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Community Survey Report: Willingness to Pay Additional Sales Tax

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Contents

- Contents 2
- Acknowledgments 3
- Disclaimer 3
- Executive Summary 4
 - Key Findings 4
- Introduction 7
 - Background 7
 - Methodology 9
- Survey Results 14
 - Connections to Community..... 14
 - Commitment to Community & the Public Interest 15
 - Demonstrated Trust: Approval of Previous Investments..... 20
 - General Support for Investment Strategies..... 22
 - Willingness to Pay a Sales Tax for Investment Strategies..... 24
 - Willingness to Pay Additional Sales Tax Amounts..... 28
- Conclusion 30
- Appendix A: Respondent Demographics..... 32
- Appendix B: Themes from Comments..... 34
- Appendix C: Results Compared to Public Survey 37

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Disclaimer

This study was conducted by the PPMC at Wichita State University. The PPMC is an independent research body unaffiliated with Reno County. This report was prepared by the research team and data collected from external sources. PPMC's findings are based on assumption of data accuracy received from internal and external sources. The findings represent the findings, views, opinions and conclusions of the research team alone. The report does not express the official or unofficial policy of Wichita State University.

Executive Summary

Reno County conducted a community survey to gauge the willingness of registered voters to pay additional sales tax to fund community investments. A stratified random sample of 3,810 registered voters was drawn across all five county commission districts, with 351 usable responses received (9.5 percent response rate).

Key Findings

Community Connections

Reno County residents demonstrate strong social ties and long-term commitment, though concerns emerge around economic opportunity and infrastructure quality.

- 86% agree that people choose to live in Reno County to be close to friends and family
- 84% expect to still be living in the county five years from now
- 76% view Reno County as a safe place to live
- 53% believe Reno County has good public schools
- Only 39% believe infrastructure is well-maintained
- Only 33% believe good job opportunities are available in the county
- Connection measures did not vary by demographics or district

Public Interest and Demonstrated Trust

Most respondents show moderate to high levels of commitment to the public interest and demonstrated trust in previous county investments, with strong correlation between the two measures.

- 79% of respondents scored moderate public interest, 9% high, 12% low
- 64% demonstrated moderate trust, 28% high, 8% low
- All four previous investments tested received 67-82% approval

Support for Investment Strategies

When asked if Reno County should make specific investments (without considering how these would be paid for), support ranged widely across the 12 strategies tested.

- Highest support: County road maintenance (90%)
- Strong support: Business growth incentives (81%), infrastructure grants for small cities (73%)
- Majority support: Housing programs (63-67%), property tax offset (67-78%), and childcare strategies (all 60-64%)
- Below majority: Relocate Sheriff and Emergency Management departments to the expanded jail facility (45%)

Willingness to Pay for Investment Strategies

Willingness to Pay vs. General Support

For most strategies, willingness to pay fell below general support:

- Infrastructure strategies showed the largest decline, with water/sewer extensions dropping to 47% (from 69% general support)
- Housing, business growth, and childcare strategies maintained majority support but at reduced levels

Two categories showed willingness to pay meeting or exceeding general support:

- Public safety strategies: 57% willing to pay vs. 45% general support
- Property tax offset strategies: remained consistent at 78-79% for quarter-cent commitment and increased to 71% (from 67%) for half-cent commitment

Framing Effects

The quality-of-life framing produced modestly higher overall support than the economic development framing, though effects varied significantly by investment type.

- Overall median willingness: 2.8 for quality of life vs. 2.6 for economic development (on 4-point scale)

Role of Public Interest and Trust

- Low public interest or low demonstrated trust was correlated with the response “Definitely Not Willing” to pay across nearly all strategies
- High demonstrated trust was correlated with the response “Definitely Willing” across all strategies

Willingness to Pay Additional Tax Amounts

Support drops sharply above the half-cent threshold, suggesting a clear limit on acceptable tax levels.

