



# 2025 Community Benchmark Report City of Liberal, KS

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**Innovation Economy Partners**  
OUR FOCUS: IMPACT AND OUTCOMES

Conny Bogaard | [conny@wkcf.org](mailto:conny@wkcf.org)



**Dear Liberal Residents and Community Leaders,**

It has been my privilege, as a representative of Innovation Economy Partners, to witness the deep bond you share with this place you call home. Liberal is more than a dot on the map—it is a community that pulses with meaning, where neighbors celebrate one another's successes and rally together when times are tough. That spirit is your greatest asset.

Today, economic confidence has dipped across the board. Business conditions, job opportunities, and income expectations all sit in negative territory, putting pressure on families and local enterprises alike. Yet, your greater willingness to invest—though tempered—remains the strongest signal of enduring hope. You see the future not as a void but as fertile ground for new opportunity.

Community feedback makes one thing clear: attracting new businesses is your top priority. Nearly three-quarters of respondents named it as essential to your town's revival. Equally urgent are removing blighted properties that erode neighborhood pride, repairing sidewalks and roads to ensure safe, efficient access, and expanding quality, affordable housing so that every resident can lay down roots here.

By focusing first on these tangible, high-impact programs, Liberal can reverse its economic slide. New employers will boost the local tax base and create living-wage jobs; cleared and renovated properties will restore community pride; infrastructure improvements will connect people and commerce; and housing investments will stabilize households and attract talent. These initiatives form a clear, data-driven roadmap—one that honors your legacy of togetherness while setting a course for sustainable growth.

Thank you for the opportunity to serve your community. We look forward to partnering with you to unlock Liberal's full potential.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Lee Pettijohn".

Lee Pettijohn

***Innovation Economy Partners***

*Supporting Local Strength, Strategy, and Success*



## What Makes Our Community Special?

*“When we do have community events and everyone participates it’s always blast!!”*

**Yesenia**

*“There are people of all ages who care for and support others”*

*“What makes our community special is the people. People band together and support each other.”*

*“The people in Liberal are the best. We have some of the most giving people here...not just with their money, but also with their time and energy. In the past it was a lot stronger, but times and population has changed. By working together regardless of their nationality I believe we will continue to grow even greater!”*

**Mike**

*“We come together in times of need.”*

*“Youth activities available through Baker Arts, library, Rec Ctr., 4-H, etc.”*

*“United Way agencies focused on caring for families”*

**Mike**

*“Unity and coming together!”*

*“The College is a hidden gem. We have a lot of tourist things we don’t do a good job of promoting, like the Mid America Air Museum, Dorothy’s House and the Land of Oz, Adventure Bay water park, Baker Arts Center, and Coronado Museum.”*

*“The diverse and inclusive amenities that make our community unique and special!”*

## The Leaders That Make Our Community Special



A word cloud of community leaders, with names arranged in a circular pattern. The names are: kelly kirk, ty lewick, mike brack, david short, tom willis, kelly hill, jim rice, kathy fitzgerald, april warden, al shank, matt quint, brad bennett, mike riney, joann sharp, rozelle webb, renee haraldson, everett ponder, jaimie arredondo, rex petty, eli svaty, cory barnett, clarissa carrillo, sonia hernández, presephoni fuller, mary brooks, sharon hobble, britt short, matt landry, ruby terrazes, alan brown, kay burtzloff, julie foster, raquel arellano, brad carr, joan griggs, shannon francis, vasquez molly colvin, jim betts, marshall lewis, norman dodge, jeff parsons, keith briedenstine, lawrence johnson, juvy jabel, brock kappelman, chasity wallace, kathleen alonso, ashley kappelman, ryan roehr, jeremy harris, brittyn heronemus, gary classen, sarah thompson, sarah foreman, lora jones, andy stewart, amy thompson, nick hatcher, jeff hall, cheryl collins, scarlette disecker, betsy betts, keeley moree, susan lukwago, luke dowell, joe denoyer, loretta hensley, earl watt, kent colvin, debra huddleston, john engel, jose lara, lidia hook-grey, nathan foreman, alicia hidalgo, sally fuller, scott carr, stephanie hall, jim garcia, luz riggs, cliff abbott, kayla hall.

# Executive Summary:

In 2025, Liberal faces economic anxiety and waning trust despite strong community pride. All confidence metrics are negative, yet investment willingness endures above the others. Top priorities—business attraction, removing blight, and infrastructure upgrades—must be paired with social-support enhancements in childcare, mental health, and safety. A unified strategy—combining quick wins like sidewalk repairs and small-business grants with long-term investments in a workforce innovation center, transparent planning, and inclusive governance—can rekindle confidence, retain talent, and drive equitable growth for Liberal’s future.

pg **4 - 5**

## Economic Confidence

Confidence has plunged across all indicators, yet residents’ lingering willingness to invest hints at resilience. Targeted business attraction and infrastructure upgrades can spark a fast recovery.

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## Community Engagement Confidence

Strong pride and achievement recognition coexist with doubts about planning, fairness, and loyalty. Transparent leadership and inclusive strategies can rebuild trust and deepen engagement.

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## Critical Community Priorities

Residents demand new employers and blight removal over social-support programs. Balancing economic anchors with childcare, healthcare, and safety investments will drive sustainable growth.

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## Survey Respondent Profile

Long-term residents feel deeper belonging than newcomers. High-school educated residents are more eager to invest than degree-holders. Public-sector workers desire affordable housing.

The Community Benchmarking report has been commissioned by Western Kansas Community Foundation to help local residents gain a better understanding of the most pressing opportunities that the local towns face. The annual reports that are generated will help leaders determine the extent to which the efforts are having an impact on the local residents. The reports are also a way for the the various towns in the Western County area to pursue grants to help further their local efforts.

**Local leaders can use this framework to help inspire change.  
This report provides the clues on what the fellow residents are craving.**





# Confidence In Our Local Economy

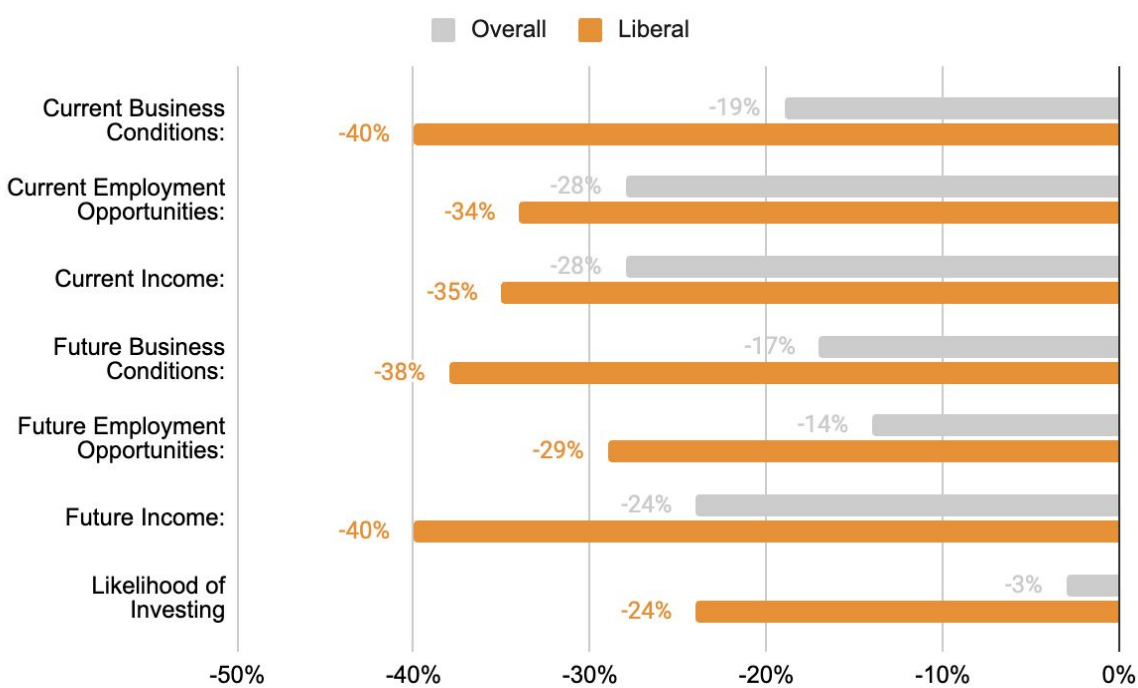
## Economic Summary:

Confidence across business conditions, jobs, and income fell sharply from 2024 to 2025; deeper than regional averages. Despite this, residents' willingness to invest remains the strongest metric, signaling underlying resilience. Frustrations over healthcare access, retail gaps, and aging infrastructure drive anxiety. Priorities like attracting employers, revitalizing downtown, and improving sidewalks offer a path forward. Focused investments in business recruitment, affordable housing, mental health services, and workforce development can stabilize incomes and reignite growth over the next two to three years.

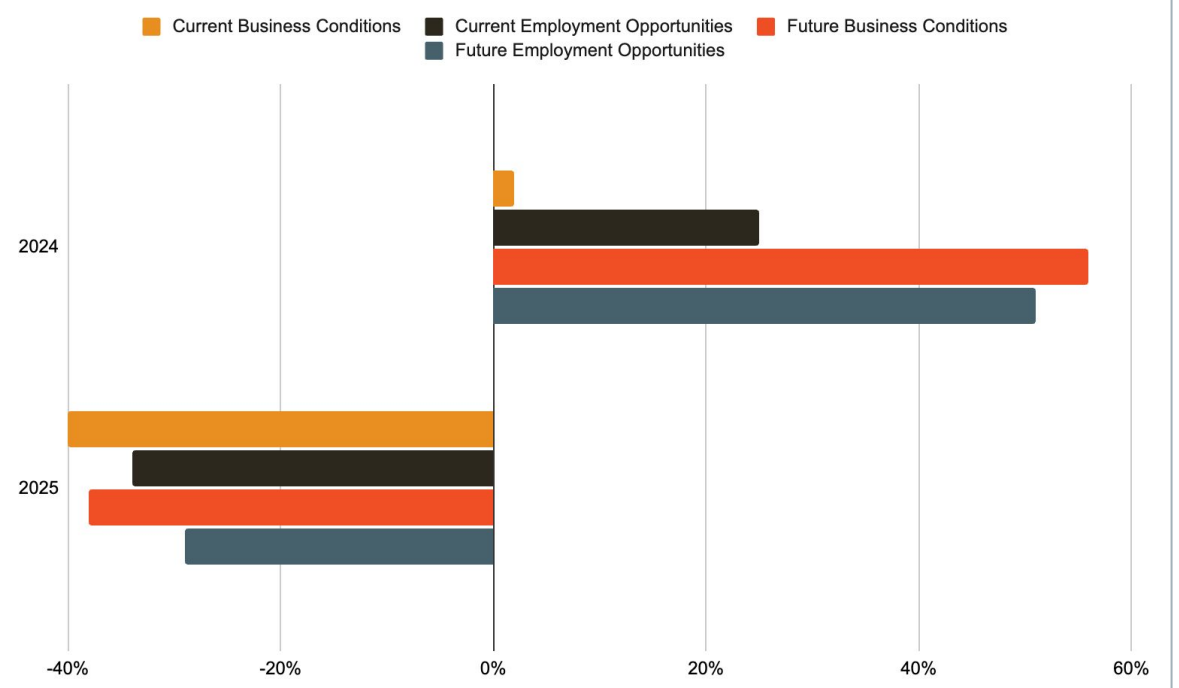
## Businesses Needed In Our Town:

- Retail Shopping** – locals shop out-of-town without local retail
- Restaurant Chains** – limited dining options drive residents elsewhere
- Entertainment Venues** – lack third spaces and family-friendly events
- Healthcare Services** – poor hospital care, need specialists locally
- Home Improvement Retail** – no big-box stores for building supplies
- Mental Health Services** – limited resources, stigma inhibits support
- Affordable Housing** – insufficient new, affordable rental options
- Childcare Facilities** – shortage of quality daycares and pre-K
- Clothing Stores** – few apparel options beyond discount chains
- Youth Activity Centers** – no dedicated spaces for teens to gather

