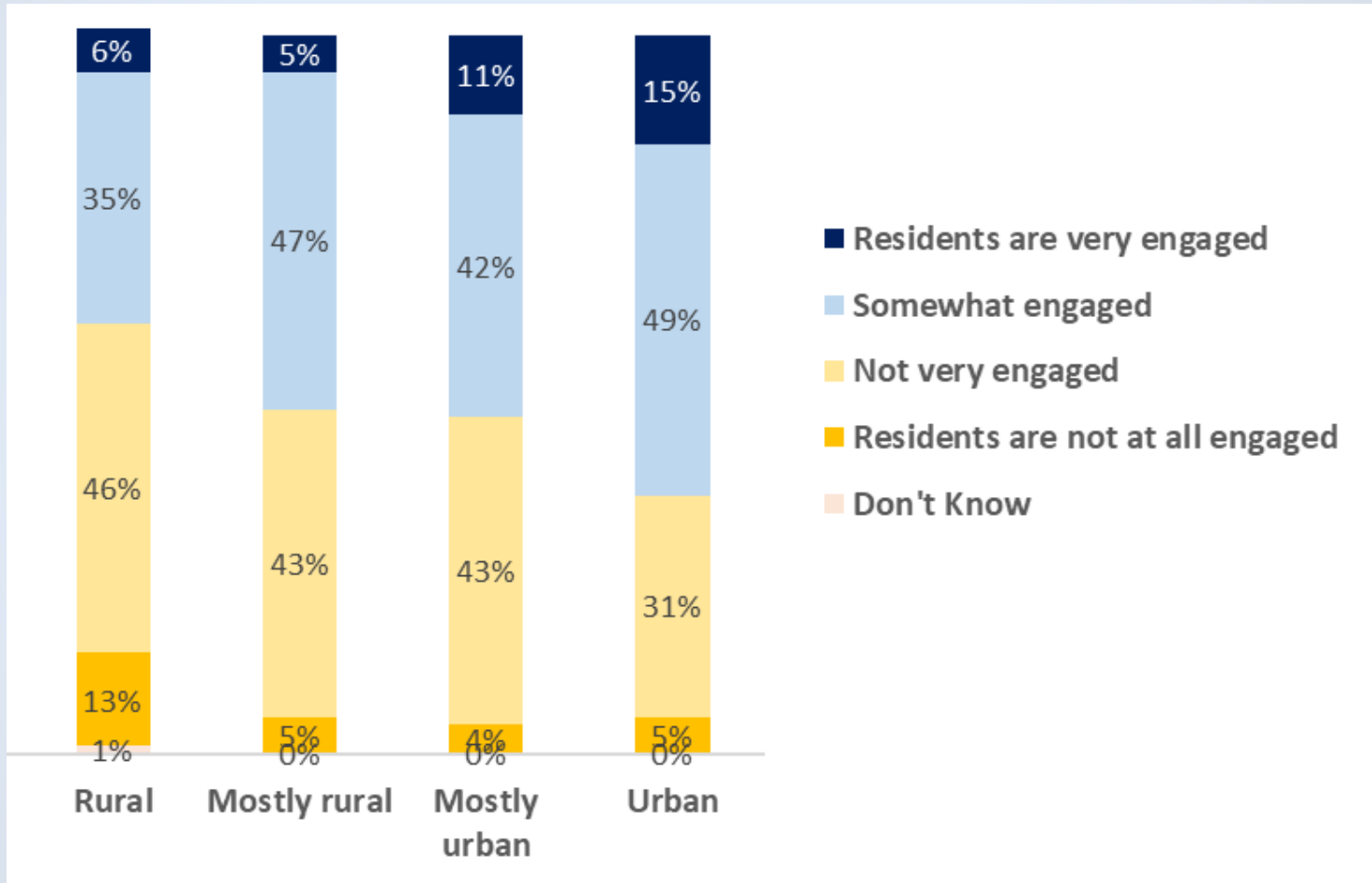
“... In terms of engagement in your jurisdiction’s policymaking and/or operations, how much of the time do you think you can trust the residents in your community to be responsible participants?”