- 70% support a one-half cent sales tax increase
- 51% support a three-quarter cent sales tax increase
- 40% support a one-cent sales tax increase
- Both public interest and demonstrated trust showed significant relationships with all three amounts

Implications

These findings suggest that a carefully designed ballot measure could achieve majority support, with several key considerations for county commissioners. A half-cent sales tax increase appears to be the most feasible option, achieving 70 percent support. Quality-of-life framing holds a modest overall advantage over economic development framing, though tailoring messages to specific investment types may be most effective.

Most critically, strong correlations with demonstrated trust in previous investments emerges as a key component of willingness to pay, underscoring the importance of transparent communication about the use of funds and results. The geographic consistency across districts and the strong foundation of community connection provide a solid base for pursuing a county-wide approach.

Introduction

Background

Reno County has levied both special and ongoing general-use sales taxes since at least 2005. In 2025, the County approached the PPMC to conduct a survey to understand voter willingness to pay additional county-wide sales tax to support community investment priorities identified through previous planning efforts. County and some city leaders want to explore alternative funding mechanisms beyond property taxes to progress on these community needs. To move forward with considering a vote on a county-wide sales tax, it is essential to understand which investment priorities have the most public support.

Understanding constituent priorities at the county commission district level is particularly important for commissioners, as it allows each commissioner to gauge support for specific investments among their own constituents and respond accordingly to community needs. District-level analysis helps ensure that any ballot measure reflects the diverse priorities across Reno County's five commissioner districts.

Under Kansas law, implementing additional sales tax in Reno County requires legislative authorization followed by voter approval. Although the ballot measure specifies how the county intends to use its portion of tax revenue, state law directs the County to distribute sales tax revenue amongst itself, and its 15 constituent cities based on a formula considering population and property tax factors. As shown in the table below, Reno County can spend less than half (40.3 percent) of county-wide sales tax revenue, while Hutchinson as the largest city receives essentially half (49.0 percent). The remaining 10.7 percent is distributed among the 14 smaller cities, with shares ranging from 0.04 percent to 3.4 percent.

Each municipality independently decides how to use its allocated share of the revenue. This means that while the ballot measure specifies the county’s intended uses, cities have flexibility to align their portion with local priorities and needs.

Table 1. Distribution of Sales Tax Revenue (2024 actuals)

Municipality	Share of Tax Revenue
Abbyville	0.1%
Arlington	0.5%
Buhler	1.5%
Haven	1.6%
Hutchinson	49.0%
Langdon	0.04%
Nickerson	1.3%
Partridge	0.2%
Plevna	0.1%
Pretty Prairie	0.9%
Reno County	40.3%
South Hutchinson	3.4%
Sylvia	0.2%
The Highlands	0.2%
Turon	0.4%
Willowbrook	0.4%

The survey findings are intended to help county commissioners and city leaders understand which investment priorities have the strongest public support, which tax amounts residents prefer, and how to craft ballot language that reflects community values.

Methodology

A survey of registered voters across Reno County was the primary method used to measure support for various community investments and willingness to pay for them through additional sales tax. To provide context for survey design and ensure alignment with local priorities, the project included a leadership team representing key municipalities and interviews conducted with many city clerks across the county.

Project Leadership Team

The PPMC worked with a project leadership team consisting of representatives from Reno County, the City of Hutchinson, the City of South Hutchinson, and the City of Pretty Prairie. This team provided local knowledge and guidance throughout the project through monthly meetings. These meetings were dedicated to sharing knowledge about existing and potential uses of sales tax revenue, survey development, and communications strategies. The leadership team's input ensured the survey reflected the county's diverse municipal contexts, from the county's largest city to smaller communities.

City Clerk Interviews

To understand the local context of smaller communities more comprehensively, phone interviews were conducted in August 2025 with city clerks from 11 of the 15 cities receiving a share of the county's sales tax revenue. Combined with ongoing input from the three cities represented on the leadership team, this provided perspectives from 14 of the 15 cities. These interviews explored each city's current use of sales tax revenue, potential uses for additional countywide sales tax revenue, and local investment priorities.

The interviews revealed several key patterns. All 11 cities reported using their current sales tax revenue primarily for general fund operations rather than specific project allocations, reflecting the operational realities of managing limited resources while addressing community needs.