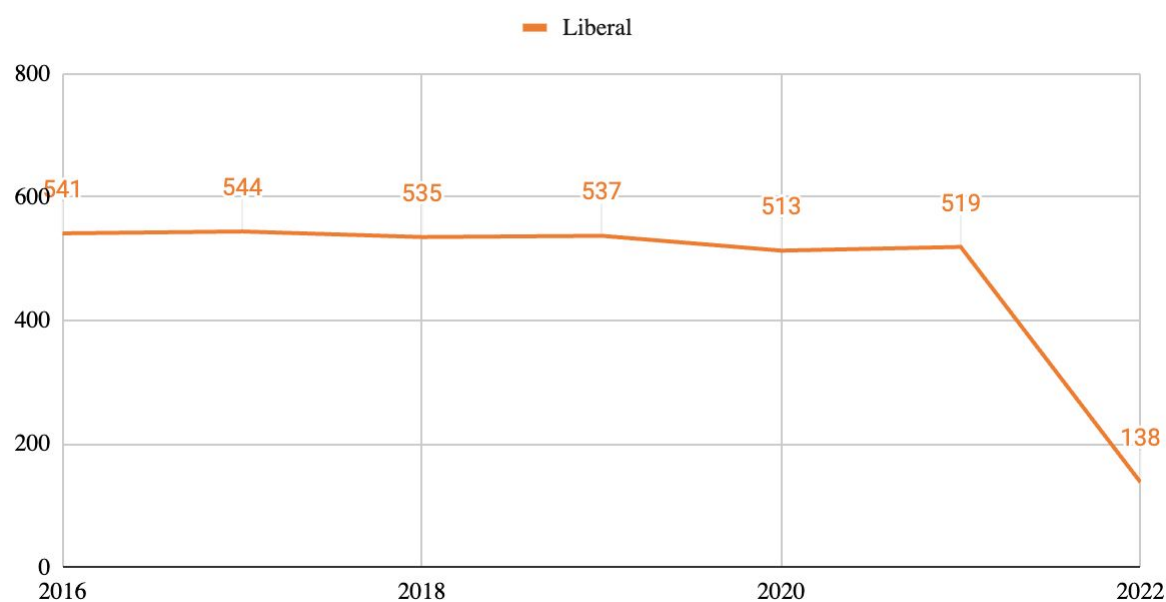
## Our Economic Perceptions



## Year Over Year Change (2024 vs 2025)

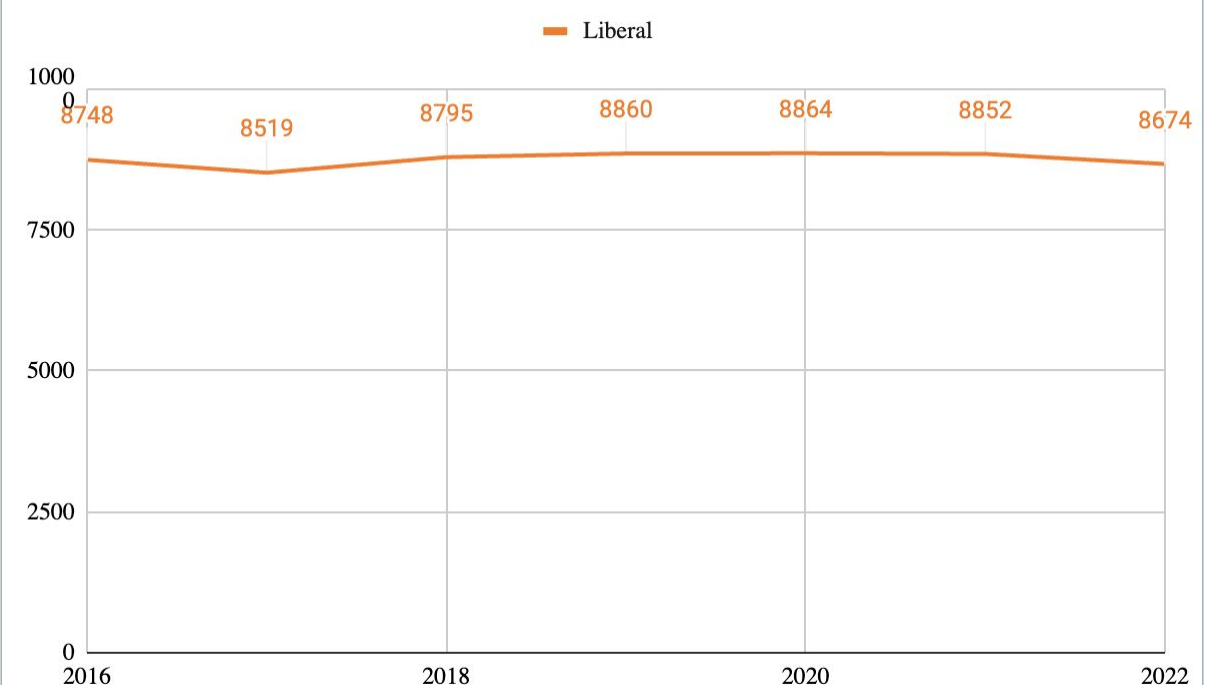


## Businesses in Our Town



Data source: United States Census Bureau (USCB), County Business Patterns

## 10 Year Shift in Local Jobs

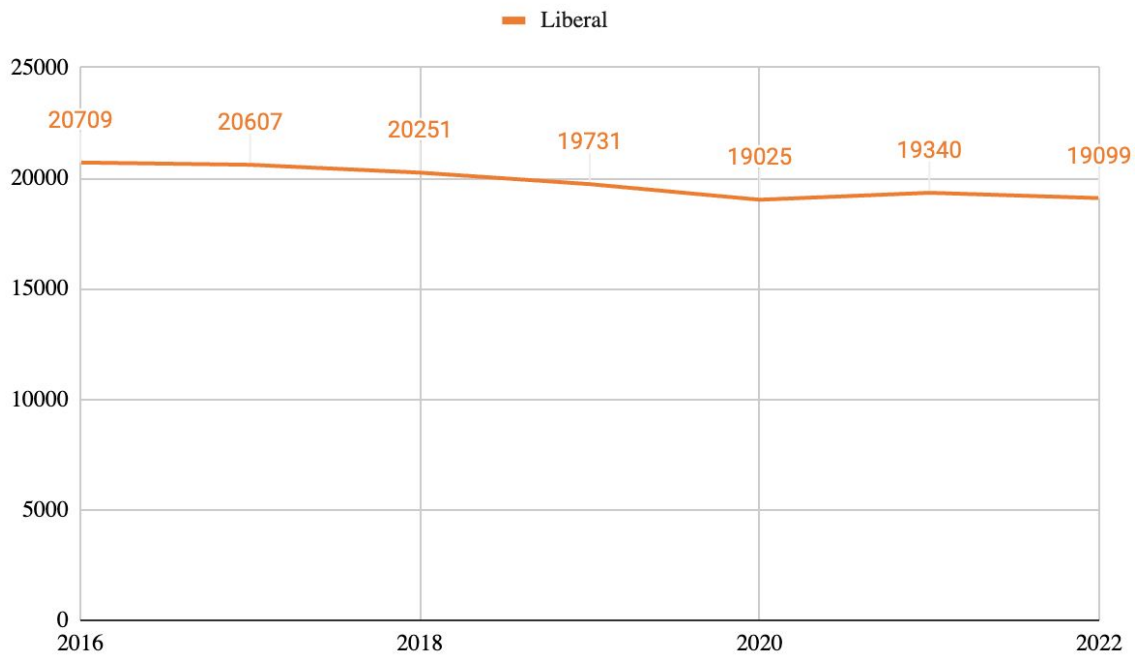


Data source: USCB, County Business Patterns

# Local Economic Indicators

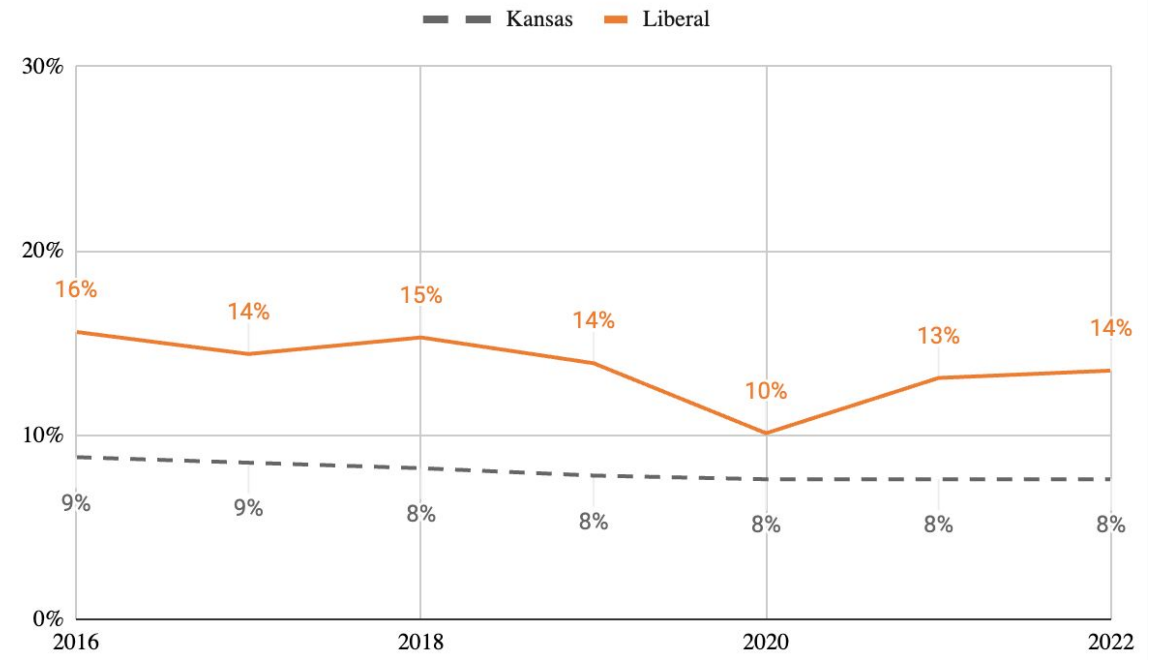


## Overall Population Trend



Data source:USCB, ACS 5-Yr Avg

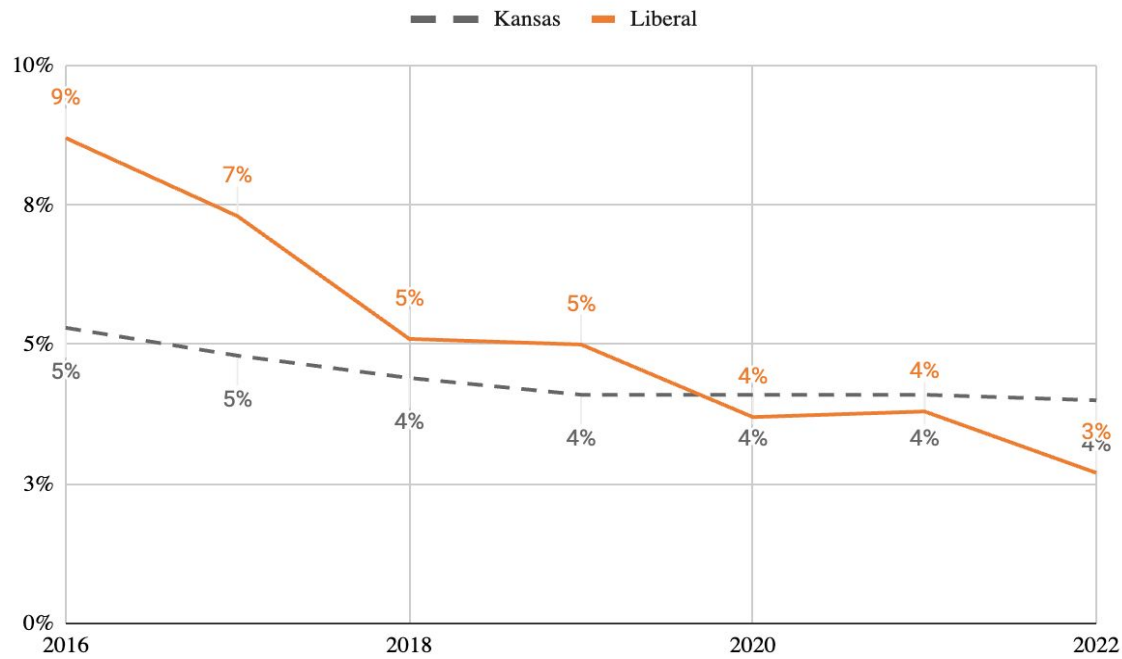
## Local Poverty Rate



Data source:USCB, American Community Survey, 5-Yr Avg, DP03



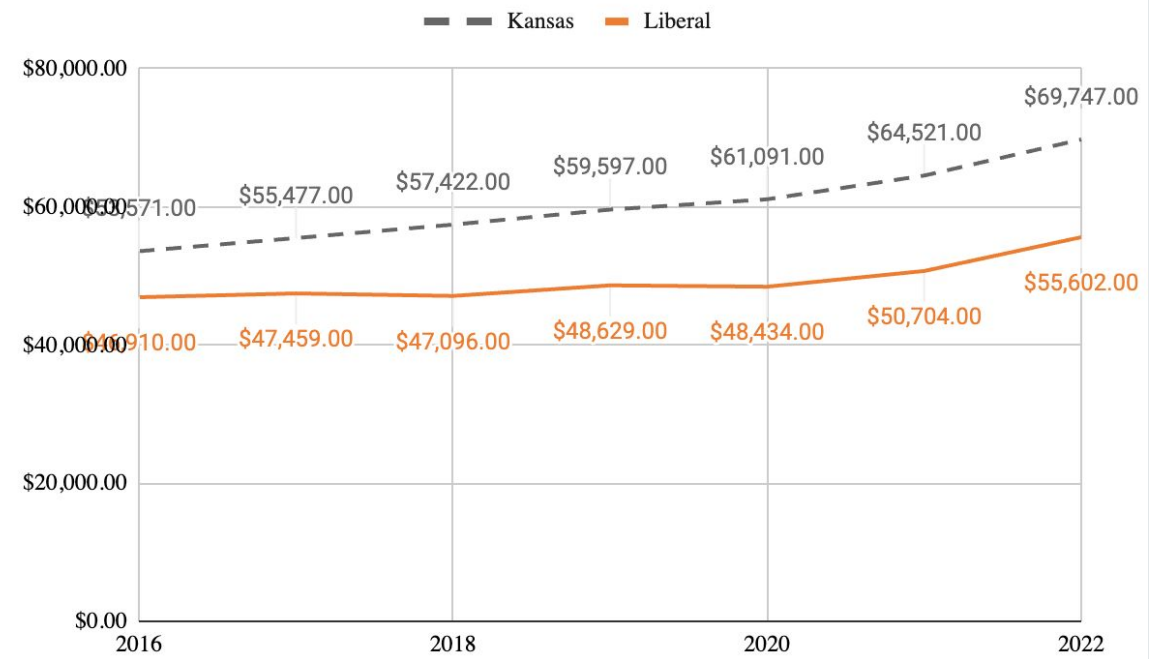
## Local Unemployment Rate



Data source:USCB, American Community Survey, 5-Yr Avg, DP03



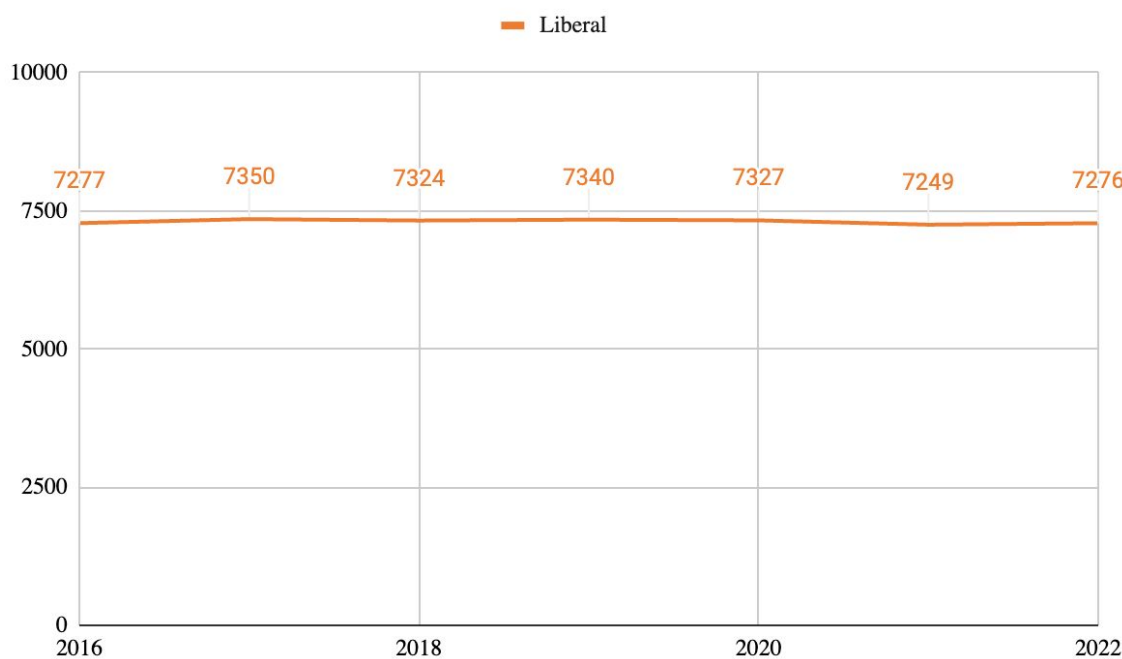
## Median Household Income



Data source:USCB, American Community Survey, 5-Yr Avg, DP03



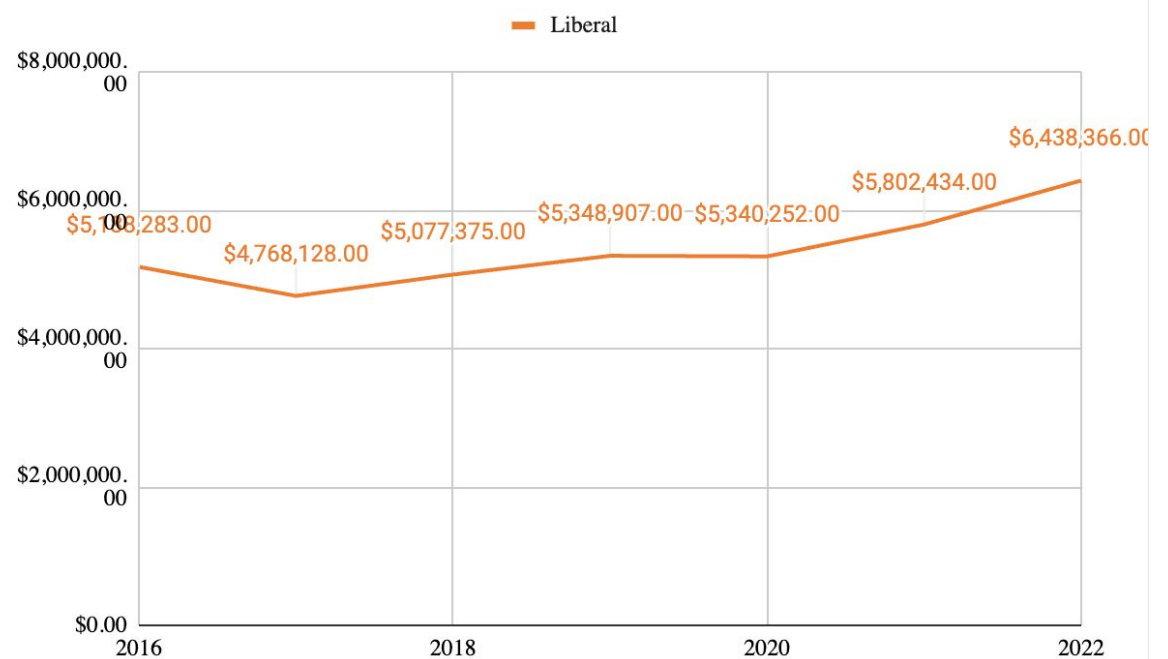
## Total Housing Units



Data source:USCB, ACS 5-Yr Avg



## Annual Sales Tax Collection



Data source:Kansas Dept of Revenue



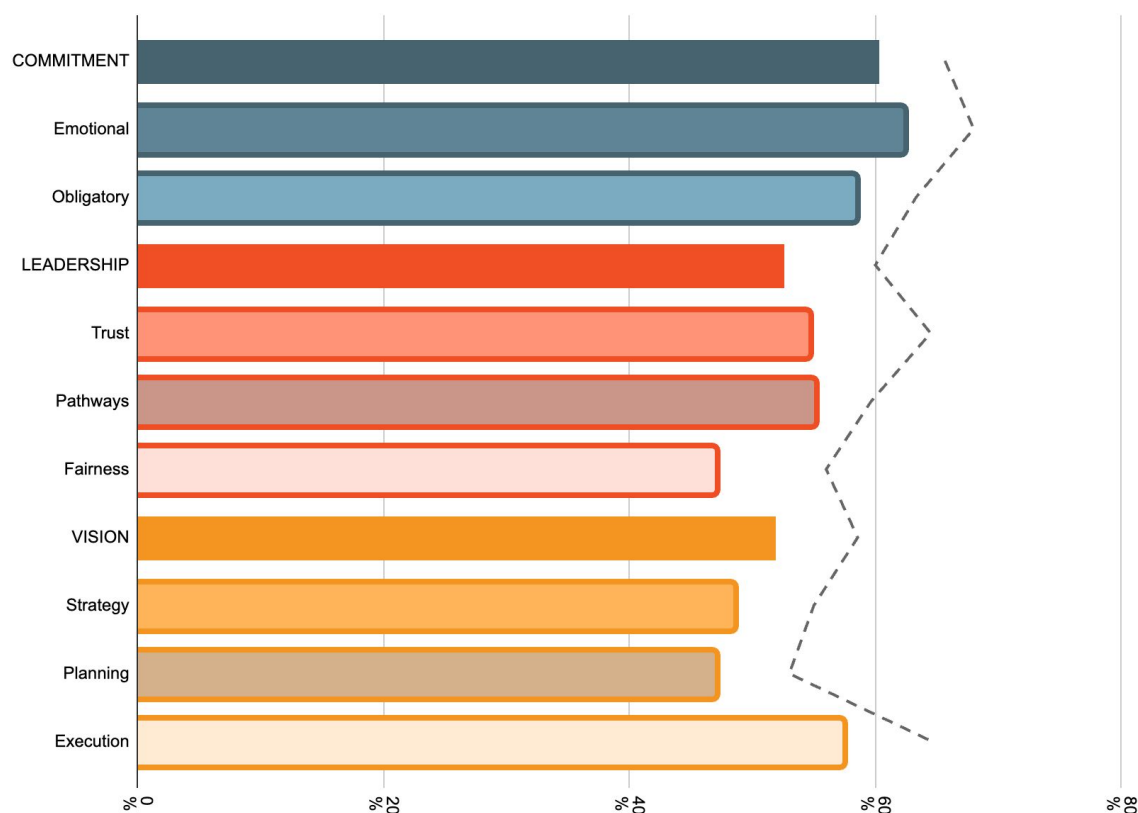
# Confidence In Our Local Community

## Engagement Summary:

Liberal lags regional averages in all perception metrics, though emotional commitment remains its strongest area. Pride in achievements and history leads under