Statewide, dramatic declines in reports of resident engagement with local governments



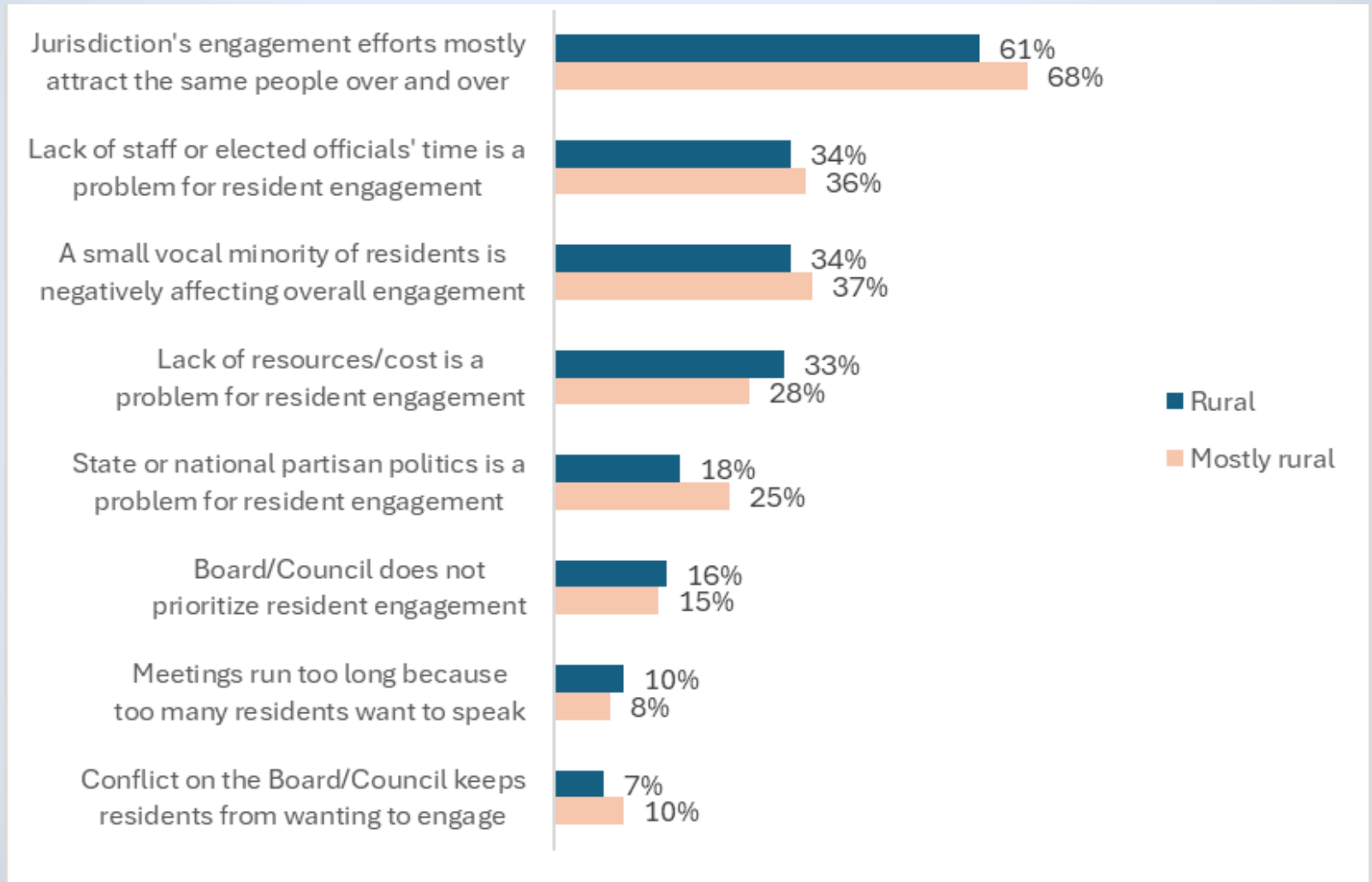
"We want to start by getting a very broad sense of resident engagement with your local government. How would you describe current levels of resident engagement with your jurisdiction?"