When asked about priorities for additional revenue, infrastructure consistently emerged as the universal concern across all municipalities. All cities identified infrastructure-dependent needs like water and sewer systems, road maintenance, disaster infrastructure, and general facility maintenance as their primary focus. The interviews also highlighted gaps in capital improvements, with cities consistently mentioning aging infrastructure or equipment and deferred maintenance as needs they lack funding to address. The insights provided important context for understanding how cities might use their allocated share of any future additional county-wide sales tax revenue.

Survey Design

A comprehensive survey instrument was developed incorporating measures of public interest, demonstrated trust, and willingness to pay—concepts developed by Mark Glaser, PhD through over 25 years of research in public interest measurement. The survey included customized questions specific to Reno County’s investment priorities.

The survey measured resident priorities across six investment categories: infrastructure, housing, business growth, public safety, childcare, and property tax offset. A key objective was to test whether residents would support using sales tax revenue specifically for economic development initiatives. The county is considering dedicating sales tax revenue to economic development, removing it from the general budget and ensuring it has voter support, which would free general fund monies for other priorities.

To assess the viability of this approach, the survey employed a “within-subjects” experimental design in which respondents evaluated specific strategies under two different framings:

1. Quality of life
2. Economic development

This design allows for direct comparison of how framing the same underlying investment differently—as either enhancing community quality of life or driving economic development—influences voter support and willingness to pay. Each respondent rated both framings for all strategies, providing data on whether an economic development-focused ballot measure would resonate with voters.

All respondents saw the two framings in the same order (a. quality of life first, then b. economic development) and were explicitly told which framing they were evaluating in the introduction to the survey section. As a result, the modest differences observed between framings could reflect order effects or respondent fatigue rather than true framing preferences and should be interpreted with appropriate caution.

Sampling and Distribution

As the research questions relate to future voting behavior, the target population was registered voters in Reno County. A stratified random sample of 3,810 registered voters was drawn to ensure adequate representation across all five county commission districts.

The survey was distributed using a mixed-mode approach during November and December 2025. All sampled voters received a physical survey packet via U.S. mail with the option to respond either by returning the paper survey or completing it online using a QR code provided inside the mailer. This approach was intended to maximize accessibility while controlling costs by allowing respondents to choose their preferred response method.

To raise awareness and encourage participation, the survey was promoted through the County's social media channels and a [webpage](#) dedicated to answering frequently raised questions about both past and potential future sales taxes. Responses were received between November 14 and December 22, 2025.

Response Rate

With 363 responses received, the survey had a 9.5 percent response rate. Over three quarters (79 percent) of responses were mailed; the remaining (21 percent) responded online via QR code. Twelve responses that had completed less than one third of the survey were removed, leaving 351 responses included in the analysis.

Weighting Adjustment

The survey sample skewed significantly older than the registered voter population in Reno County. To adjust for this demographic imbalance, age-based weights were applied to all analyses in this report. Weights were calculated using the distribution of age among all registered voters in Reno County, ensuring that results better reflect the views of the full electorate rather than only those who responded to the survey.

All percentages and statistics reported throughout this document reflect weighted data unless otherwise noted.

Limitation: Concurrent Ballot Measure

An important limitation for readers of this report to consider involves the timing of data collection relative to a separate sales tax ballot measure from the City of Hutchinson. In March 2026, Hutchinson is planning to ask voters to approve a sales tax specifically for city purposes—a distinct initiative from the county-wide sales tax explored in this survey.

This survey was conducted several months before Hutchinson's sales tax election and potentially a year before any county-wide ballot measure would go to voters (likely Fall 2026). The timing of the survey was necessary because Reno County is currently at its statutory maximum for sales tax without legislative authorization to increase the rate. To pursue a county-wide sales tax increase, the County needed survey data for the 2026 legislative session (January-March).