Execution, while fairness in leadership, strategic planning, and obligatory commitment score lowest. Year-over-year dips suggest eroding trust. To reverse this, leaders should increase transparency, involve residents in planning, and highlight collaborative successes. Strengthening inclusive decision-making and clarifying future goals will rebuild confidence and deepen community engagement.



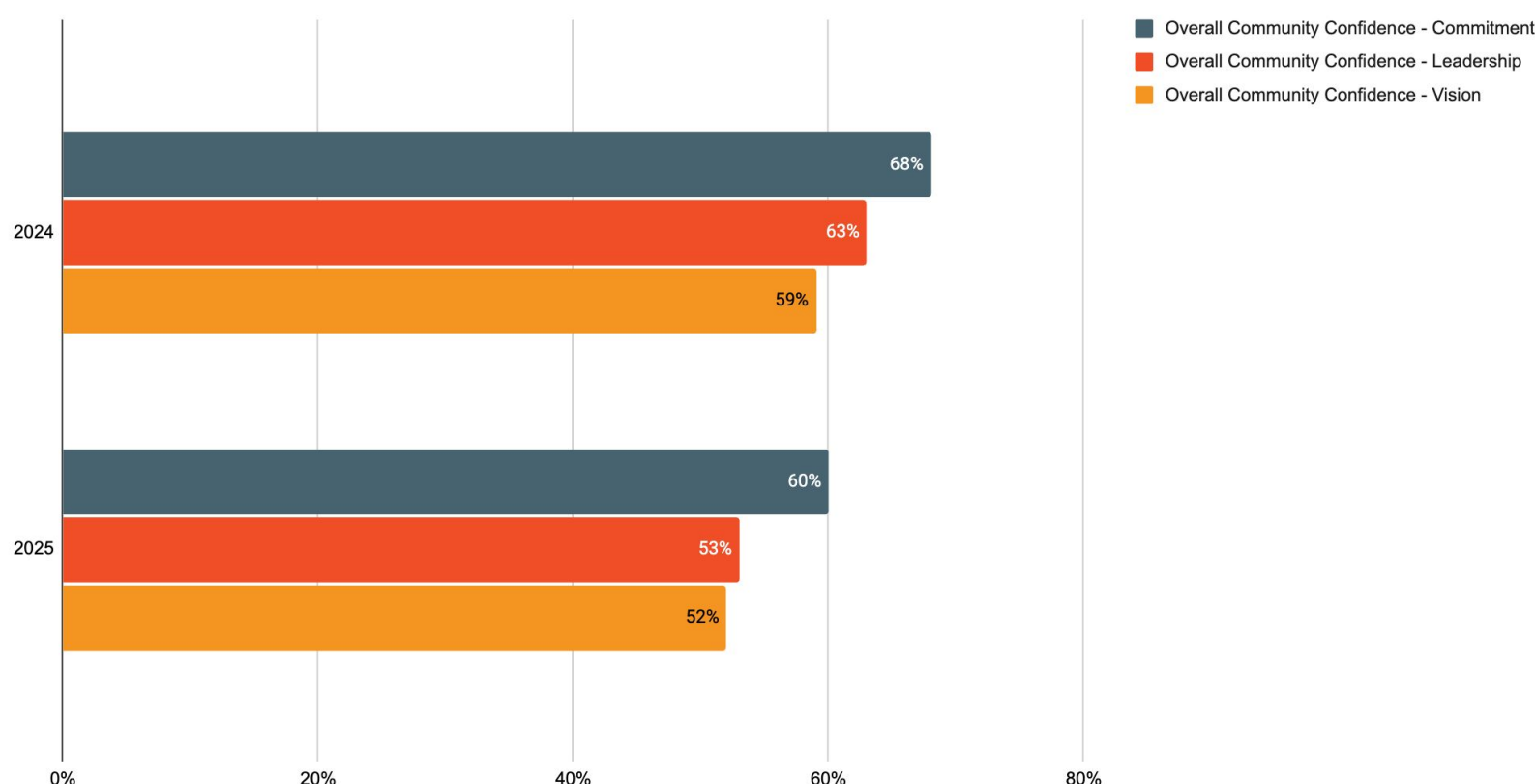
## How do our residents view our community?



## Questions:

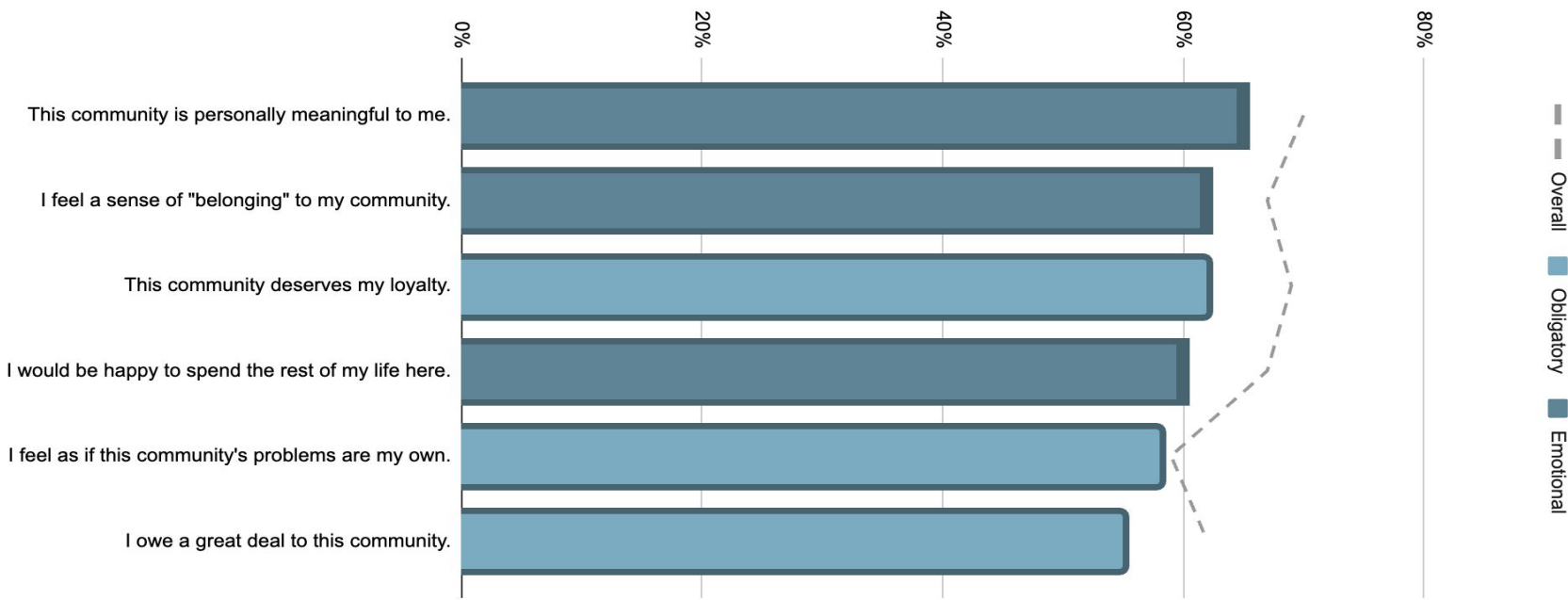
- How can Emotional Commitment be further strengthened given it remains the top ranking category despite all metrics being lower than the community average?
- What factors contribute to the low scores in Fairness, and how might they be addressed?
- In what ways can we leverage Execution successes to uplift other Vision subcategories?
- How could Planning improvements help close the gap between Liberal and the overall average?
- What strategies would boost Obligatory Commitment perceptions and deepen community loyalty?
- How might enhanced Trust initiatives rebuild confidence in decision makers?
- What role should Pathways play in increasing resident involvement and ownership?
- Why are all metrics consistently lower than the community average, and what cross-category approaches can reverse this trend?