Resident engagement lower in rural communities



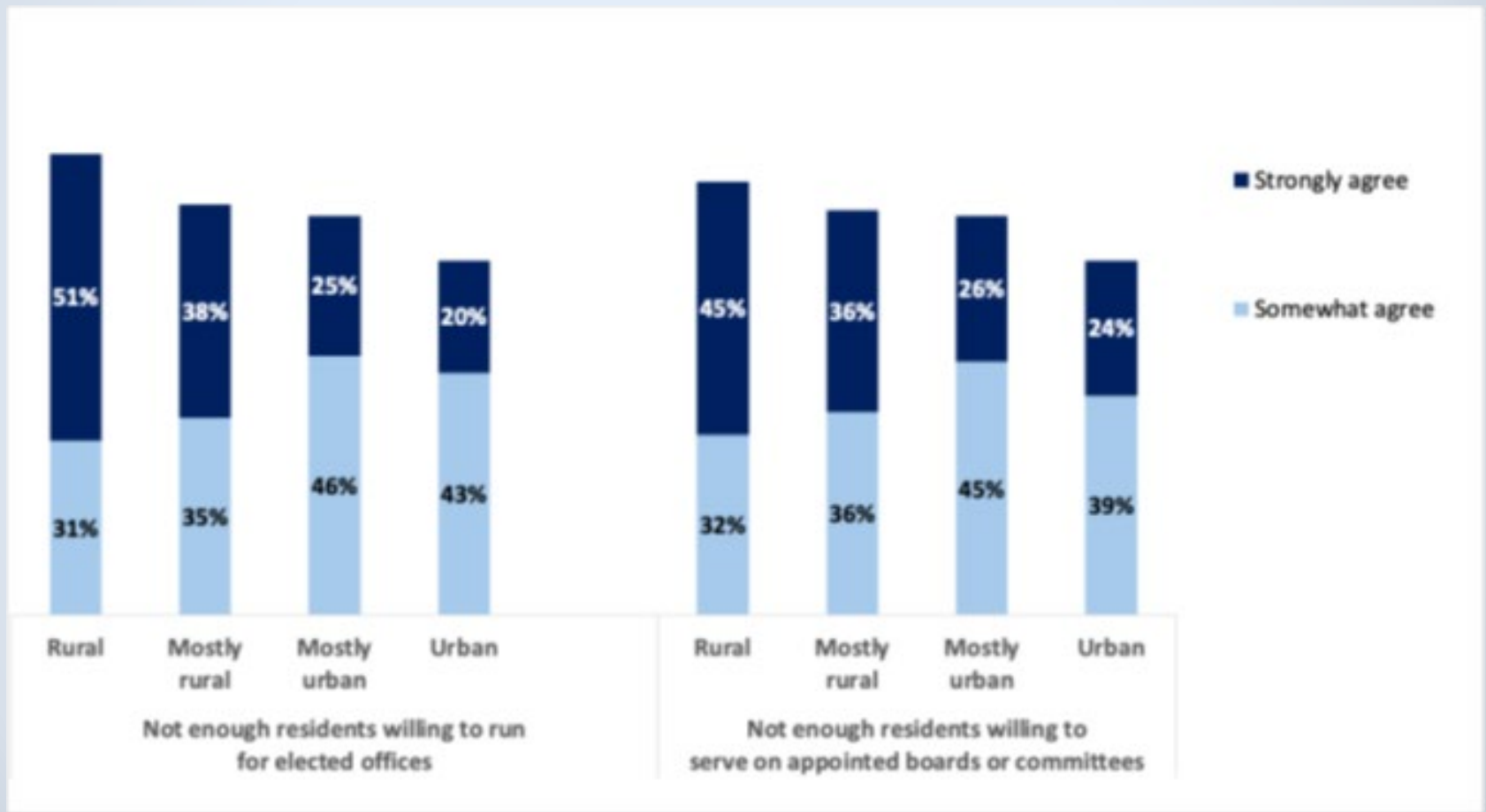
"We want to start by getting a very broad sense of resident engagement with your local government. How would you describe current levels of resident engagement with your jurisdiction?" (2025)