Because Hutchinson residents represent over half of the county’s population and account for 49 percent of county-wide sales tax revenue, changes to their preferences following a March 2026 city election represent a meaningful source of uncertainty. Voter attitudes towards additional taxation may shift based on the outcomes of Hutchinson’s measure—whether it passes or fails, and how residents experience any implemented tax increase.

To mitigate potential confusion between the two measures during data collection, the survey instrument included language at the beginning to clarify this survey concerned a potential county-wide sales tax separate from Hutchinson’s city-specific measure. However, readers should consider that this survey captures a snapshot of voter preferences at a specific point in time, and these preferences—particularly among Hutchinson residents—may evolve before any county-wide ballot measure is put to a vote.



Survey Results

The following results align with the survey instrument itself. The flow of the survey is intentional, designed to get respondents thinking about their connections to the community and level of satisfaction with previous investments before specific investment strategies or tax amounts are posed.

Connections to Community

First, respondents reflected on their connections to Reno County as a community. The measures in Table 2 reveal why residents choose to live in Reno County. Social ties emerge as the strongest draw, with 86 percent agreeing that people choose Reno County to be close to friends and family. Additionally, 84 percent expect to still be living in Reno County five years from now, indicating strong commitment to the area. Safety is also a significant factor, with over three-quarters (76 percent) viewing Reno County as a safe place to live.

Table 2. Measures of Connection to Community

	Agree	Disagree
People choose to live in Reno County because they want to be close to friends and family.	86%	14%
I will be living in Reno County five years from now.	84%	16%
People choose to live in Reno County because it is a safe place to live.	76%	24%
People choose to live in Reno County because it has good public schools.	53%	47%
People choose to live in Reno County because it is well-maintained in terms of quality infrastructure (roads and bridges).	39%	61%
People choose to live in Reno County because it provides good job opportunities for people to make a living.	33%	67%

Commitment to Community & the Public Interest

The reasons residents choose to live in a community and their connections are revealing but cannot alone inform future investment decisions. The sustainability and growth potential of a community requires coproduction, meaning continued support and investment, from residents. Coproduction depends on residents who recognize the value of investing in the community's public interest.

For the purposes of this survey, two dimensions of the public interest are considered: 1) a balanced concern for the interests of one's household and broader community interests, and 2) a balanced concern for the wellbeing of current and future generations. The items in Tables 3 and 4 have been shown to be reliable measures of resident commitment to the public interest.

Balancing Self Interests and Community Interests

Communities are made up of households driven by their self-interests, albeit to varying extent. Self-interests cannot always align with community interests. Local government leaders, acting on behalf of households and the individuals that make them up, must be careful to balance self-interested demands with the community's interests and needs.

The survey encouraged respondents to reflect on their own personal willingness and their fellow residents' willingness to balance community interests against household interests. These measures offer insight into the predisposition of Reno County residents to act according to the public interests.



The first two measures of the public interest in Table 3 show a gap between personal willingness (67 percent) and perceived willingness of others (37 percent) to balance household and community interests. While two-thirds of respondents express personal willingness to consider broader community needs, less than two-fifths believe their neighbors share this commitment. This 30-percentage point gap reveals a paradox: individuals have greater confidence in their own commitment to the public interest than in that of their fellow residents.

Table 3. Self Interests vs Community Interests

	Agree	Disagree
I am willing to balance the personal interests of <u>my household</u> against the interests of <u>the broader community</u> .	67%	33%
Most residents are willing to balance the personal interests of <u>their household</u> against the interests of <u>the broader community</u> .	37%	63%

Based on other community surveys measuring willingness to pay additional sales tax, a 70 percent (personal willingness) to 30 percent (perceived willingness of others) split is common. Reno County's results (67 to 37 percent) are close to this pattern, though with slightly higher perceived willingness of others than typical. It is important to note that none of the other surveys have been at a county scale, rather for individual cities.

Balancing the Well-Being of Current and Future Generations

The second dimension of the public interest is a balanced concern for the needs of current and future generations. It is not uncommon for communities to choose to defer costs and necessary investments to the future. Regular investment in public infrastructure, for example, is crucial to prevent system failures. Nonetheless, investments like these are often overlooked until repairs cannot be ignored.

