Western Kansas
Community Foundation

2026 Community Benchmark Report

City of Liberal, KS

Be The Movement!
Connect with local changemakers, local community projects, resources & grants, and much more.

www.wkcf.org

Innovation Economy Partners
OUR FOCUS: IMPACT AND OUTCOMES

Dr. Katie Reck | katie@wkcf.org

What Makes Our Community Special?

Liberal residents most often described the community as diverse, caring, welcoming, and willing to help during difficult times. They value Seward County Community College, parks and youth sports, locally owned businesses and restaurants, cultural traditions, community events, nonprofit partnerships, and services that support families.

"The people! We have amazingly kind and generous people in our community with a great diversity of cultures and ethnicities. Perfect to learn and grow from one another."

"There's lots of hospitality here, and we can lean on each other in our hard times. We can celebrate together in the good."

"What makes Liberal special is its diversity and strong sense of community. People from many different backgrounds live and work together here."

"The way the people come together to help each other when they know there is a need."

Several residents said Liberal's mix of cultures gives the community a distinctive identity and creates opportunities to learn from one another. Others praised neighbors who step forward when families face hardship and the organizations that work together to meet community needs.

"We are not homogeneous, but we help each other."

"The cultural dynamic in our town is the best part. You get a mix of everything living here."

'Community Leaders I Most Admire'

Scarlette Diseker
Kay Burtzloff
April Warden
Janeth Vazquez
Luz Riggs
Shannon Francis
Jeff Parsons
Gary Classen
Karem Gallo Flores
Sarah Thompson
Sarah Foreman
Keeley Young
Clarissa Carrillo
Fred Bloom
Steve Helm
Kaylee Lopez

Residents named many people who contribute to Liberal. Scarlette Diseker received the most mentions, followed by Kay Burtzloff and April Warden. Janeth Vazquez and Luz Riggs were also named multiple times, along with many other civic, education, nonprofit, and business leaders.

"The people! We have amazingly kind and generous people in our community with a great diversity of cultures and ethnicities. Perfect to learn and grow from one another."

~Anonymous Liberal Resident

Innovation Economy Partners
OUR FOCUS: IMPACT AND OUTCOMES

Western Kansas Community Foundation

Community Benchmarking Report
City of Liberal, KS | 2026

Executive Summary

The 2026 Liberal Community Benchmark Report reflects feedback from 72 participating residents about the community's strengths, economic outlook, confidence, and priorities.

- ❖ Residents value Liberal's diversity, caring people, cultural identity, community college, parks, local organizations, and willingness to help during times of need.
- ❖ Economic perceptions improved from the sharp 2025 decline but remained cautious in 2026.
- ❖ Personal commitment, trust, and opportunities to participate remain relative strengths. Planning and fairness in community decision-making received lower ratings.
- ❖ Attracting new businesses remained the leading priority. Physical healthcare access became substantially more prominent in 2026.
- ❖ Residents want measurable progress in healthcare access, higher-wage businesses, the local tax base, household income, and new business launches.

pg **4-5**

Local Economy and Economic Perceptions

Examines how residents view Liberal's current and future income, business, and employment opportunities. This section also reviews local indicators such as jobs, unemployment, household income, population, and poverty.

pg **6-8**

Community Confidence

Explores residents' connection to Liberal and their confidence in community cooperation, leadership, planning, direction, and opportunities to become involved.

pg **9-10**

Critical Community Priorities

Identifies the programs residents most want prioritized and the outcomes they believe should be tracked, including business growth, healthcare access, property revitalization, housing, and infrastructure.

pg **11**

Survey Participant Profile

Describes the 72 participating residents by age, time in Liberal, education, employment, race and ethnicity, and housing. This profile helps readers understand whose perspectives are most visible.

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 various towns in the Western Kansas 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.

1 Collaborative Leadership + 2 Committed Citizenship + 3 Community Vision & Action = Economic & Community Sustainability

Confidence In Our Local Economy

Economic Summary:

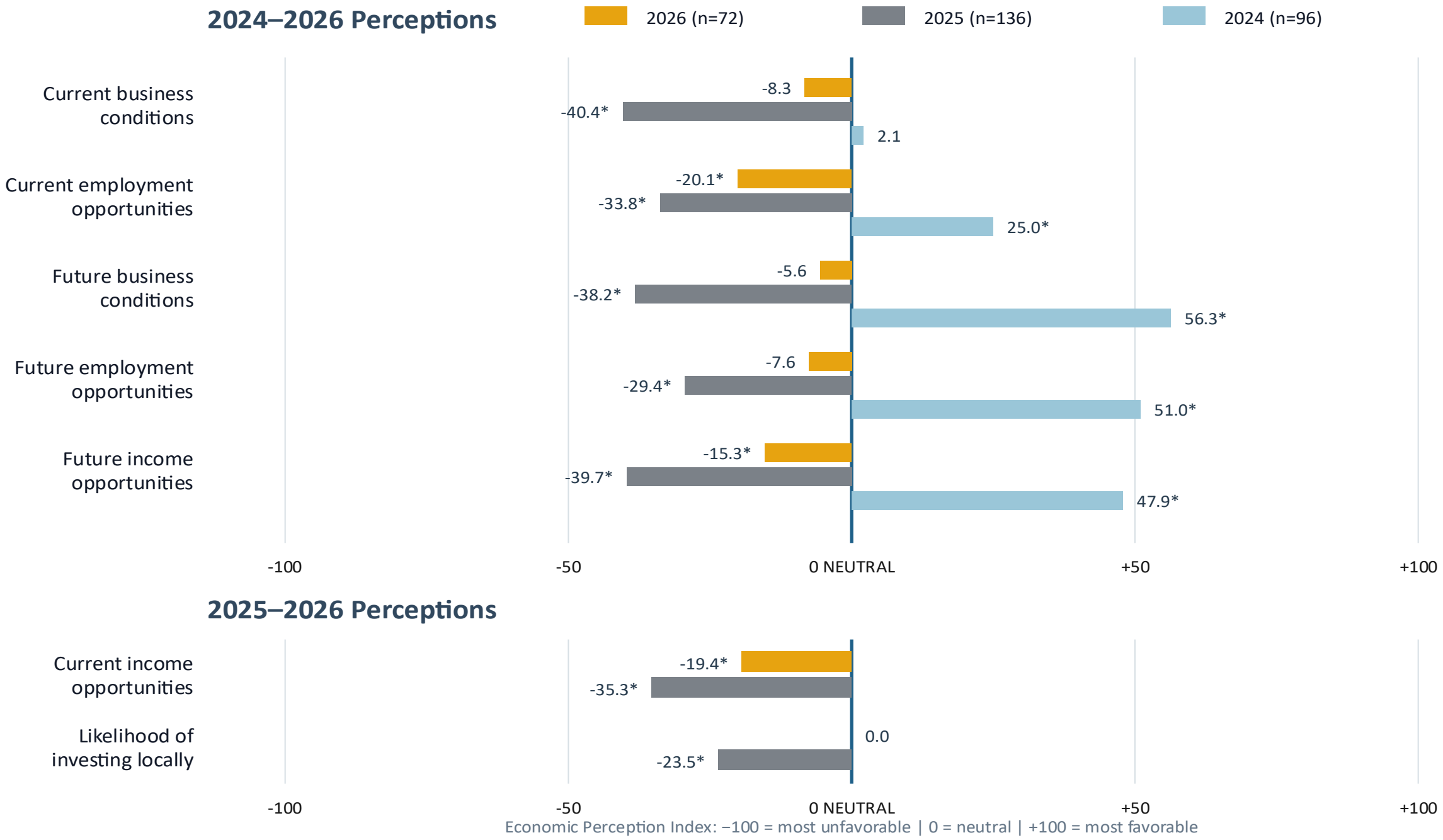
Liberal residents expressed a cautious economic outlook in 2026. Ratings improved from the sharp decline recorded in 2025, but current income and employment opportunities remained negative.

Current business conditions, future business conditions, future employment, and willingness to invest were closer to neutral. Residents frequently requested more retail, restaurants, entertainment, home-improvement options, healthcare specialists, and employers offering higher wages and advancement.

What businesses does Liberal Need?	Number times stated
Retail, shopping, & clothing	25
Healthcare, doctors, and specialists	19
Youth & family entertainment/recreation	13
Restaurants and food service	11
Manufacturing and higher-wage employers	8
Home-improvement stores and lumberyards	5
Childcare services	4

Our Economic Perceptions | 2024-2026

With regard to your community, how would you assess current economic conditions?



Economic Perception Index: −100 = most unfavorable | 0 = neutral | +100 = most favorable

What This Means

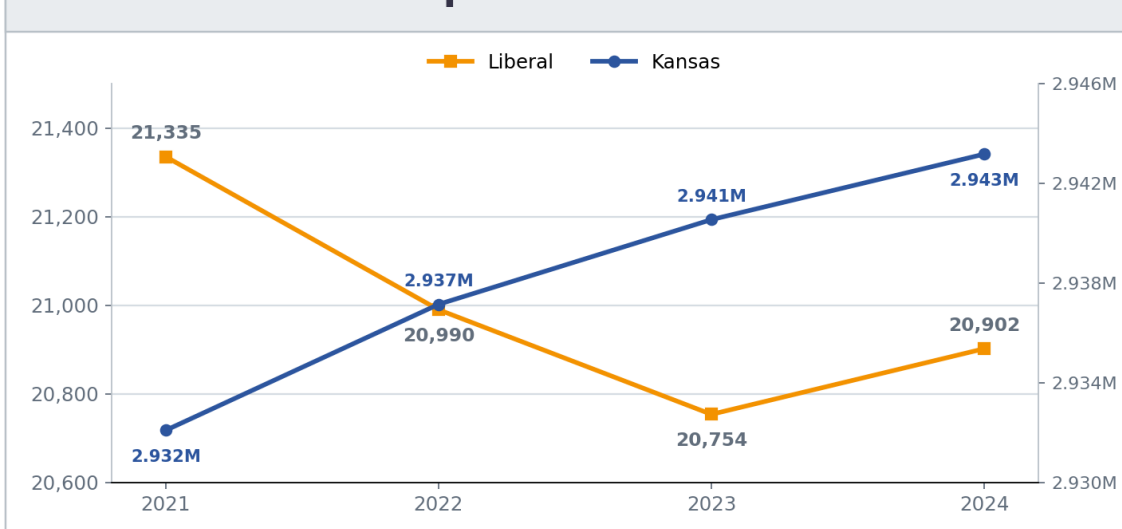
Liberal's economic optimism fell sharply between 2024 and 2025. The 2026 results show a partial recovery, with most measures moving closer to neutral but not becoming clearly positive. Current income and employment opportunities remain the weakest ratings.