Problems rural officials report with resident engagement



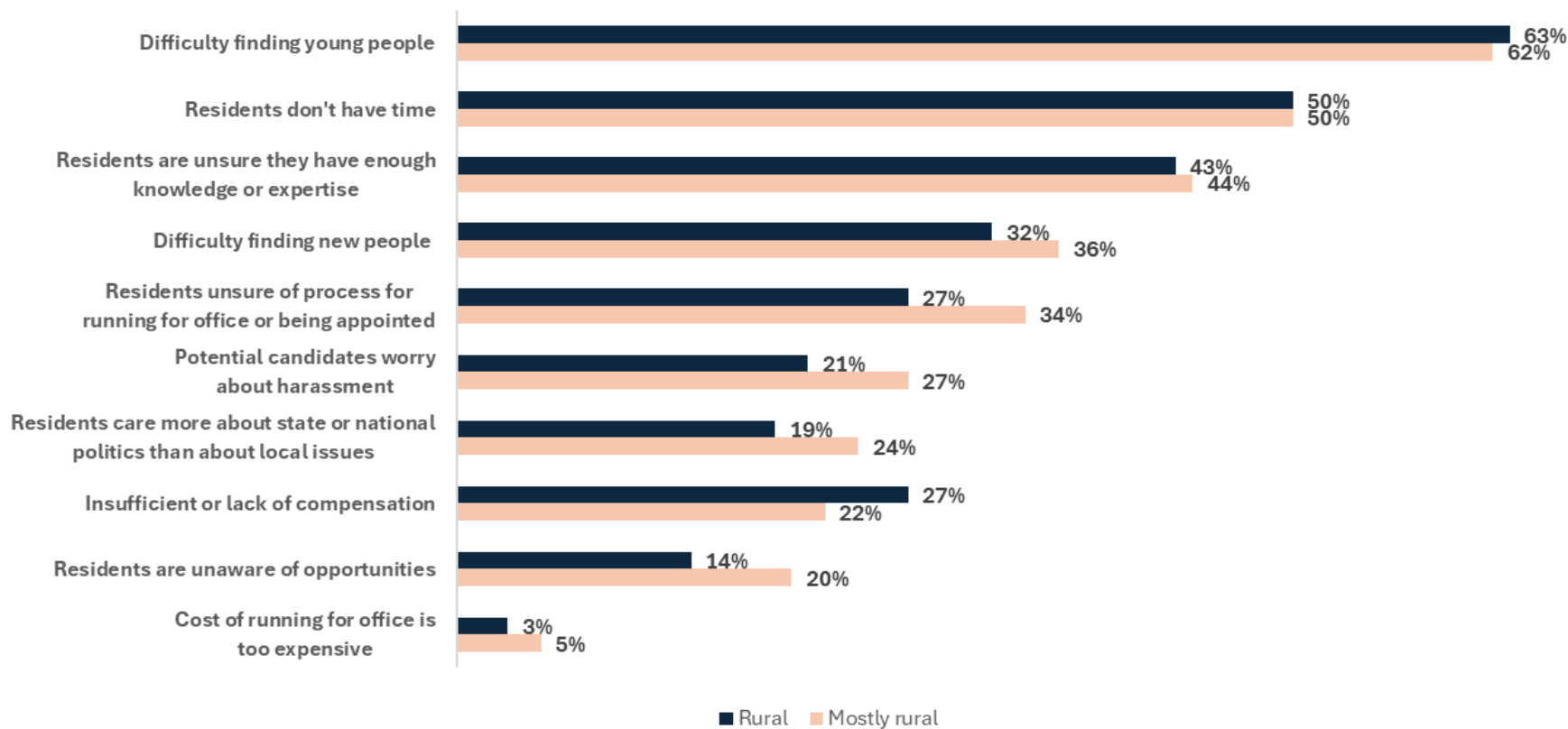
"Which of the following, if any, are problems your jurisdiction currently faces with resident engagement?" (2025)