Deferral occurs for a number of reasons, but most common in the case of Reno County due to limited resources. The survey asked respondents to reflect on their personal willingness and the willingness of their fellow residents to balance the interests of their household today against households of the future.

Table 4. Well-Being of Current vs Future Generations

	Agree	Disagree
I am willing to balance the interests of households <u>today</u> against households of the <u>future</u> .	68%	32%
Most residents are willing to balance the interests of households <u>today</u> against households of the <u>future</u> .	39%	61%

Table 4 indicates the same paradox observed in the prior measures: respondents express near identical levels of personal willingness (68 percent) to consider future generations but show identical skepticism (39 percent) about whether their neighbors share this long-term perspective. The consistent gap across both dimensions of public interest suggests a pattern in Reno County residents’ view of the public interest. They see themselves as more willing to make sacrifices for the common good than they believe others are.

Based on studies done in other communities, a common response to the items in Table 4 is an 80 percent (personal willingness) to 40 percent (perceived willingness of others) split. Reno County's results (68 to 39 percent) fall somewhat below these benchmarks on both measures, suggesting residents may be slightly less optimistic about both their own and others' willingness to prioritize future generations compared to communities studied elsewhere.

Public Interest Index and Classification of Respondents

Each respondent was assigned a Public Interest score according to their answers to the four items in Tables 3 and 4 (1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Agree, 4=Strongly Agree).

According to that score, respondents were then classified by their level of commitment to the public interest as either high (13-16), moderate (8-12), or low (4-7). **High** scores represent respondents who indicate a personal willingness

to balance the interests of their household with the community. They similarly believe their fellow residents are willing to do the same. Conversely, **low** scores represent respondents who indicate an *unwillingness* to balance their household interests with the community. These respondents believe their fellow residents are similarly unwilling.

Moderate scores represent respondents with mixed views on the public interest. They may be personally willing to balance household and community interests but skeptical that others share this commitment, or they may show willingness on some dimensions but not others. This group represents both a solid base of potential support and the most movable segment of the population. While those with high public interest scores are likely already committed to community investments and those with low scores are difficult to persuade, moderate respondents can be influenced.

The public interest index showed significant positive correlations with all measures of community connection. Respondents with high public interest were more likely to:

1. Expect to be living in Reno County five years from now
2. View the County as having good job opportunities to make a living
3. Consider it a safe place to live

Respondents to this survey have the following Public Interest Index scores:

9% High
79% Moderate
12% Low

4. Rate its infrastructure quality positively
5. Believe it has good public schools
6. Indicate they choose to live in Reno County because of family and friends

Conversely, respondents with low commitment to the public interest were more likely to disagree with all statements about community connection.

Among business owners, 19 percent demonstrated high public interest compared to 7 percent of non-business owners—more than two times the rate. Respondents who have lived in Reno County for five to nine years were more likely to demonstrate a low commitment to the public interest, 31 percent as compared to zero to 13 percent in other tenure groups.

These correlations suggest that one's commitment to the public interest is tied to satisfaction with current community conditions, economic stake in the community, and long-term investment in the area. Notably, public interest index scores did not vary significantly across demographic characteristics including age, gender, , or county commission district. This consistency suggests that commitment to the public interest in Reno County cuts across demographic lines and is driven more by community connection and satisfaction than by traditional demographic factors.

Previous research has shown strong correlations between respondents' willingness to pay a sales tax for investments and their level of commitment to the public interest. Residents with high and moderate levels of commitment are instrumental to promoting community wellbeing since they are predisposed to working with other residents and local government, and to coproducing improvements through investment.

The rest of this report will note important differences based on these classifications of respondent commitment to the public interest (high, moderate, and low).

Demonstrated Trust: Approval of Previous Investments

Whether residents approve of previous investments can influence their willingness to coproduce future investments. Local government leadership must demonstrate they can be trusted to invest, rather than simply spend tax dollars. To measure current levels of trust in County leadership to invest tax dollars, the survey asked how appropriate residents felt four previous investments were. Each investment is a potential demonstration of trust.