The pattern supports continued attention to business recruitment, higher-wage employment, healthcare access, and services that keep household spending in Liberal. Because the response groups differed across years, changes should be interpreted as patterns among participating residents rather than proof of a community-wide shift.

Data source: Community Survey (Conducted in Spring 2026)

Local Economic Indicators

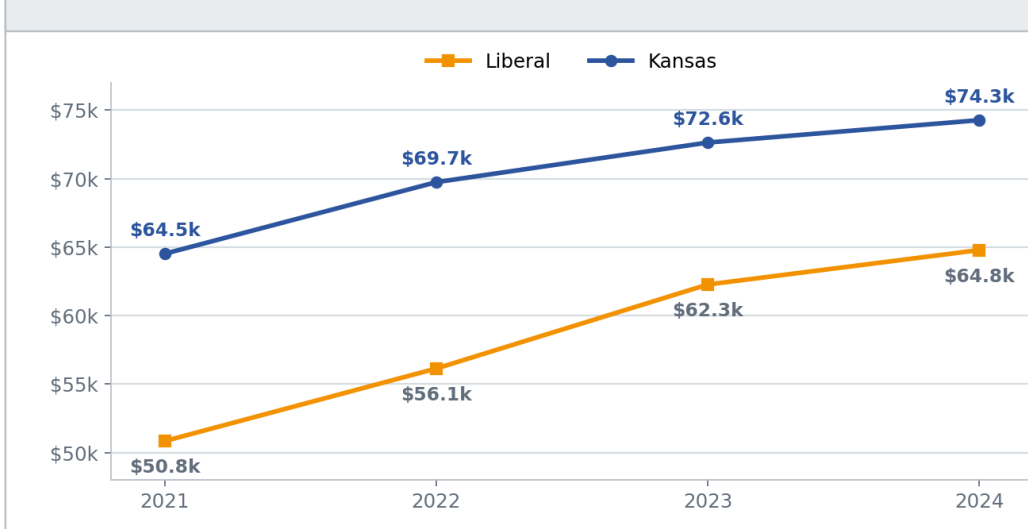
Population Trend



Liberal's estimated population declined 2.0% from 2021 to 2024, while Kansas increased 0.4%.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2021–2024 ACS 5-Year Estimates, B01003
Liberal: ZCTA 67901 | Separate population scales

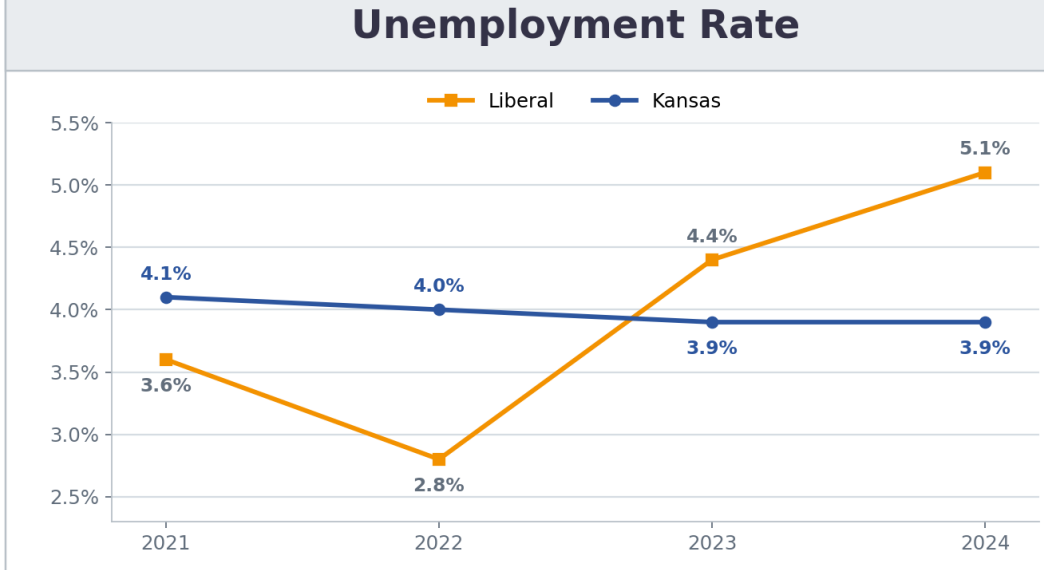
Median Household Income



Median household income increased in Liberal, but remained below the Kansas median in 2024.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2021–2024 ACS 5-Year Estimates, B19013
Liberal: ZCTA 67901 | Dollar values are not adjusted for inflation