Rural governments struggle to find residents to serve in elected office or on appointed boards



Thinking about how often residents in your jurisdiction run for local elected office or agree to serve on appointed jurisdiction boards or committees, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (2025)

Problems rural officials report with finding residents to serve in elected or appointed positions



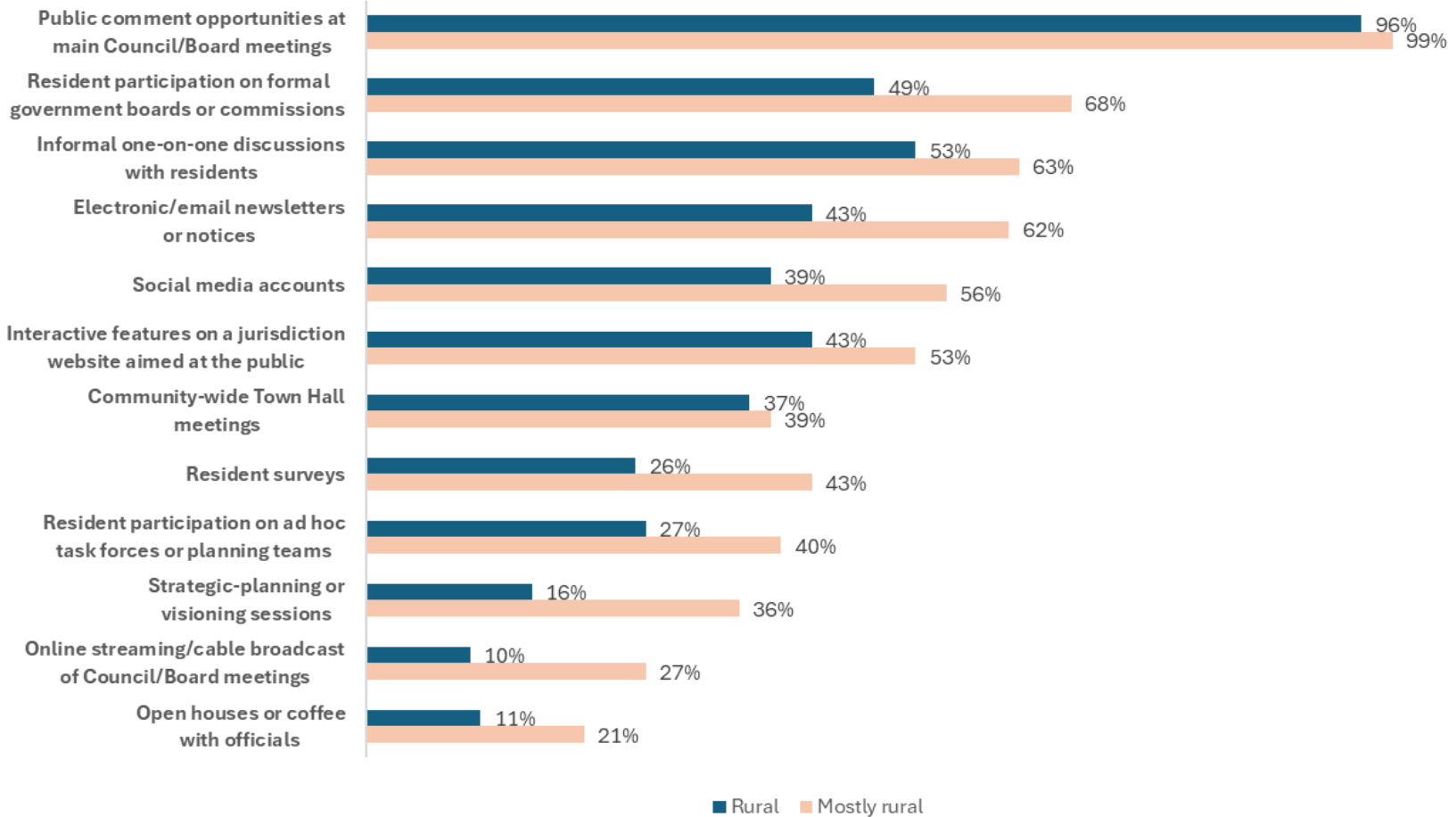
“Which of the following, if any, are problems your jurisdiction currently faces in finding residents to run for office and/or serve on appointed boards?” (2025)