Table 5. Approval of Previous Investments

	Appropriate	Inappropriate
One-time sales tax that built the new Reno County Corrections Facility in 2015.	82%	18%
Ongoing sales tax that lowers the property tax rate (mill levy) since at least 2005.	80%	20%
One-time federal funds (ARPA) that supported housing rehabilitation and preservation programs.	74%	26%
One-time federal funds (ARPA) that supported childcare grant programs.	67%	34%

Respondents expressed strong approval of previous government investments, with all four receiving majority support. The one-time sales tax that built the new Reno County Corrections Facility in 2015 garnered the highest approval, closely followed by the ongoing sales tax that lowers property taxes.

Both one-time ARPA-funded programs for childcare grants and housing also received solid majorities, though at somewhat lower levels than the sales tax investments. The slightly lower approval for ARPA programs may reflect less familiarity with these more recent initiatives, or differing views on federal versus locally controlled funding.

Overall, these high approval ratings suggest a foundation of trust in Reno County's stewardship of public funds.

Demonstrated Trust Index and Classification of Respondents

As with the public interest, each respondent was assigned a Demonstrated Trust Index score of high (13-16), moderate (8-12), or low (4-7) according to their responses to the four items in Table 5 (1=Very Inappropriate, 2= Inappropriate, 3= Appropriate, 4= Very Appropriate). **High** scores represent respondents who approve of all or nearly all previous investments, indicating strong trust in county leadership's resource management. **Low** scores represent respondents who view most or all previous investments as inappropriate, suggesting skepticism about government spending decisions. **Moderate** scores represent respondents with mixed approval; they may support some types of investments while questioning others, or they may view investments as generally appropriate but not strongly so. Like the moderate public interest group, moderate trust respondents represent a persuadable segment whose support can be strengthened.

Respondents to this survey have the following Demonstrated Trust Index scores:

28% High
64% Moderate
8% Low

Previous research indicates a strong correlation between resident levels of demonstrated trust, commitment to the public interest, and willingness to pay taxes. Each has the potential to reinforce the other. When local government leaders show they can be trusted to invest public funds, residents are more inclined to coproduce community improvements, ultimately strengthening their commitment to the public interest.

The rest of this report will reference important differences based on these classifications of respondent approval of previous investments as high, moderate, or low in demonstrated trust.

Relationship Between Public Interest and Demonstrated Trust

Consistent with previous research, the public interest index showed a strong positive correlation with the demonstrated trust index. Among respondents with high public interest, nearly half (41 percent) of respondents also demonstrated high trust in local government; none (0 percent) demonstrated low trust.

In contrast, among those with low public interest, only 13 percent demonstrated high trust while 38 percent demonstrated low trust. This relationship is consistent from the demonstrated trust perspective: those with moderate to high commitment to the public interest were far less likely to demonstrate low trust.

This mutually reinforcing relationship between commitment to the public interest and trust has important implications for ballot measure success. Voters who both care about public issues and trust their local government represent the most reliable base of support for community investments funded through additional taxation.

General Support for Investment Strategies

Up to this point in the survey, respondents were asked about their commitment to the community in abstract terms. In this next section, respondents indicated their support for specific investment strategies. Respondents were not yet asked to consider how to fund these investments, just whether Reno County **should** make each investment.



Table 6. General Support for Investment Strategies

	Should	Should Not
Infrastructure Strategies		
Extend water and sewer infrastructure to targeted areas of need in small cities.	69%	31%
Create grants for small cities to fund their critical infrastructure projects.	73%	27%
Improve/maintain County roads.	90%	10%
Housing Strategies		
Support home repair and renovation programs.	63%	37%
Encourage new housing construction.	67%	33%
Business Growth Strategies		
Provide financial incentives to expand and attract businesses.	81%	19%
Public Safety Strategies		
Expand the jail for new offices for the Sheriff and Emergency Management Departments.	45%	55%
Childcare Strategies		
Fund childcare facility expansions to increase available slots.	64%	36%
Provide ongoing funding to Kids Collective.	60%	40%
Offer grants to childcare providers to offset operational costs.	61%	39%
Property Tax Strategies		
Commit a quarter of sales tax revenue to offsetting property tax increases.	78%	22%
Commit half of sales tax revenue to offsetting property tax increases.	67%	33%

As Table 6 shows, support levels vary considerably across the 12 investment strategies, ranging from 90 percent support for improving and maintaining county roads to 45 percent for expanding jail facilities. Infrastructure improvements have the strongest support overall, with county road maintenance leading, followed by infrastructure grants for small cities to fund critical infrastructure projects, and water/sewer extensions.