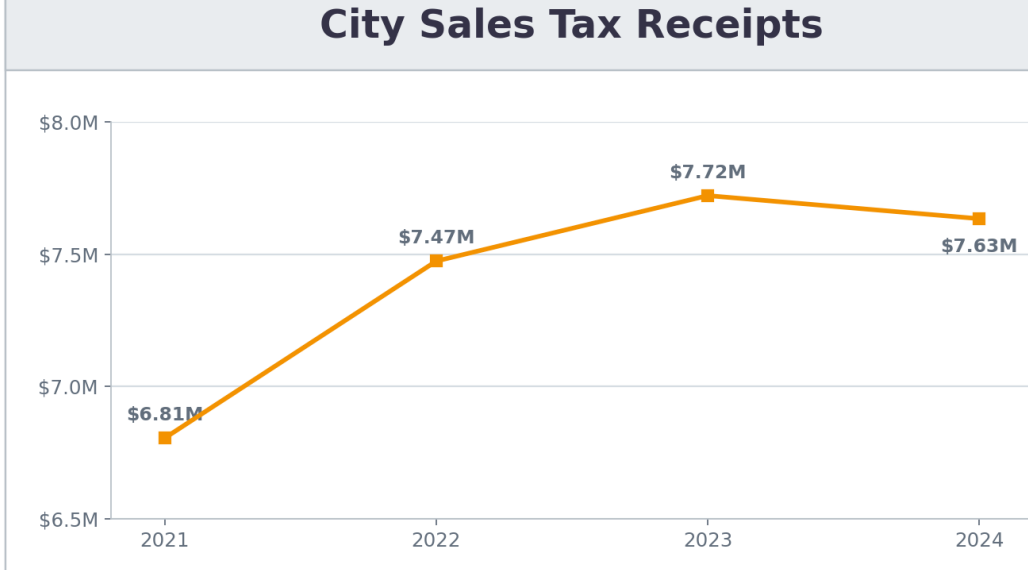
Unemployment Rate



Liberal's estimated unemployment rate rose to 5.1% in 2024, above the Kansas rate of 3.9%.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2021–2024 ACS 5-Year Estimates, B23025
Liberal: ZCTA 67901

City Sales Tax Receipts



Liberal's city sales tax receipts increased 12.2% from 2021 to 2024.

Source: City of Liberal annual audits, 2021–2024.
Includes the dedicated 0.5% educational and 1.0% city sales taxes.

Housing Units

Liberal's estimated housing supply increased 1.6% from 2021 to 2024.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2021–2024 ACS 5-Year Estimates, B25001
Liberal: ZCTA 67901

Families Below Poverty

Liberal's estimated family poverty rate fell to 9.7% in 2024, but remained above the Kansas rate of 7.5%.

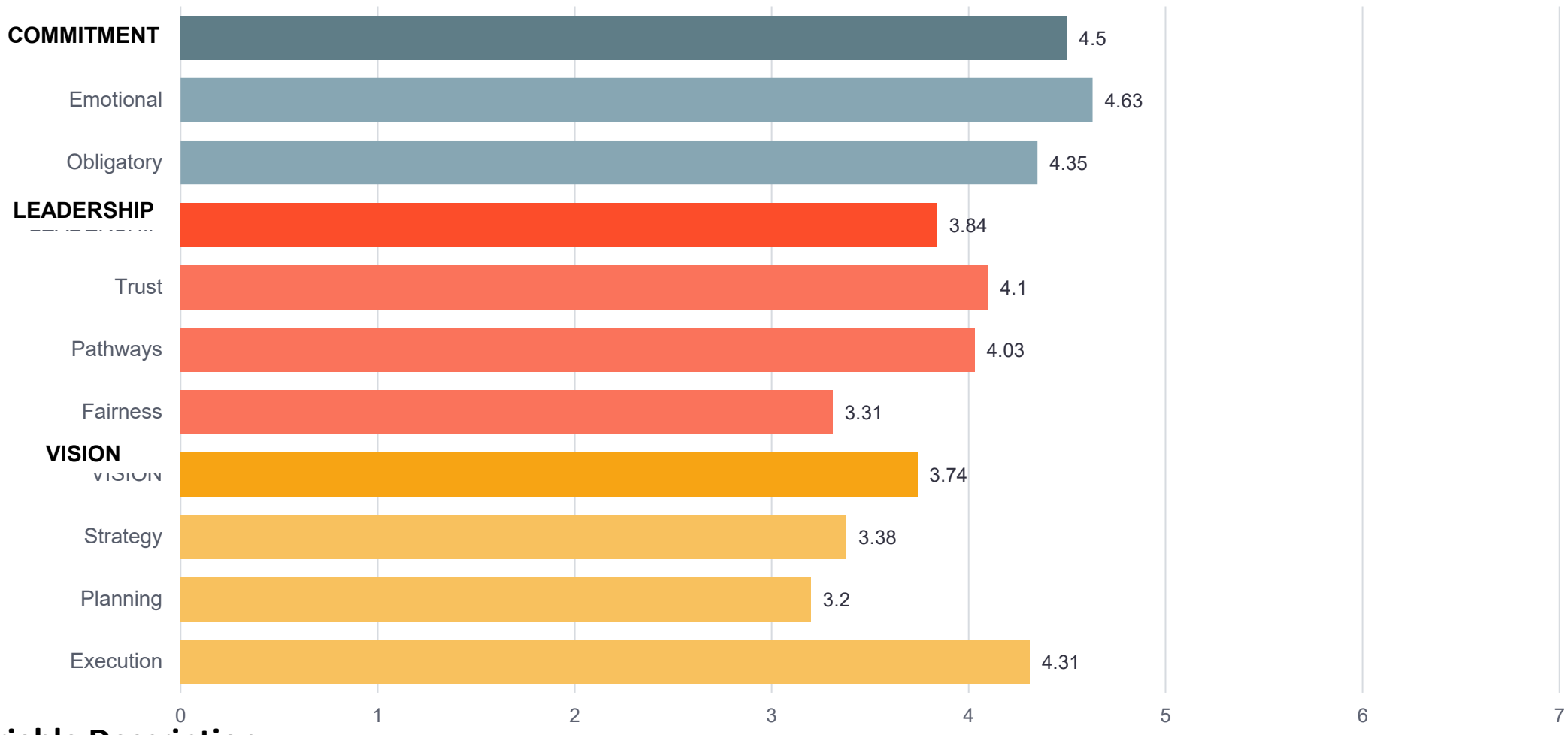
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2021–2024 ACS 5-Year Estimates, B17010
Liberal: ZCTA 67901

Confidence In Our Local Community

Engagement Summary

Liberal's strongest community asset is residents' personal commitment. In 2026, Emotional Commitment scored highest (4.63), followed by overall Commitment (4.50) and Obligatory Commitment (4.35). Execution (4.31), Trust (4.10), and Pathways (4.03) were also above the remaining measures. Planning scored lowest (3.20), followed by Fairness (3.31) and Strategy (3.38). Residents feel connected to Liberal, but report less confidence in community planning, direction, and inclusive decision-making.