Looking for Change: Voices across rural Michigan

If you don't feel things with resident engagement are going well in your jurisdiction, what do you wish was different?

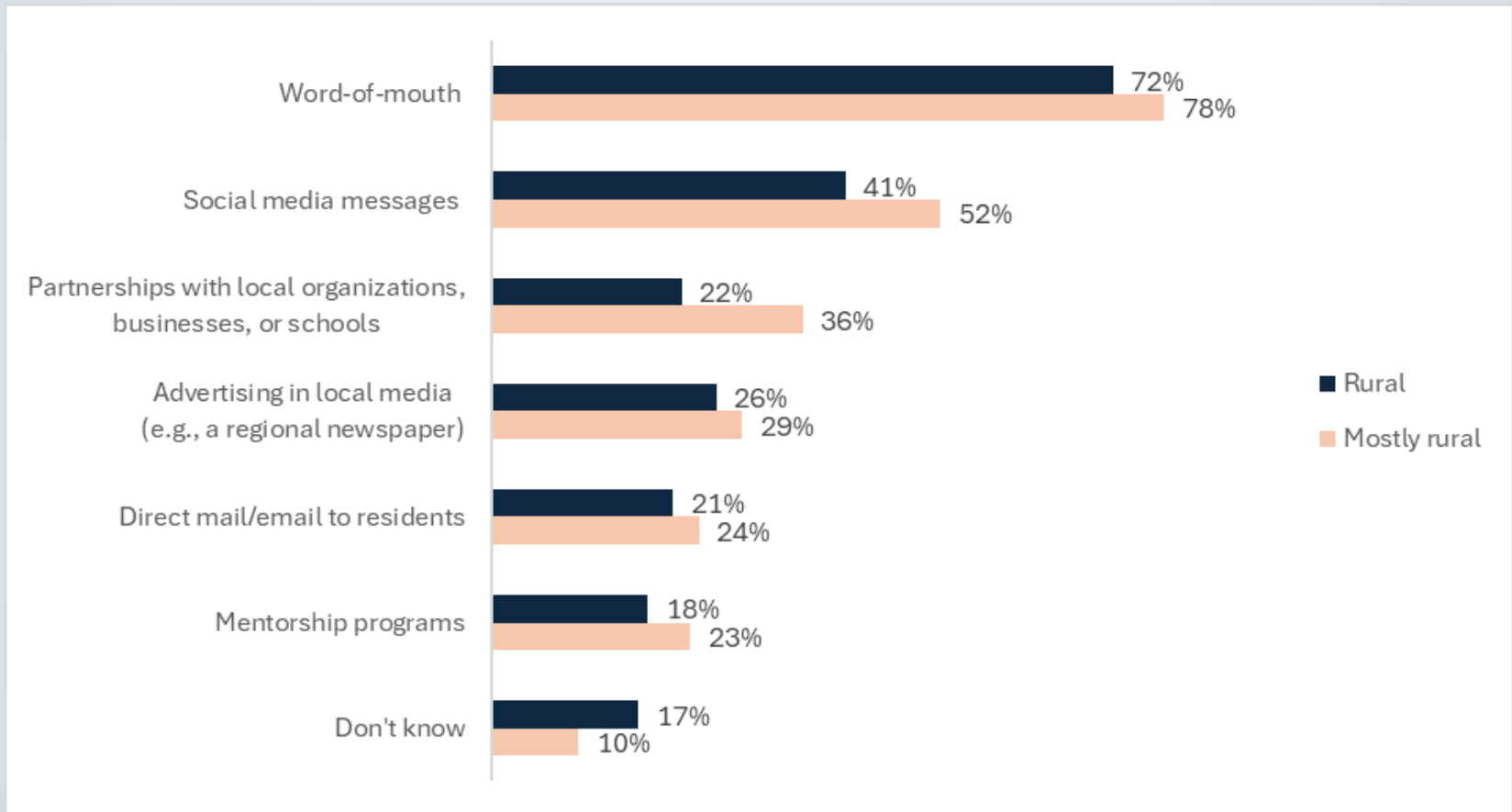
- “I wish residents would be more informed about policy procedures so they can understand why things operate the way they do. Understand mandates and how they affect the budgeting process.”
- “I wish people would be more involved with the issues that come up. We are currently working on getting social media platforms set up so it will be easier to do so. Also more events at our local park.”
- “Our Township hall is located outside of our population center making it very difficult for out constituents to participate. I would like to relocate the Township Hall to a more centralized location in the Township.”
- “Residents need to feel in powered that they do have a voice and a say in Township government. But they need to run / participate personally and actively!”
- “The divisiveness in the community keeps good people from running or offering to serve on boards as they do not want in be harassed.”
- “Residents are comfortable letting their elected officials make almost all of the decisions when, truthfully, we would prefer more input from those people that elected us.”