## Year Over Year Change



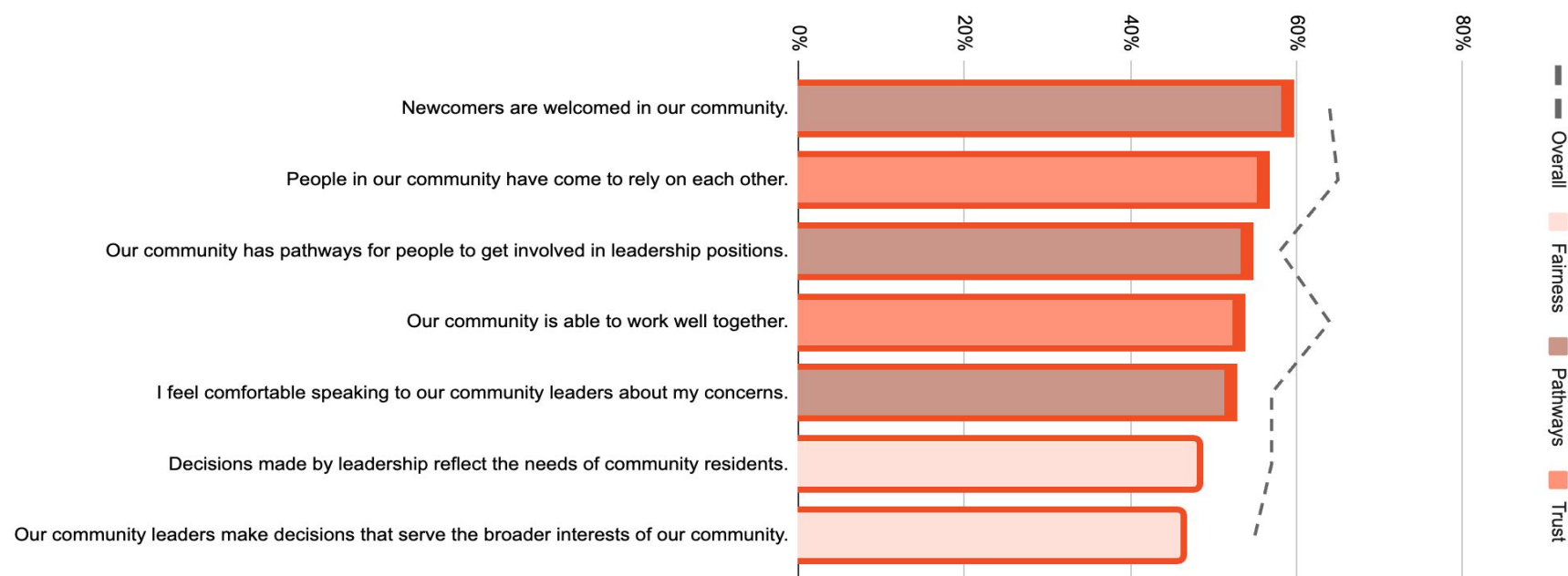
# Confidence In Our Local Community

## Community Confidence: Personal Commitment



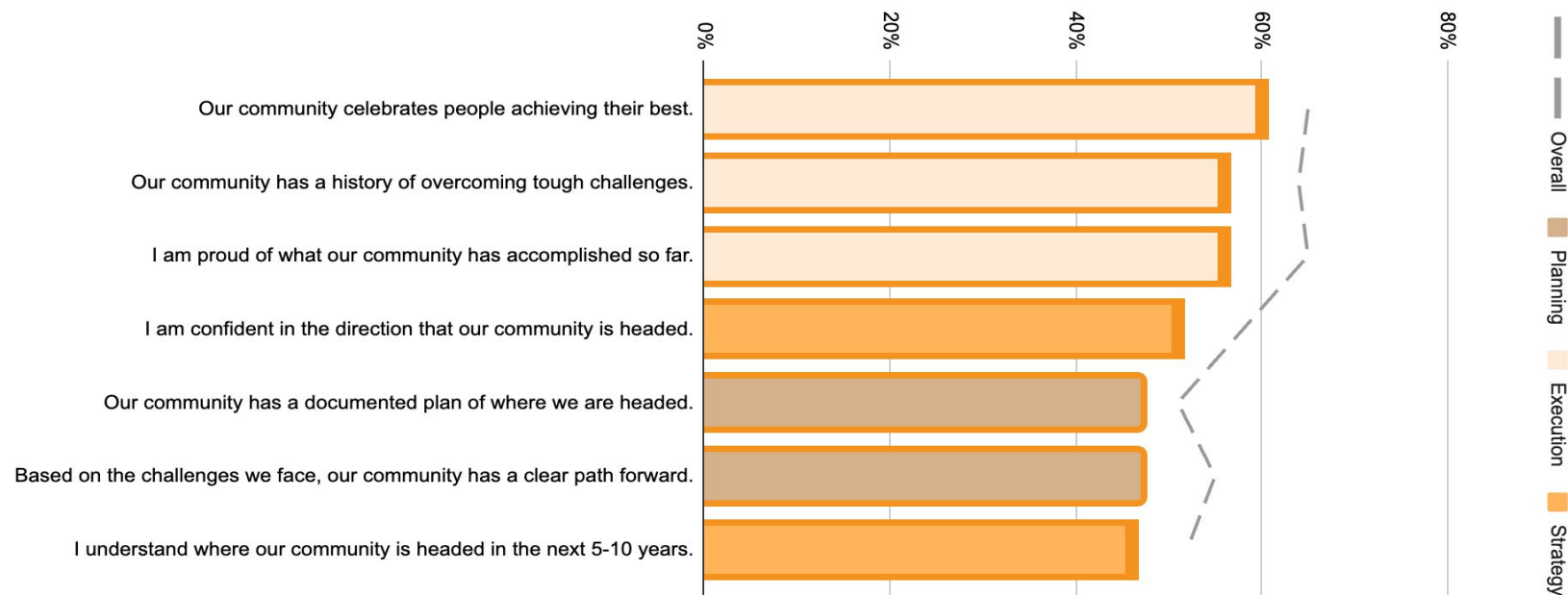
- How might we deepen residents' feeling of belonging?
- What actions could increase the perception that "This community deserves my loyalty"?
- In what ways can we foster the sentiment "I would be happy to spend the rest of my life here" to drive stronger emotional ties?

## Community Confidence: Local Leadership



- What measures can improve fairness so that "Decisions made by leadership reflect the needs of community residents"?
- How can we ensure "Our community leaders make decisions that serve the broader interests of our community"?
- What initiatives would expand people to get involved in leadership position?

## Community Confidence: Vision



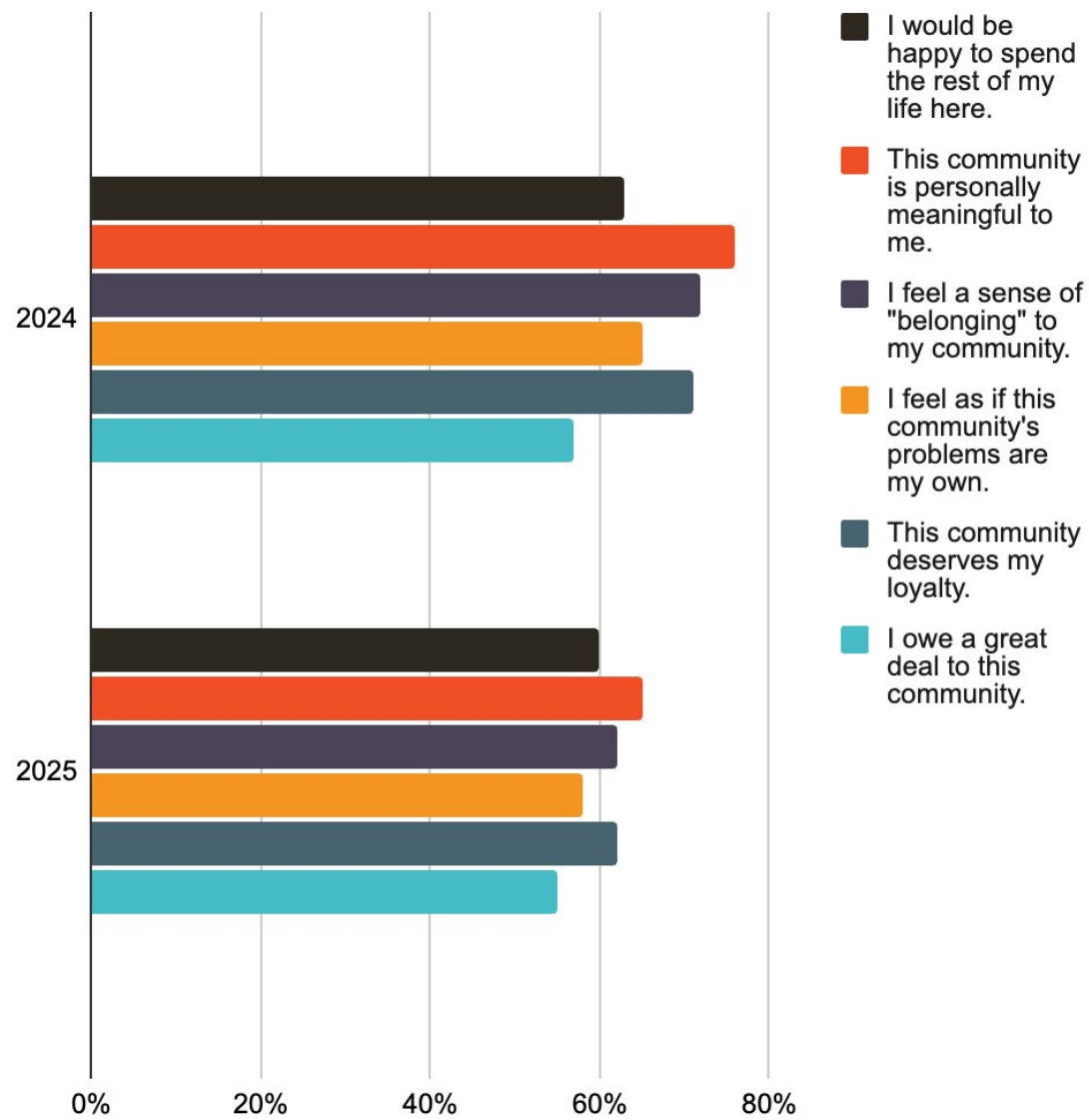
- How can we improve understanding of "where our community is headed in the next 5-10 years" to build clearer Strategy?
- What steps will bolster confidence in the statement "I am confident in the direction that our community is headed"?

Portion of the community that is highly confident on the listed community dimensions (Rating range: 0-7)