Community Views



Variable Description

Commitment: How strongly residents feel personally connected and responsible to Liberal.

- **Emotional Commitment:** Feelings of belonging, personal meaning, and a desire to remain in Liberal.
- **Obligatory Commitment:** Feelings of loyalty, responsibility, and an obligation to help address community problems.

Leadership: How residents view trust, participation, and fairness in community decision-making.

- **Trust:** Confidence that community members and leaders work well together and can rely on one another.
- **Pathways:** Whether residents feel welcomed, comfortable speaking up, and able to become involved in leadership.
- **Fairness:** Whether community decisions reflect residents' needs and the broader community's interests.

Vision: How clearly residents understand Liberal's direction and its ability to make progress.

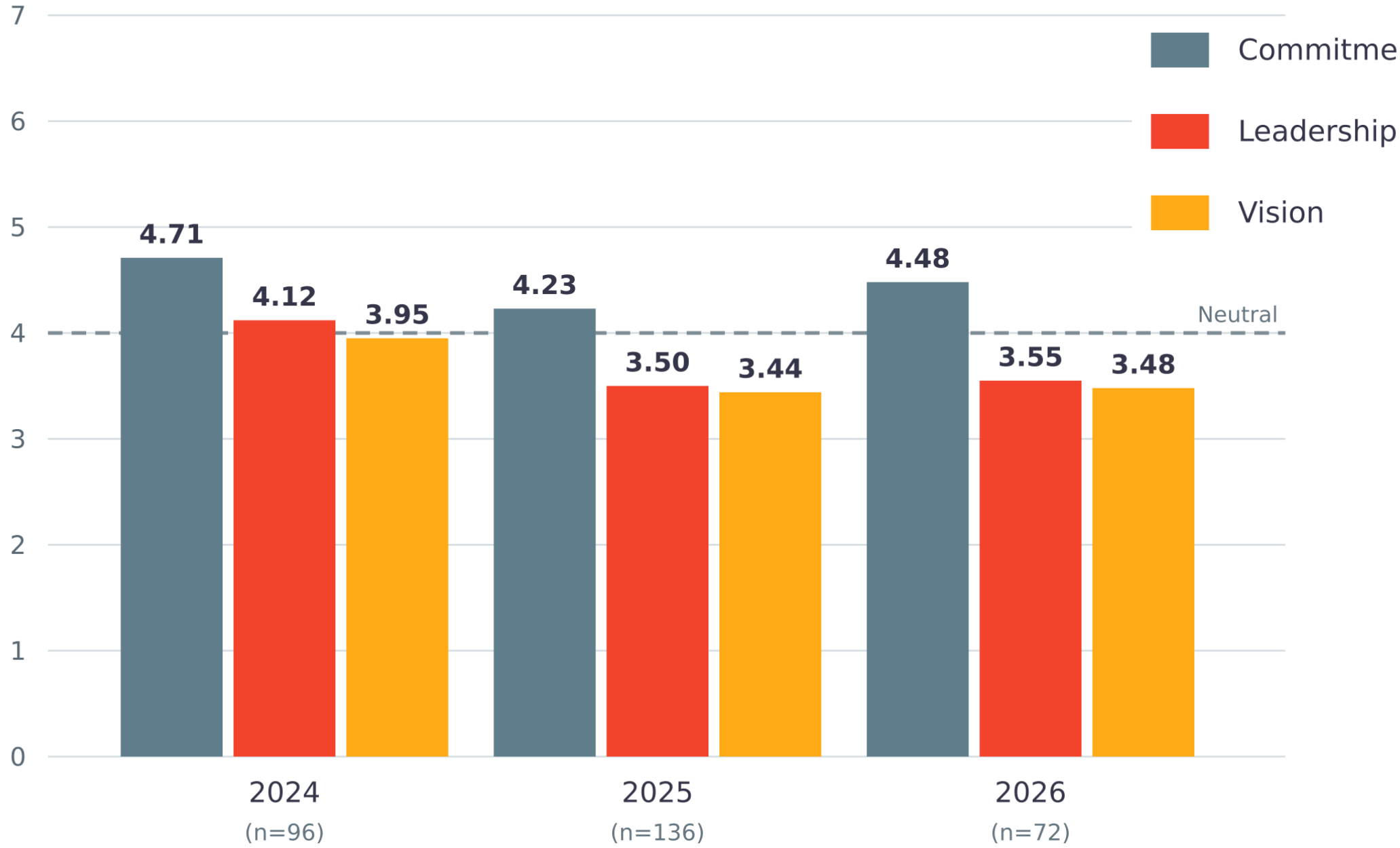
- **Strategy:** Whether residents understand and feel confident in the community's direction.
- **Planning:** Whether Liberal has a documented plan and a clear path for reaching its goals.
- **Execution:** Whether the community can overcome challenges, accomplish goals, and recognize its achievements.