Some approaches rural jurisdictions currently use for resident engagement



“As far as you know, which of the following approaches – if any – does your jurisdiction use to engage its residents in your government’s policymaking and/or operations?”

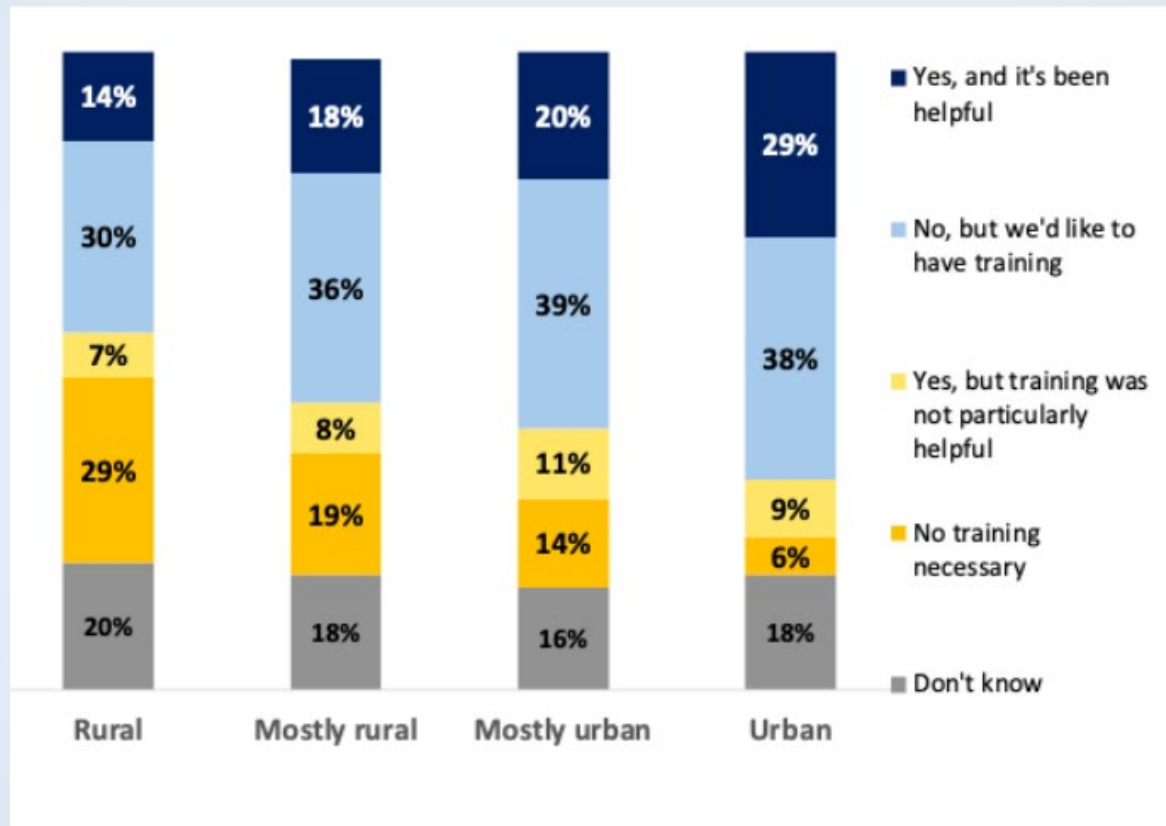
Outreach methods local officials think are effective