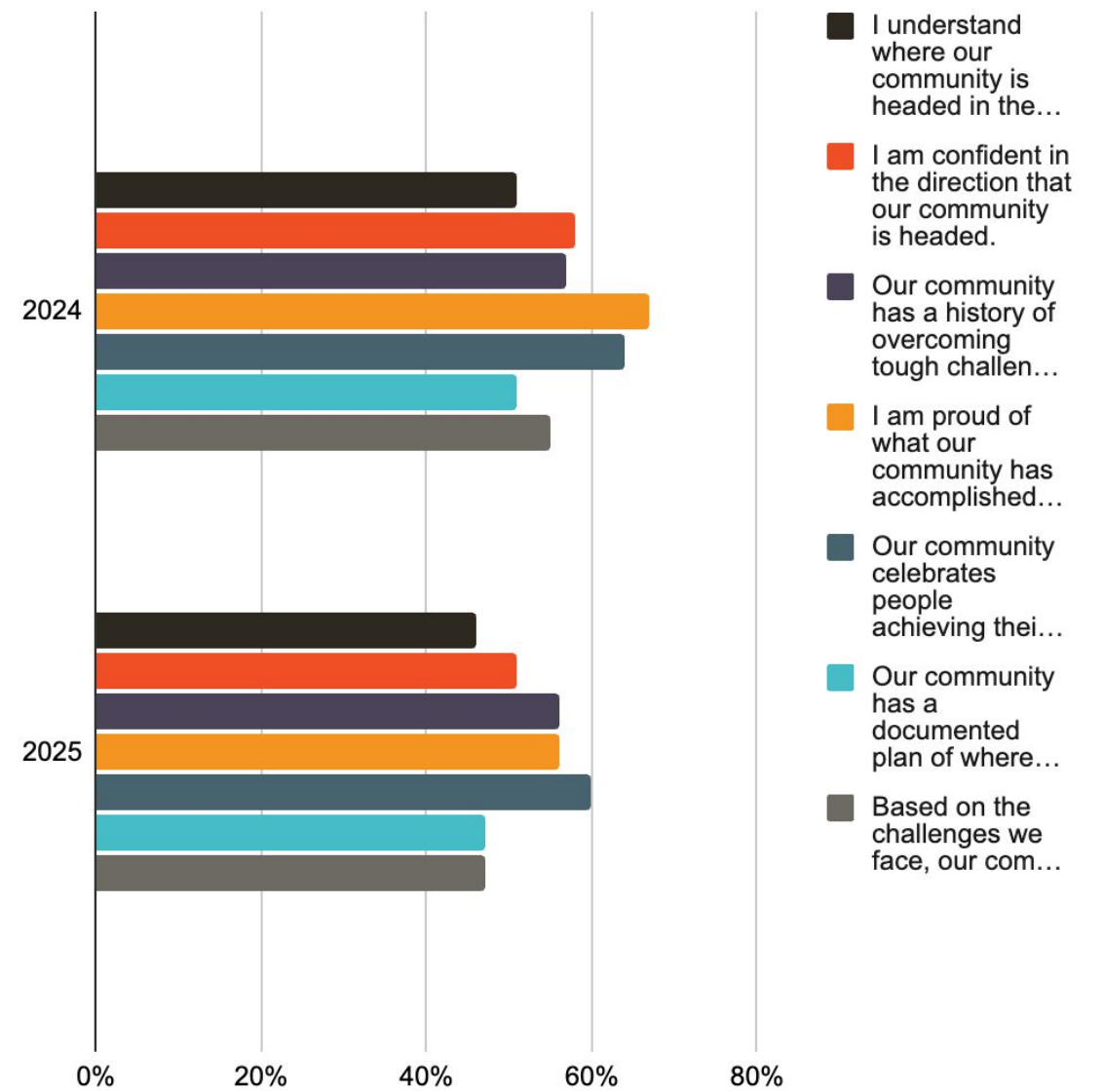


# Confidence In Our Local Community

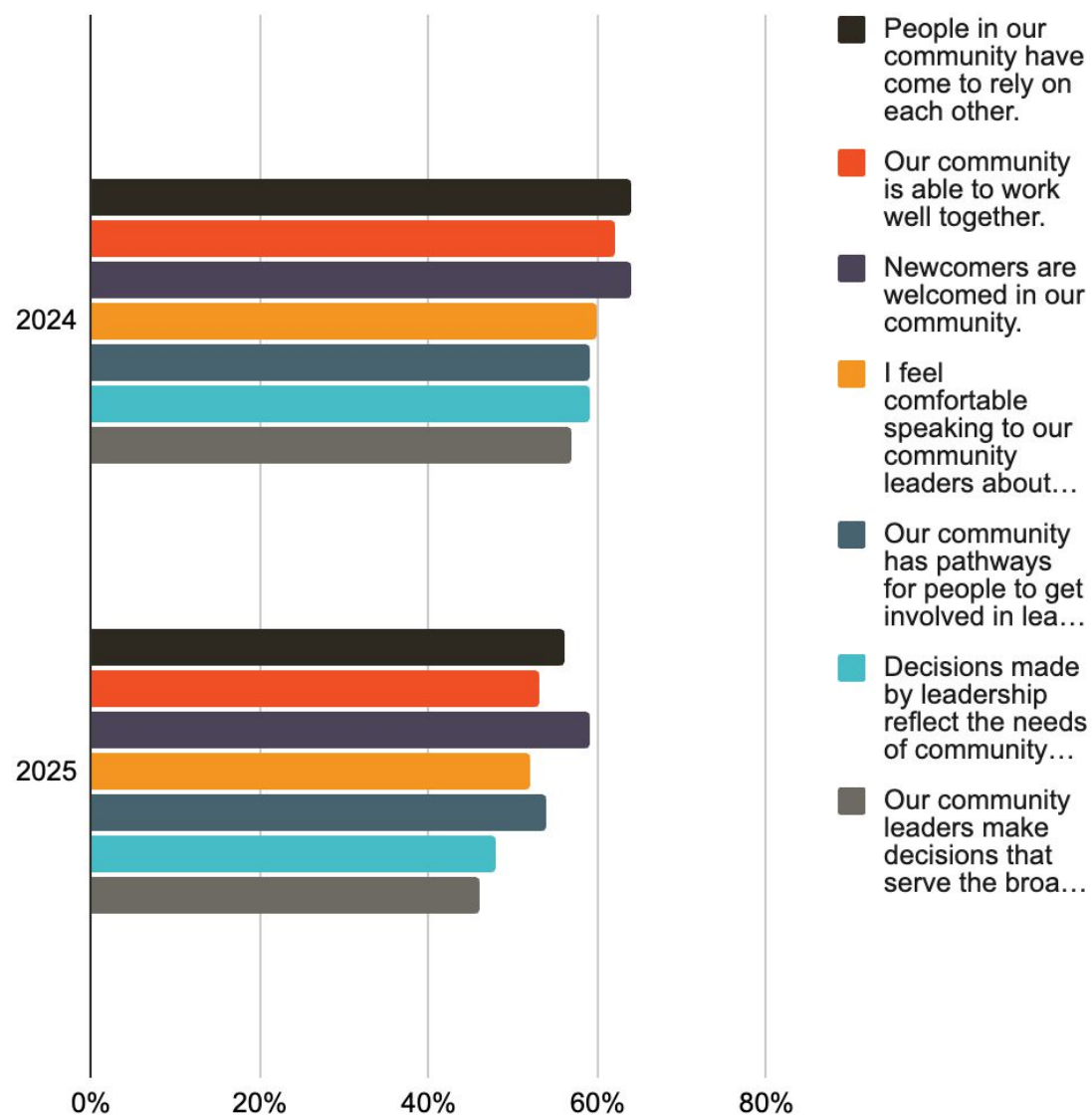
## Commitment



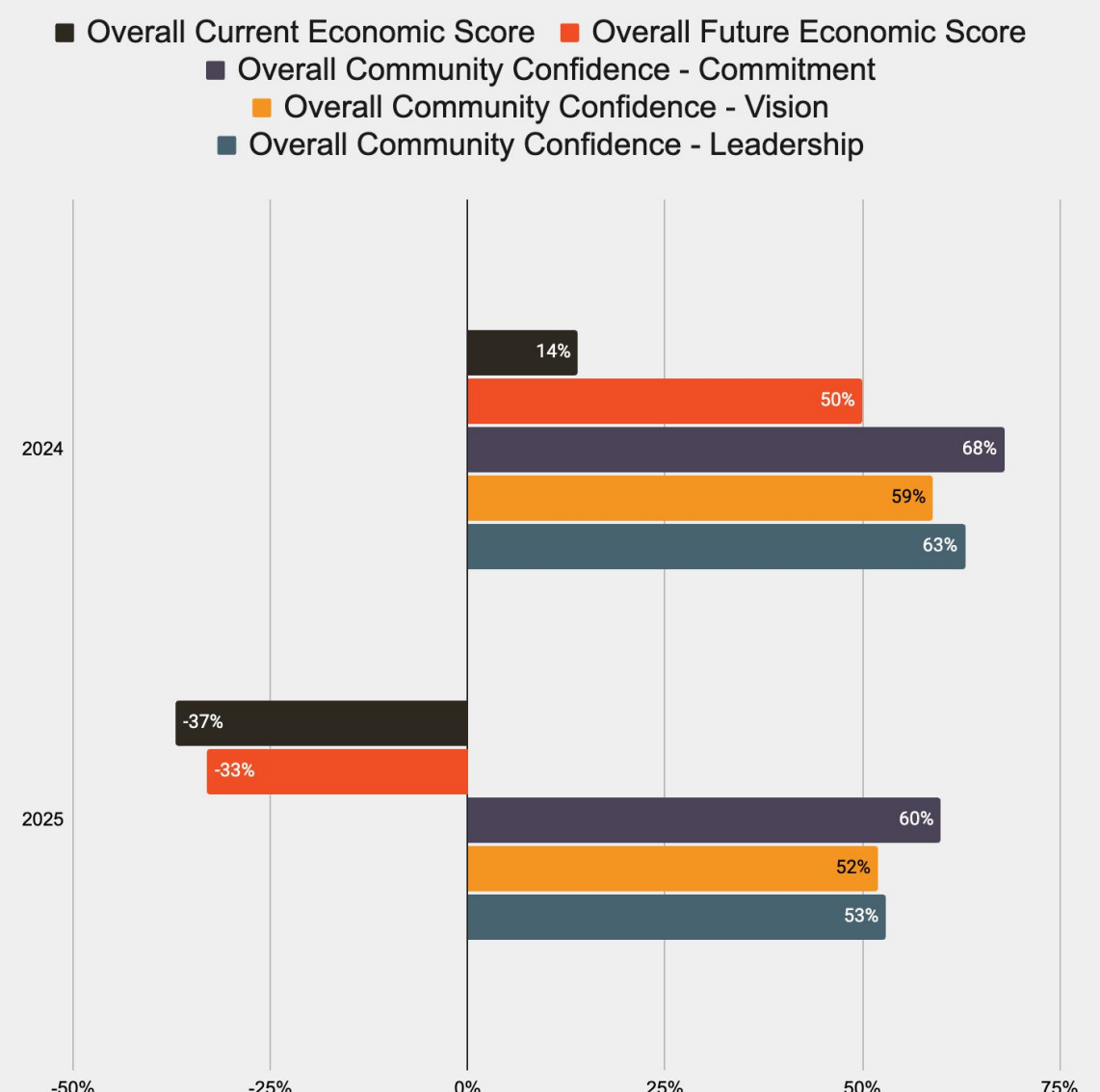
## Vision



## Leadership



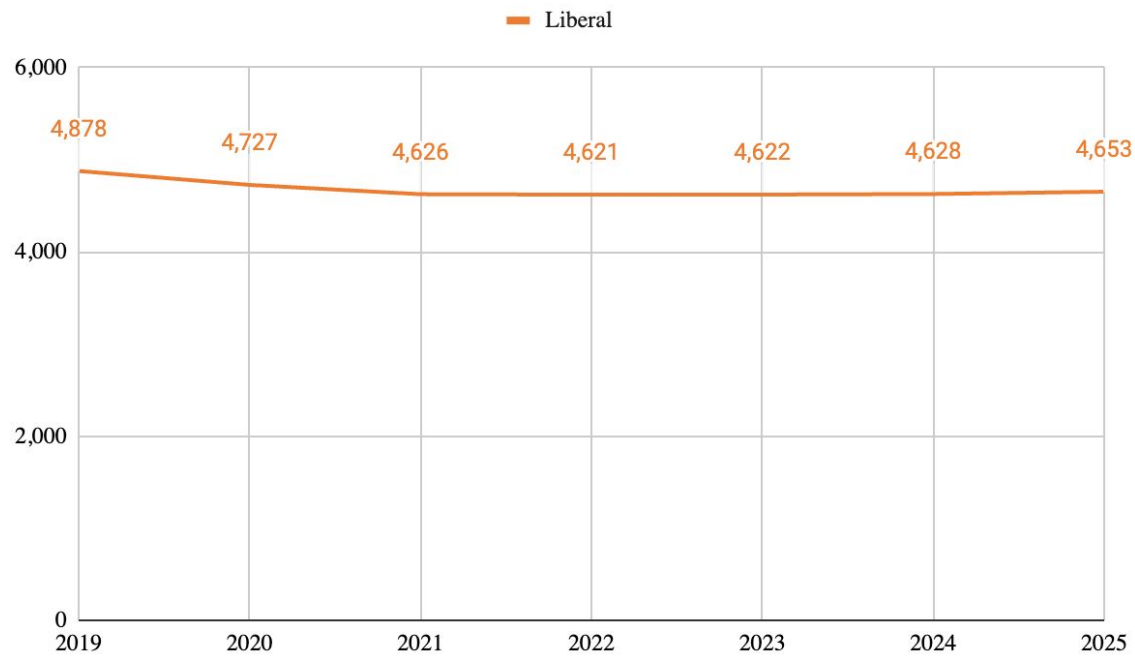
## Economic vs. Community Confidence



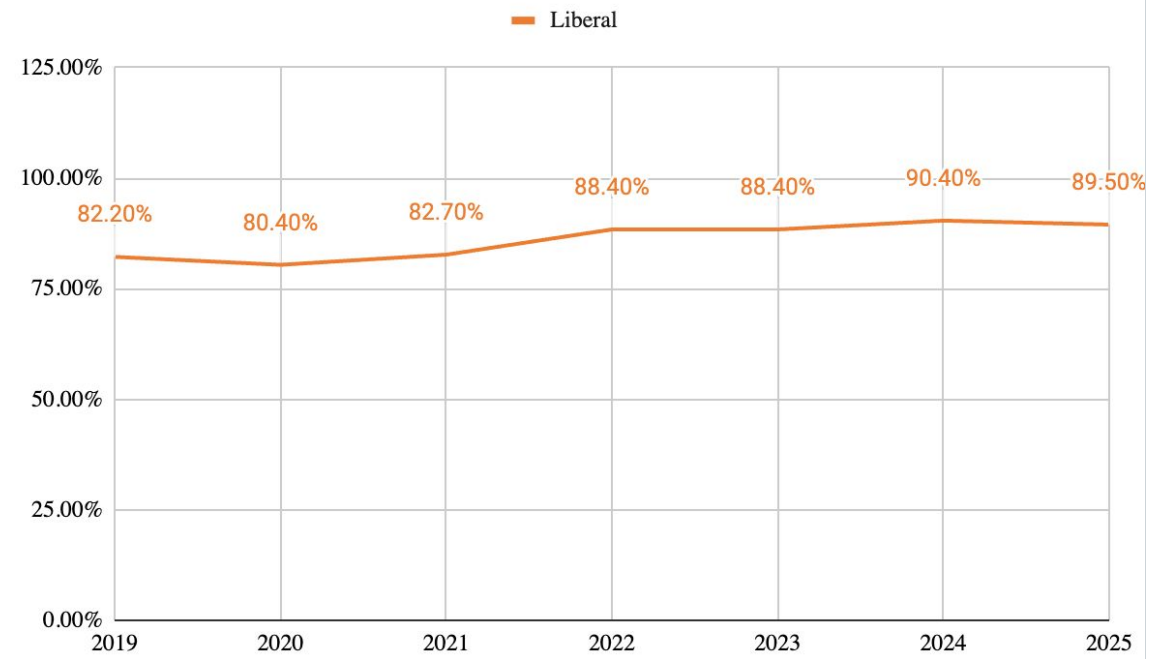
Portion of the community that is highly confident on the listed community dimensions (Rating range: 0-7)