What This Means

Liberal residents feel connected to their community, with personal meaning and belonging as relative strengths. Confidence is lower in community planning, long-term direction, and whether decisions reflect residents' needs. Clearer communication about priorities, progress, and opportunities to participate could strengthen trust and confidence.

Confidence In Our Local Community

Three Year Results



What This Means

Confidence declined across all three dimensions in 2025, then partially recovered in 2026. Commitment remained Liberal's strongest area each year. Leadership and Vision improved slightly in 2026 but remained below their 2024 levels. Differences across the three annual samples reached statistical significance for Leadership and Vision.

The results suggest that Liberal retains a strong base of personal commitment while participating residents want clearer plans, stronger confidence in leadership decisions, and more visible opportunities to help shape the community's direction.

Residents' Words Reflect the Data | Selected Quotes

2024 "The people, the community make me feel like I belong."

"I really think some of this is up to us individually. We have to create opportunities to meet others and become involved."

2025 "I'm open to helping in many capacities as both a teacher and a community member."

2026 "My community's needs will change. I believe my service to my community will need to change as well."

"I would like to be more involved. I'm just not sure in what or how much I can fit into my schedule."

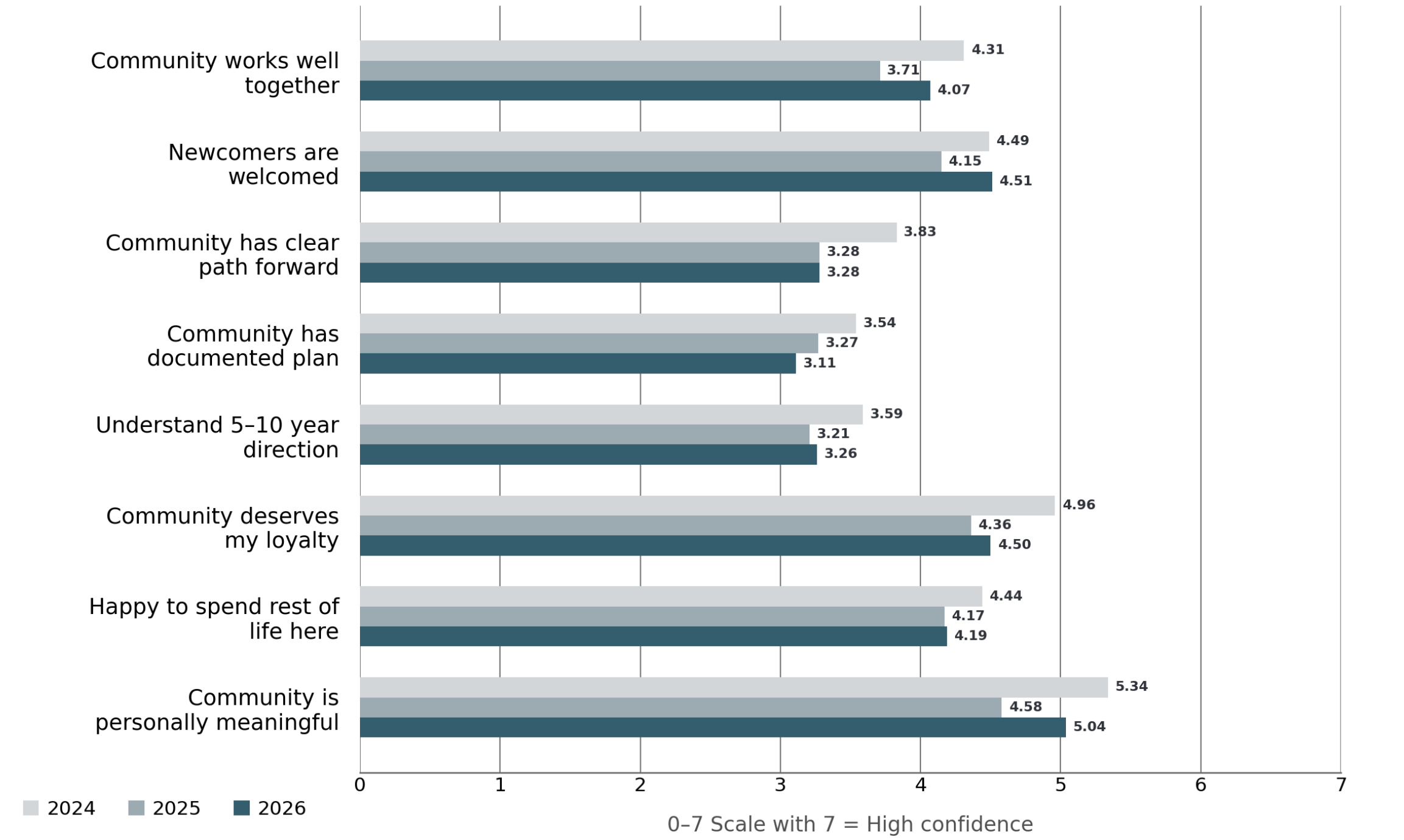
Confidence In Our Local Community

Summary

Liberal residents continue to express a strong personal connection to their community. In 2026, personal meaning received the highest rating (5.04), followed by welcoming newcomers (4.51) and community loyalty (4.50). Confidence in working together also improved from 2025 but remained below its 2024 level.

Planning-related measures remained the lowest rated. Residents were less confident that Liberal has a documented plan, a clear path forward, or a clearly understood direction for the next 5–10 years. None of the changes from 2024 to 2026 was statistically significant.

What Is Driving Community Confidence?