“What kinds of outreach methods do you think are, or could be, most effective in your jurisdiction for encouraging residents to run for office or serve on appointed boards?”



Rural governments interested in training opportunities



“Have any of your jurisdiction’s staff or elected officials had formal training recently in promoting or managing resident engagement?”

Solutions from local leaders

Thinking about all the ways your jurisdiction may be encouraging resident engagement in general, are you doing anything particularly innovative or effective that you could share with other local governments?

- **Frequent communication in many modes:** press releases, e-newsletters, mailed newsletters, Facebook/social media postings, website updates, open office hours, or podcasting.
- **Online participation in meetings:** using zoom and allowing remote participants to comment; posting meeting materials online in advance.
- **Tried and true analog methods:** talking in person or posting information on physical bulletin boards in local businesses or public places.
- **Resident surveys:** help community members feel included and understand other perspectives; when residents see general consensus for an idea, they may be more likely to step up and volunteer to help.
- **Plan ahead and use an iterative process:** allowing time for a few rounds of feedback shows residents how their ideas are being considered along the way.

Solutions from local leaders

- **Engage residents on topics they are interested in:** road repairs, zoning, or other resonant issues can spark resident interest in government operations.
- **Find partners:** partnering with local nonprofit organizations and other local governments
- **Always be recruiting:** keep a list of people you meet who may be a good fit for a future role; providing opportunities for young people to intern and learn about how your government works.
- **Try a citizen academy:** a more intensive option is to recruit residents to a multi-session academy or weekend workshop where they can dig into the details of your government's operations; single-session educational events can also engage residents.

“If there’s one thing I’d share with other local governments, it's that even in times of financial limitation, transparency, openness to change, and community dialogue can go a long way in planting the seeds for future engagement.” – Township Supervisor

- “Whenever we have significant issues, such as roads, sewer, (flooding lately), fire service etc... We hold small, informal town hall meetings with the residents. We bring in the experts, we give them all the information and let them ask all their questions. Most importantly, we do not sugar coat anything that will affect them. Over the last 20yrs this has led to a community that may not always like our answers, but they know they will get honest information.”
- Bi-monthly town halls are well attended, and resident driven (very informal, not broadcast, so residents are free to speak without fear). We have also become very active on "Nextdoor" which is very targeted for local participation, and feedback is good. We recently started up an app. Too soon to tell, but early feedback is positive.”
- “We have a monthly meeting which is facilitated by the mayor. It is open to all in the community, citizens, business owners/managers, government, organizations, schools, library, theater folks, artists, etc. All of these community silos enter the room in-person or via Zoom. Only positive comments are allowed, no negativity - as a ground rule. ”

For additional information



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