# Local Community Indicators

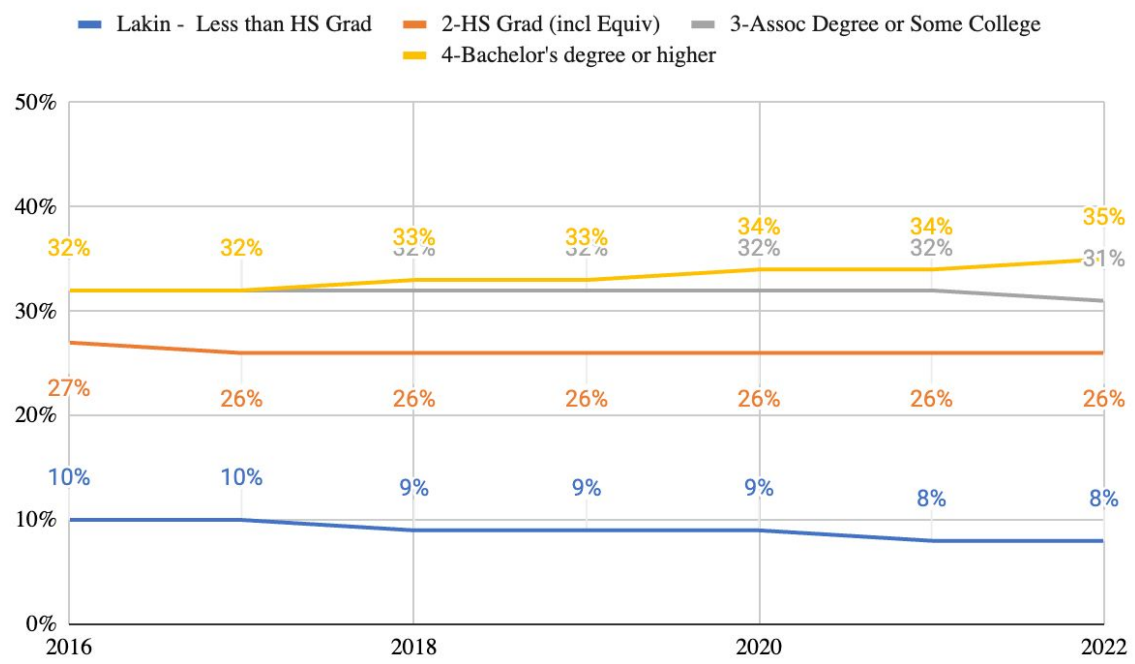
## Local School Enrollment



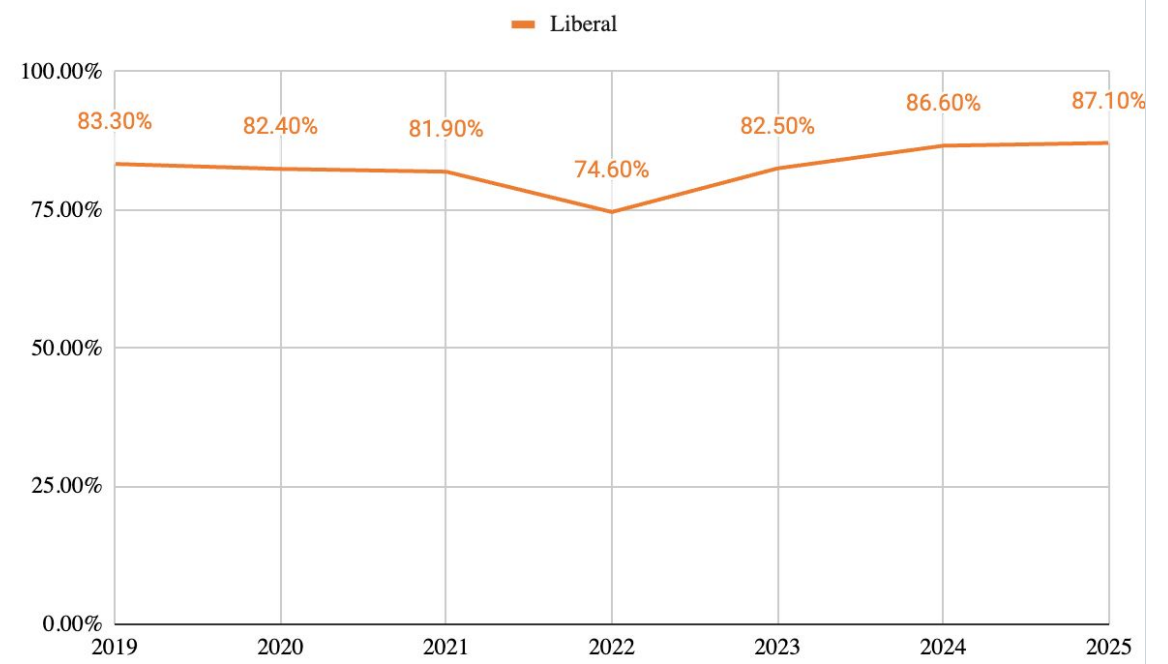
## High School 4 Year Graduation Rate



## Local Educational Level

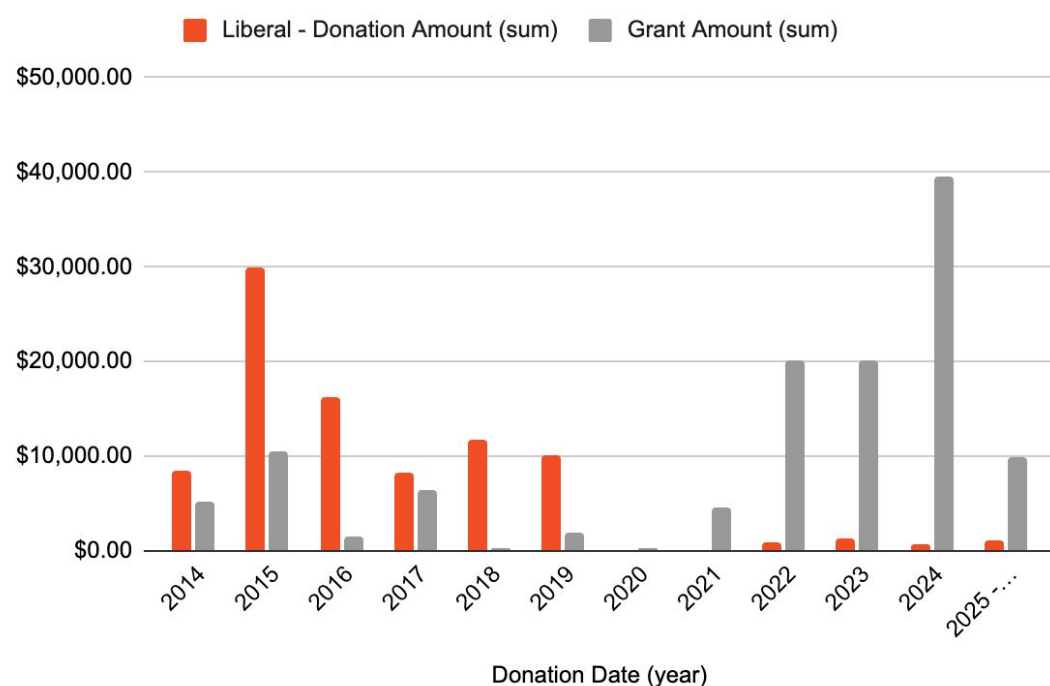


## School % Free/Reduced Price Lunch

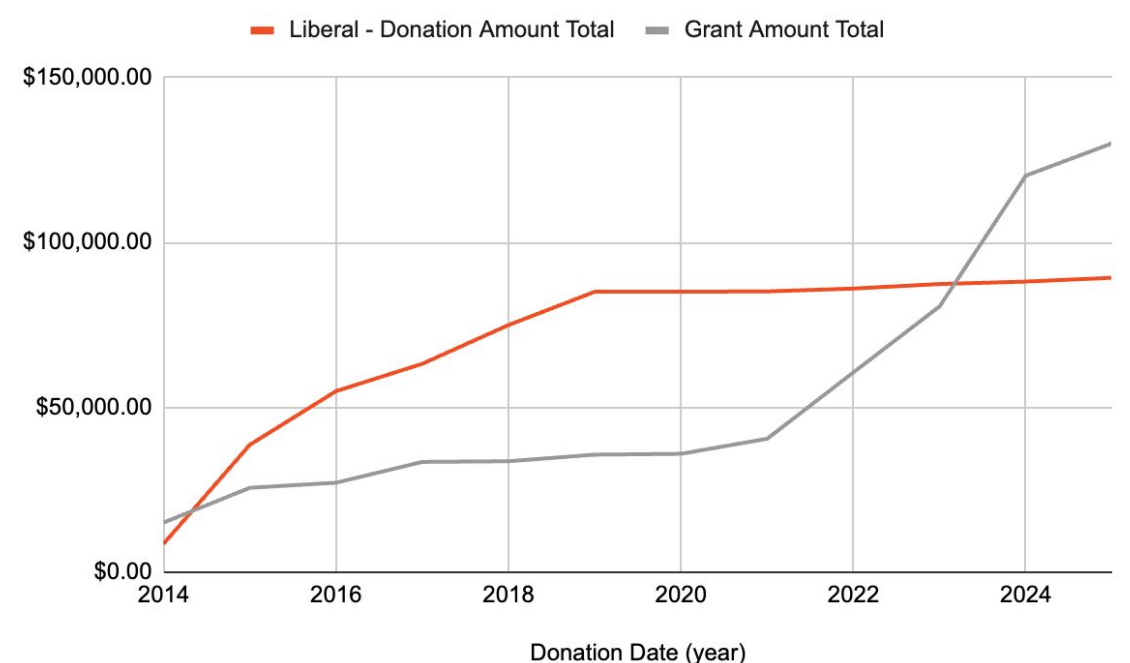


Source for all education graphs: Kansas State Dept of Education, Data Central

## Community Foundation: Annual Dollars Raised & Invested



## Community Foundation: Compound Dollars Raised & Invested



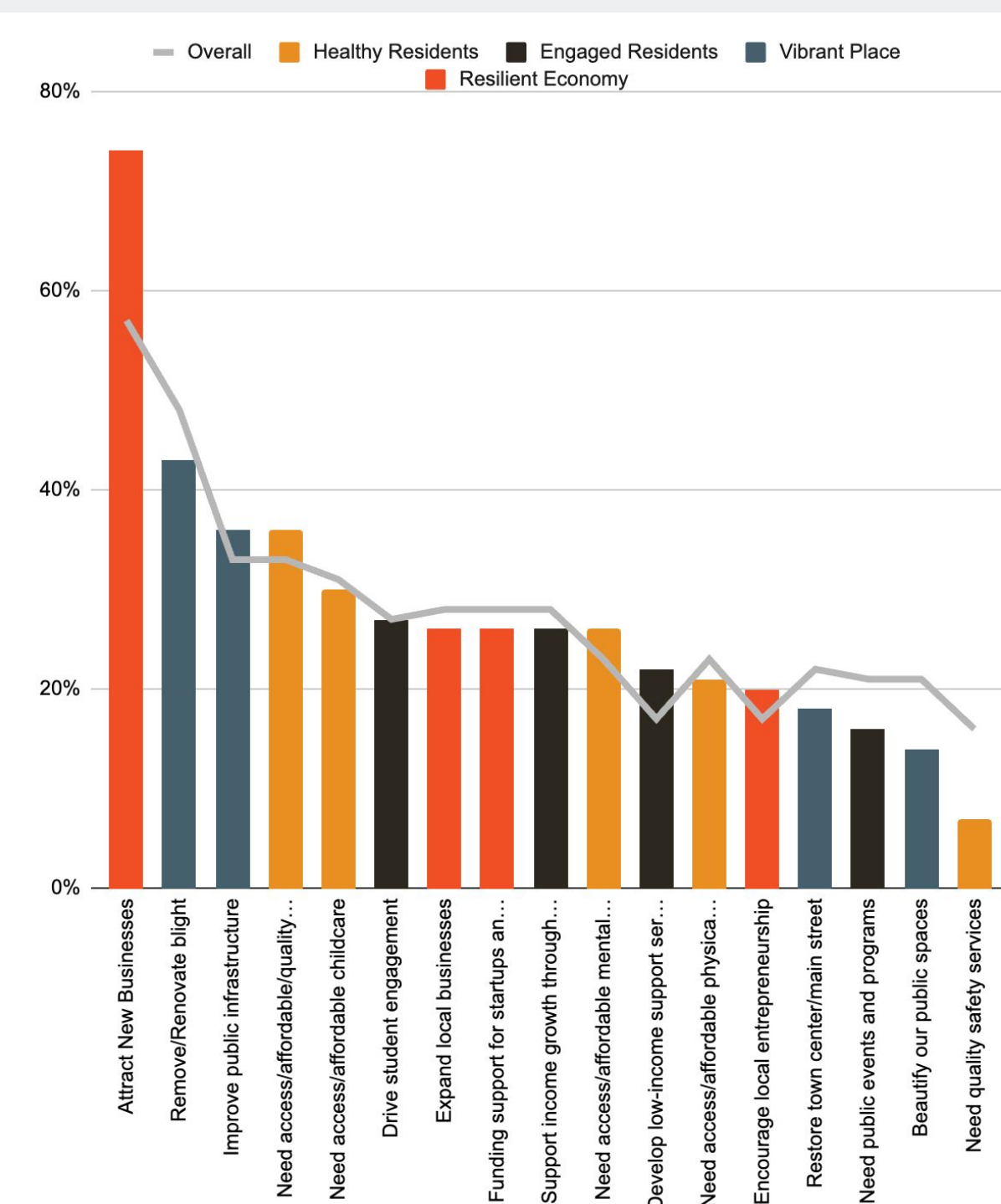


# Community Program Priorities

## Priorities Summary:

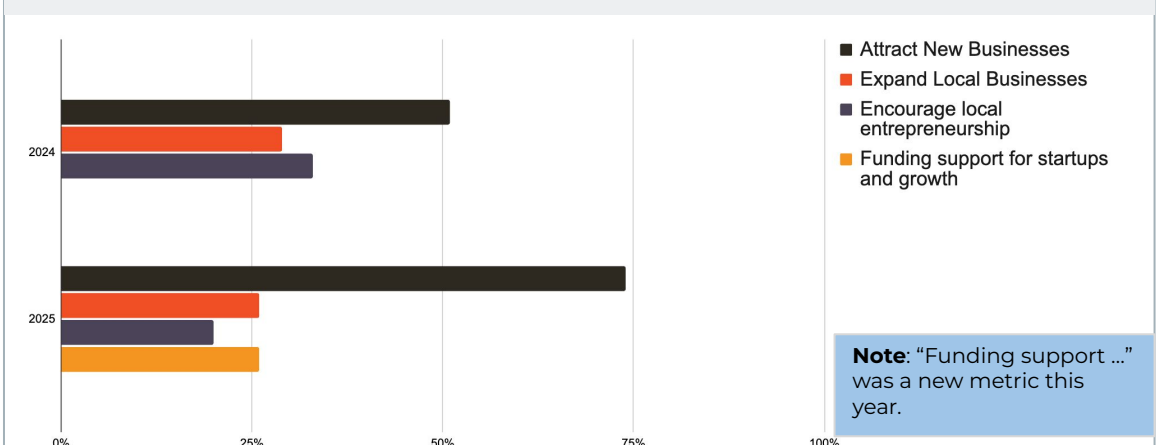
Economic resilience tops residents' agenda: attracting new businesses vastly outweighs other goals, followed by restoring the town center and upgrading infrastructure. Support for low-income services, childcare, healthcare, and safety has declined. Yet rising calls for a stronger tax base and community confidence highlight growth potential. Balancing aggressive business recruitment and downtown revitalization with microgrants, workforce training, and mental health investments will ensure inclusive prosperity and sustainable development.