No selected change from 2024 to 2026 was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).

What This Means

Liberal's strongest foundation is residents' personal attachment to the community and its welcoming character. The clearest opportunity is to connect that commitment to a more visible shared direction.

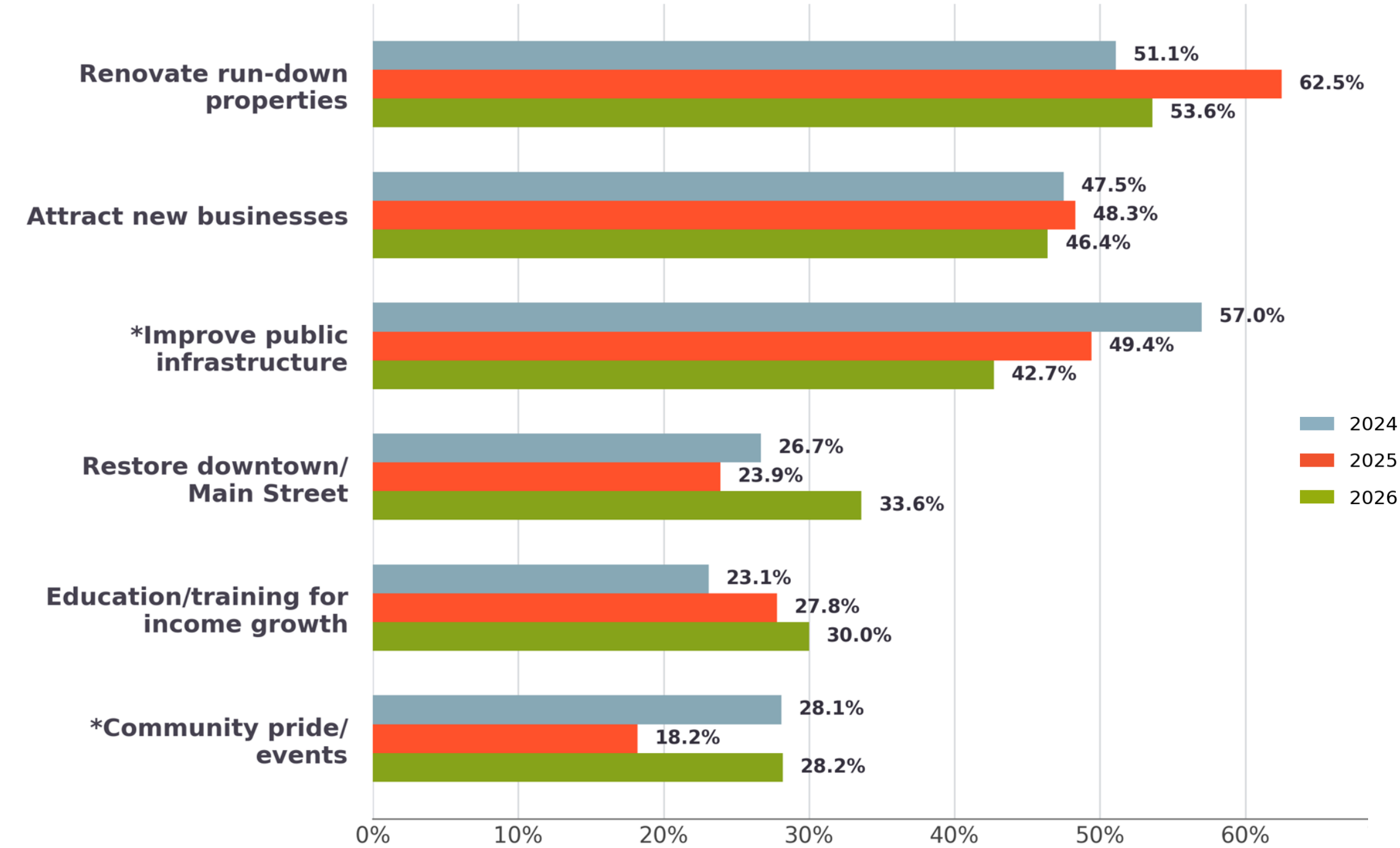
Regular communication about community goals, current projects, responsibilities, progress, and ways to participate could strengthen residents' confidence in Liberal's planning and future direction.

Community Program Priorities

Priorities Summary:

Attracting new businesses remained Liberal's leading priority in all three years, selected by nearly three-fourths of participants in 2025 and 2026. Renovating run-down properties, affordable housing, infrastructure, and local business expansion also received consistent support. Physical healthcare access rose from 21% in 2025 to 40% in 2026, tying property renovation as the second-most-selected 2026 priority.

Core priorities across three years



Percent of residents who selected the item as a top-five priority

*Statistically significant variation across 2024–2026 ($p < 0.05$)

What This Means

Residents want continued attention to renovating run-down properties, attracting new businesses, and improving public infrastructure. This will improve overall business recruitment and visible improvements to Liberal's economy and physical condition. The strong and persistent interest in new businesses shows that economic growth remains the central concern.

Significant shifts in community pride and restoration of downtown were seen from 2025 to 2026 years.

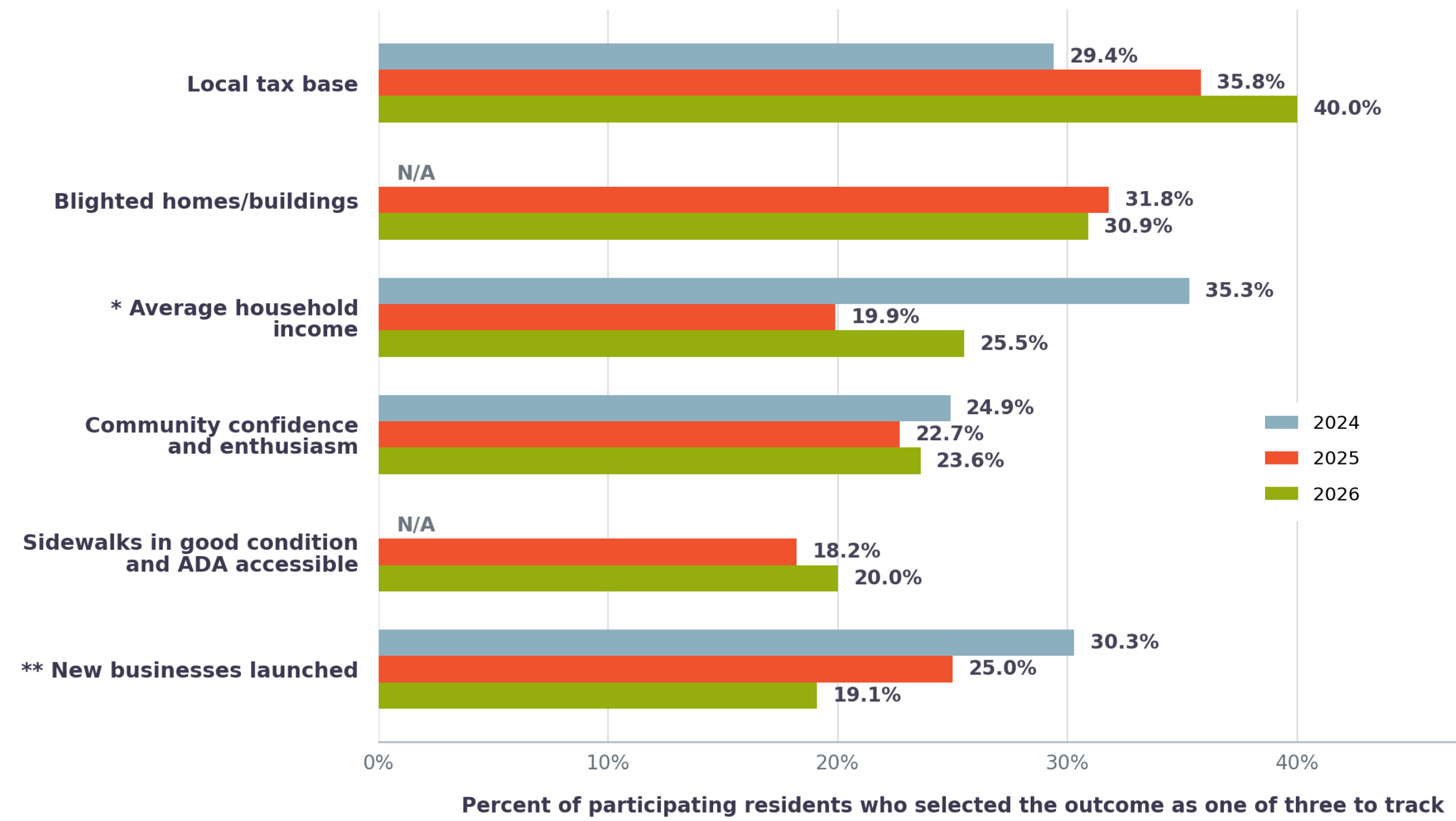
Community Program Priorities

Summary:

In 2026, residents most often wanted progress tracked through the local tax base (40%) and reduction of blighted properties (31%). Household income, community confidence, sidewalks, and new business launches followed.

Across the three years, the local tax base gained importance while new business launches declined. Household income rebounded in 2026 after falling in 2025. Blight remained a leading measure after it was added in 2025.

Community Outcomes Residents Want Tracked



What This Means

Liberal residents want progress measured through visible improvements in both economic strength and community conditions. A stronger local tax base and fewer blighted properties ranked highest in 2026, followed by higher household income and stronger community confidence. Sidewalk conditions and new business growth also remain important measures. Together, these results support a community scorecard that tracks economic growth alongside improvements residents can see and experience locally.

*Differences across years: * p<.05; * p<.10. Because participation varied by year, changes should be viewed as general trends rather than definitive shifts in community opinion.**

Who participated in the 2026 Liberal survey

This sample profile helps readers understand whose perspectives are most visible in the results.

72
RESIDENTS

72%
FEMALE

72%
HOMEOWNERS

Age

46% ages 40–59
32% ages 60+
22% ages 20–39

Time in Liberal

40% moved here 20+ years ago
26% born and raised
22% lived here 5–20 years
7% lived here under 5 years
3% only work here

Education

39% graduate degree
21% high school diploma/GED
19% bachelor’s degree
13% associate degree
6% some higher education
3% technical or current secondary student

Employment

51% public sector
19% retired
17% private sector
7% local business owners
4% unemployed

Race and ethnicity

68% White, non-Hispanic
18% Hispanic or Latino
6% Black or African American
4% American Indian or Alaska Native
4% two or more races

Housing

72% own their home
22% rent
6% other

Sample context: Participation leaned female, middle-aged or older, college-educated, public-sector-employed, long-established, and homeowner. Results describe participating residents and may not represent all of Liberal.

Data source: 2026 Western Kansas Community Opinions Survey; Liberal participants (n=72) • Percentages rounded