### Program Priorities

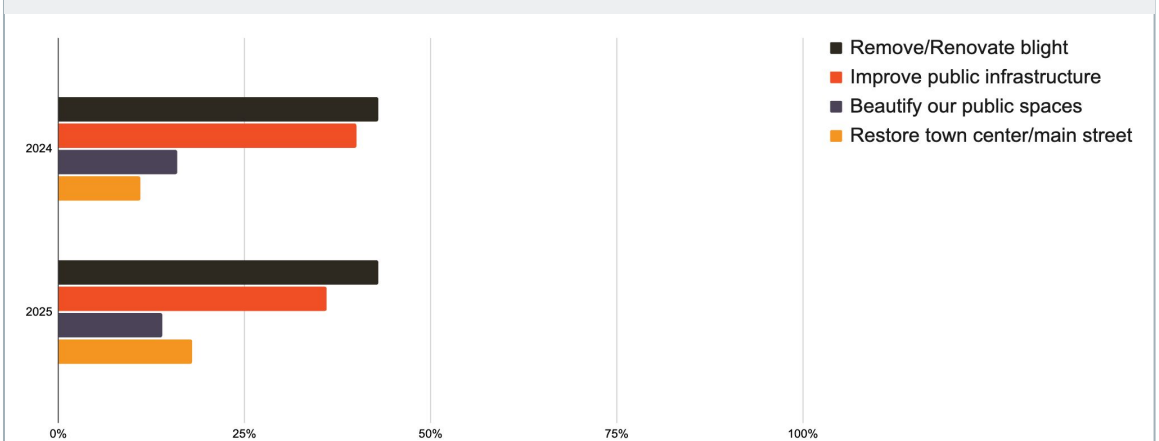


- Why is "Attract New Businesses" prioritized over "Remove/Renovate blight" by over a 30% margin, and how can we align resources to address both?
- What underlying factors explain the sharp decline in priority for "Encourage local entrepreneurship," and how should strategies adapt?
- Given the drop in need for "Need access/affordable childcare," what barriers exist to childcare access, and how might we overcome them?
- Considering "Need quality safety services" ranks lowest, what safety improvements would rebuild trust and enhance community well-being?

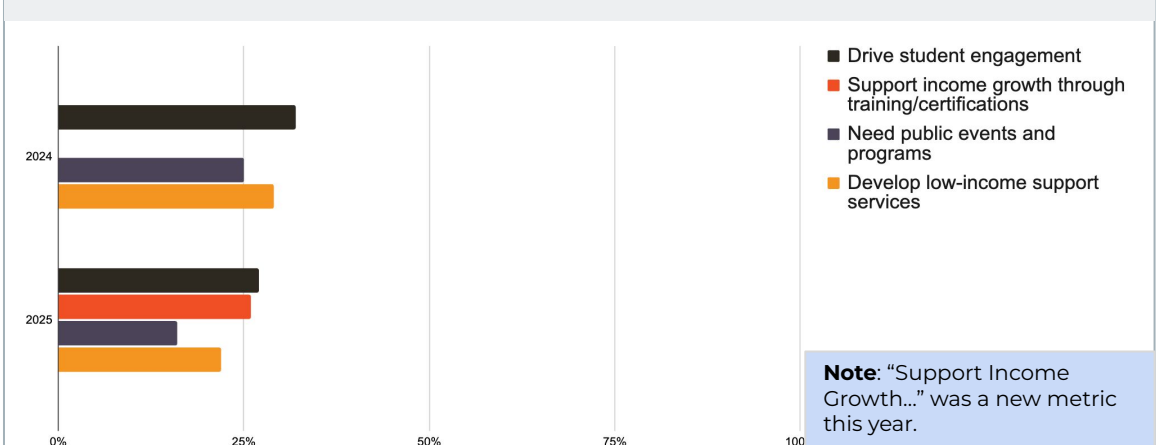
### Resilient Economy



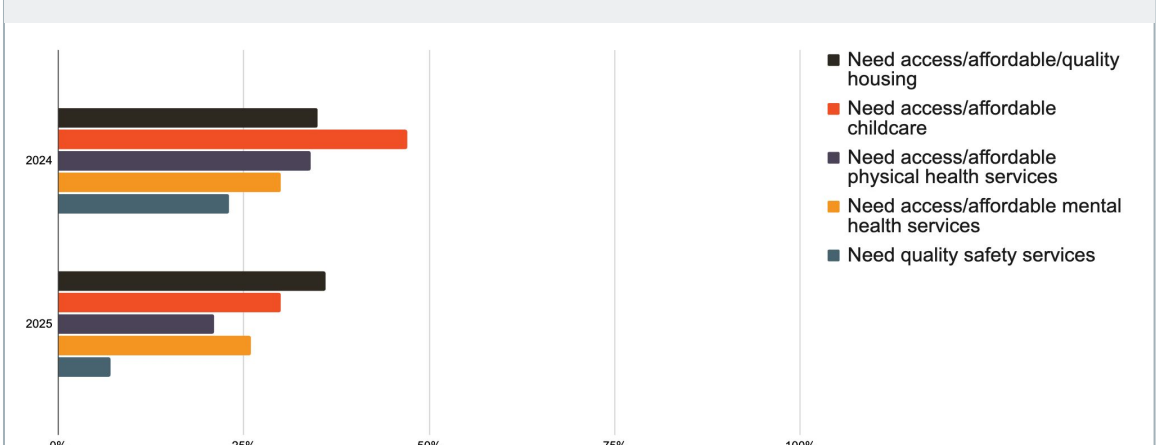
### Vibrant Place



### Engaged Residents

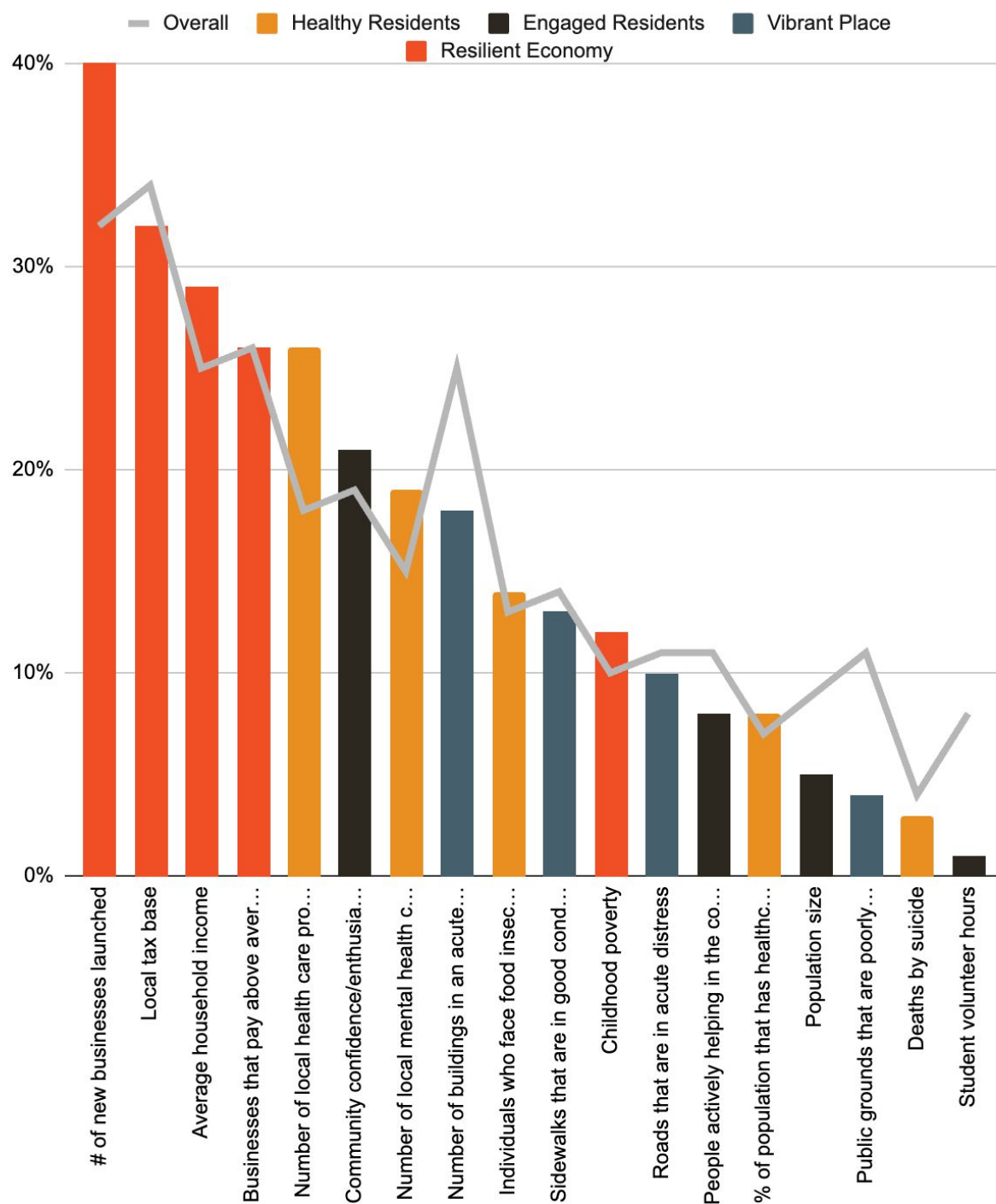


### Healthy Residents



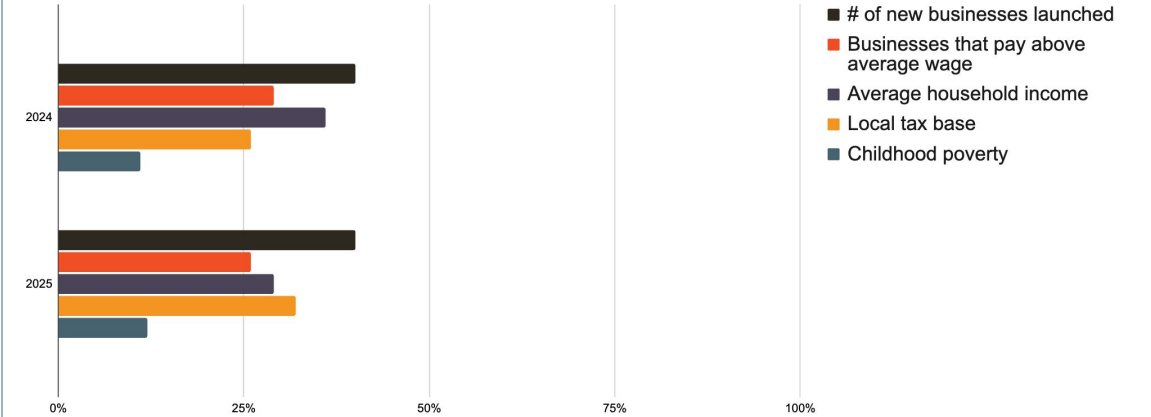
# Community Priority Metrics

## Priority Metrics

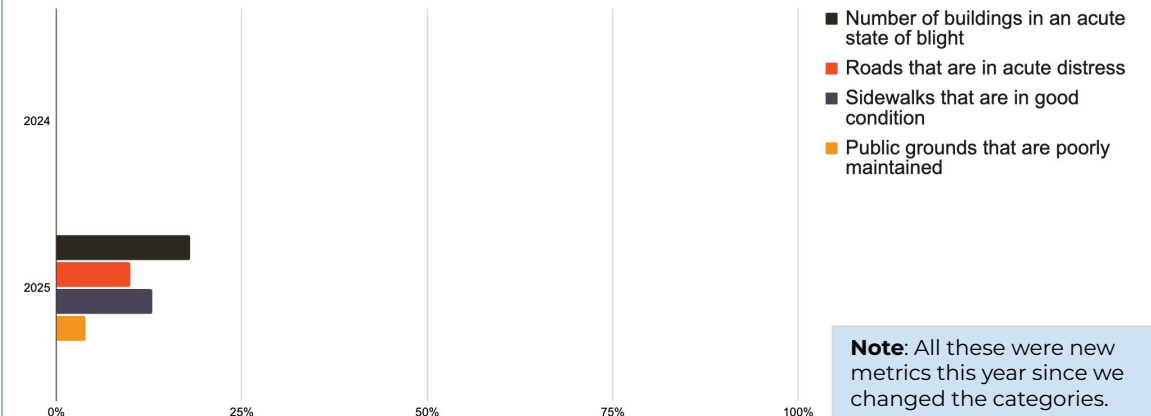


- Why has the “Number of local health care providers” metric decreased significantly, and what are the implications for affordable health care service planning?
- With the top four metrics all in Resilient Economy, how can we balance economic expansion with infrastructure and blight-removal efforts?
- Given that “Student volunteer hours” is the lowest metric, what program designs could better engage youth and strengthen Engaged Residents?
- Which initiatives could simultaneously elevate “Average household income” and improve “Individuals who face food insecurity”?

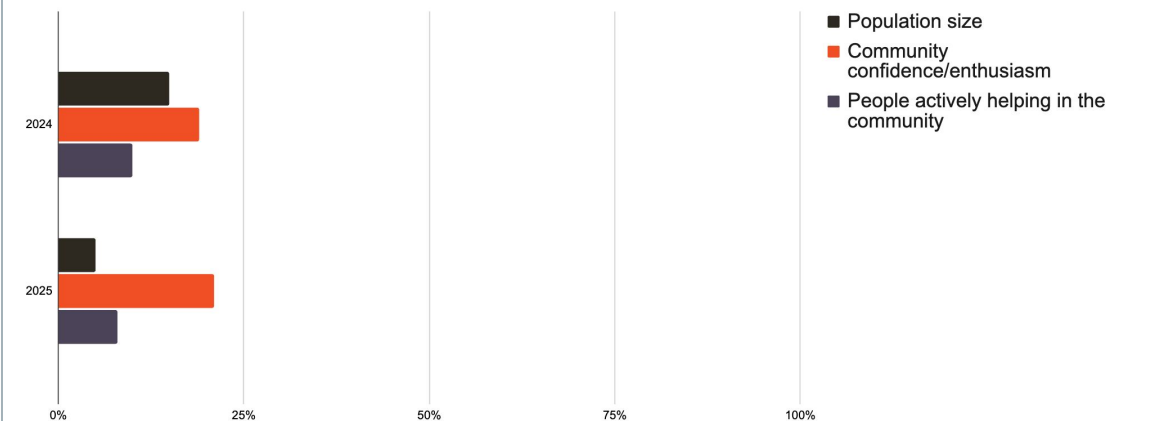
## Resilient Economy



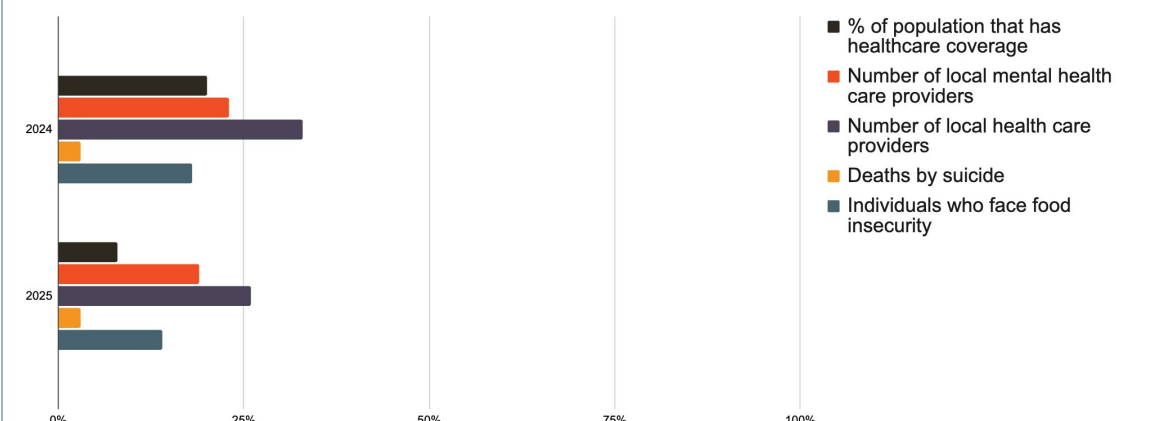
## Vibrant Place



## Engaged Residents



## Healthy Residents





# Investing In Local Priorities

**What project should be undertaken locally if money, time, or skills were not a constraint? What outcome would this create in the next 2-3 years?**

- Business Attraction & Growth – Develop initiatives to attract new employers and support local startups for job creation and economic vitality
- Affordable Housing & Revitalization – Build affordable and middle-income housing, remove blighted properties to foster community pride and stability
- Recreation & Community Center – Construct a multi-use facility with indoor pool, sports courts, and gathering spaces
- Mental Health & Healthcare Services – Expand accessible mental health and specialized medical providers
- Infrastructure & Mobility Improvements – Install sidewalks, repair roads

**If we could only invest \$15k in a program each year for the next 3 years, what project should we work on? What outcome would this create in the next 2-3 years?**

- Sidewalk Improvements – Install and repair sidewalks to enhance walkability and ADA compliance, fostering a safer, more connected community
- Downtown Revitalization – Beautify and renovate vacant downtown properties, boosting pride and attracting businesses
- Small Business Microgrant & Mentorship – Launch a “Liberal Launch” program offering small grants and mentor support, spurring entrepreneurship and local job growth
- Youth Career Pathways & Mentorship – Provide career workshops, internships, and mentors for teens, equipping them for meaningful careers and encouraging retention

## Serving your community!

**How do you serve your community today?**

- Church Volunteering – Serves through church groups and faith-based organizations, organizing events
- Educational & Youth Programs – Teaching at USD 480 and SCCC, mentoring Scouts, coaching youth sports, and running youth workshops
- Civic Organization Participation – Participating in Rotary, Community Concert Association, Pancake Day, LACF, library boards, and event planning
- Social Support Services – Volunteering at food pantries, Stepping Stone Shelter, and providing mental health counseling
- Public Health & Safety Initiatives – Offering CPR and health classes, coordinating care, picking up trash, and serving as 911 dispatchers

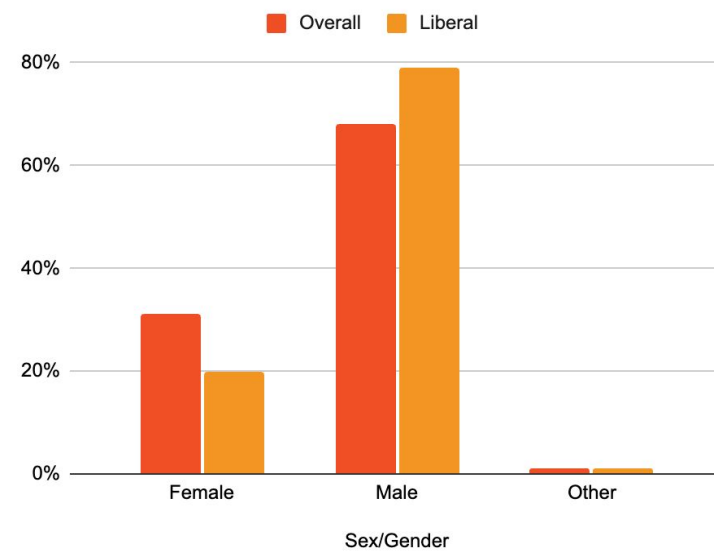
**How would you like to serve your community in the future?**

- Volunteering – Provide time and support across nonprofits and events, bolstering existing community efforts
- Youth Engagement Programs – Develop mentorship, tutoring, and structured activities to empower the next generation
- Mental Health Advocacy – Offer therapy, outreach, and de-stigmatization to support community well-being
- Community Gathering Spaces – Establish neutral hubs (e.g., food centers, meeting places) to foster connections
- Environmental Stewardship – Lead by example in cleanup and sustainability initiatives for a cleaner community

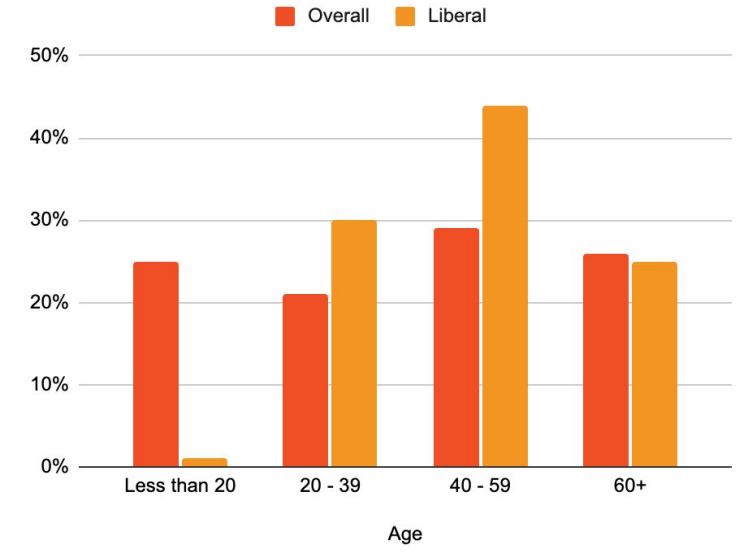
# Survey Respondents

**136**  
Total Responses

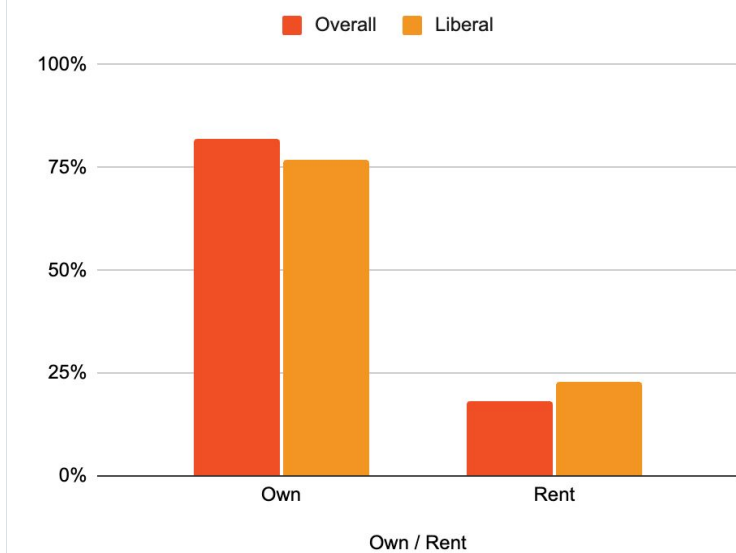
Gender



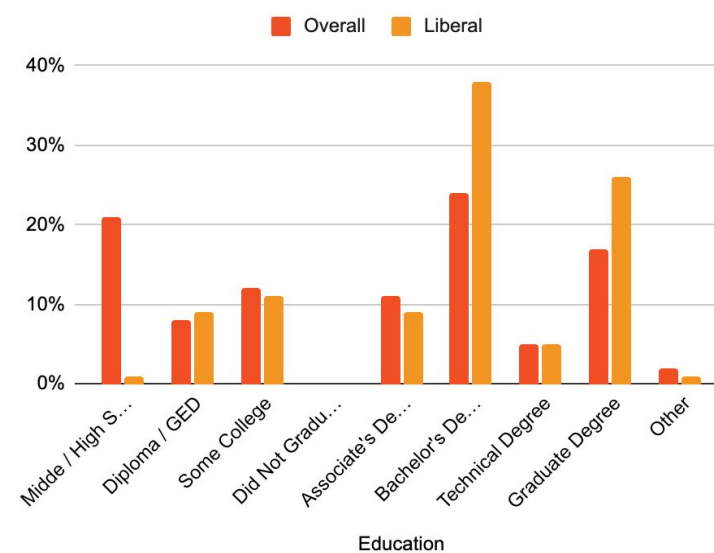
Age Profile



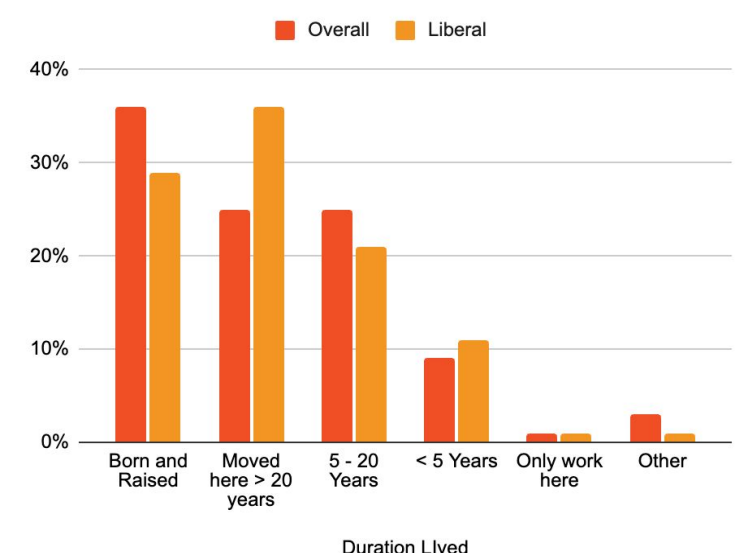
Residential Status



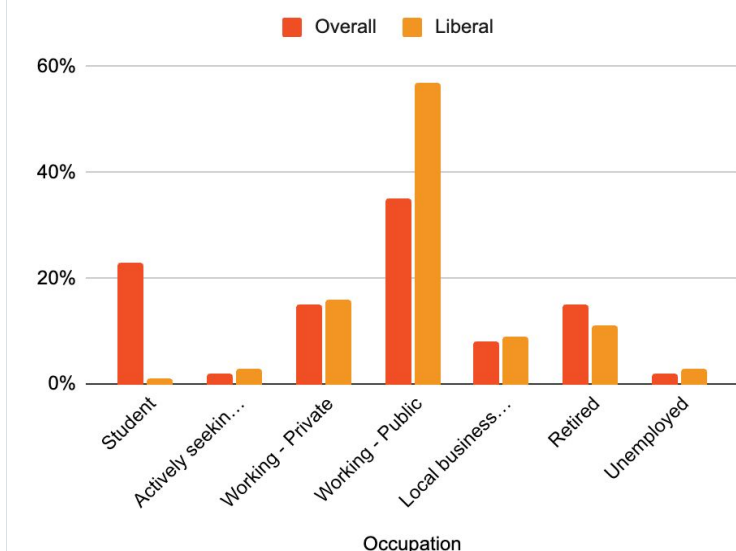
Education Level



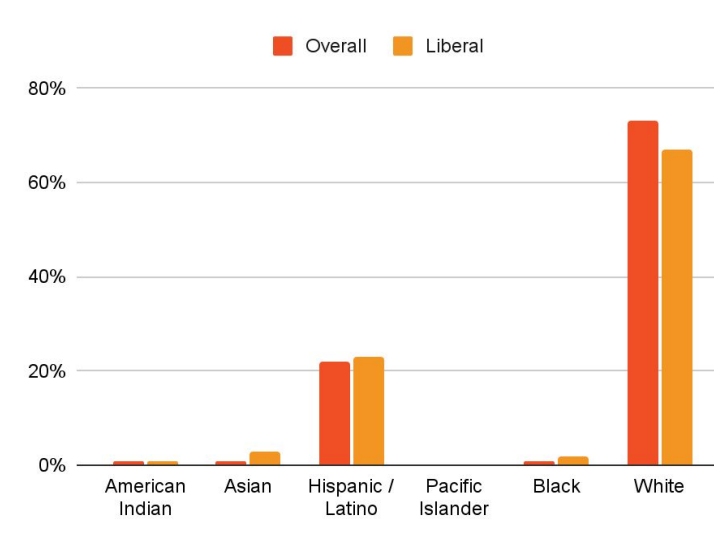
Years lived in location





Occupation



Ethnicity



- Individuals with a high school education or less are much more inclined to invest than those holding a bachelor's degree.
- Residents who have lived in Liberal for over twenty years find the community far more personally meaningful than those here under five years.
- Public sector employees clearly express a need for affordable, quality housing, while local business owners see little need.
- Local business owners display strong confidence and enthusiasm in the community, whereas private sector workers report minimal confidence.

 **Town Score**  
 **Average Community Score**

**45**

Number of people who expressed an interest in volunteering to better the community  
45 of 136 (33%)