Housing strategies show solid support, with home repair programs and new housing construction both receiving majority backing. Childcare investments cluster around 60-65 percent support across all three strategies tested. Property tax offset strategies show strong support, with 78 percent backing a quarter-percent sales tax commitment and 67 percent supporting a half-percent commitment, suggesting some sensitivity to the amount dedicated. Relocating Sheriff and Emergency Management departments to the expanded jail stands out as the only strategy without majority support at 45 percent.

Willingness to Pay a Sales Tax for Investment Strategies

While the previous section measured whether Reno County should make specific investments in principle, this section asked respondents whether they would be willing to pay an additional sales tax to fund these same investments. Introducing the question of payment typically reduces support levels, as voters must weigh the benefits of community improvements against the personal cost of higher taxes.

Respondents rated their willingness to pay for each investment strategy using two different framings - one emphasizing quality of life benefits and another emphasizing economic development benefits. For each framing, they indicated their willingness on a four-point scale: 1=Definitely NOT Willing to Pay, 2=Probably NOT Willing to Pay, 3=Probably Willing to Pay, 4=Definitely Willing to Pay. The relationship between general support in the previous section (“should invest”) and willingness to pay varies by investment type, revealing which investments voters prioritize most strongly.

For infrastructure, housing, and business growth, and childcare strategies willingness to pay generally falls below the “should invest” percentages, reflecting the typical gap between aspirational support and tax-backed commitment. Infrastructure strategies showed the largest decline, with support for extending water and sewer infrastructure dropping to 47 percent willing to pay (from 69 percent general support)—the only strategy to fall below majority support. The remaining strategies in these categories maintained majority support but at reduced levels compared to their general support figures.

Table 7. General Willingness to Pay for Investment Strategies

	Willing to Pay	Not Willing to Pay
Infrastructure Strategies		
Extend water and sewer infrastructure to targeted areas of need in small cities.	47%	53%
Create grants for small cities to fund their critical infrastructure projects.	60%	40%
Improve/maintain County roads.	66%	34%
Housing Strategies		
Support home repair and renovation programs.	61%	39%
Encourage new housing construction.	58%	42%
Business Growth Strategies		
Provide financial incentives to expand and attract businesses.	66%	34%
Public Safety Strategies		
Expand the jail for new offices for the Sheriff and Emergency Management Departments.	57%	43%
Childcare Strategies		
Fund childcare facility expansions to increase available slots.	61%	39%
Provide ongoing funding to Kids Collective.	61%	39%
Offer grants to childcare providers to offset operational costs.	59%	41%
Property Tax Strategies		
Commit a quarter of sales tax revenue to offsetting property tax increases.	73%	27%
Commit half of sales tax revenue to offsetting property tax increases.	71%	29%

However, public safety and property tax offset strategies showed a notably different pattern. For public safety, willingness to pay (57 percent) substantially exceeded general support (45 percent). Property tax offset strategies maintained near-identical support levels between general support and willingness to pay: committing a quarter of revenue held steady at 78-79 percent, while committing half actually increased slightly from 67 percent general support to 71 percent willingness to pay.

These divergent patterns indicate that voters prioritize public safety and tax relief enough to overcome the typical resistance to taxation, while other investments—even those with strong majority support—face the conventional challenge of translating abstract support into tax-backed commitment.

The following analysis examines how different framings of the same investments affect willingness to pay, providing insight into which messages may be most effective in building support for a sales tax measure.

Framing Effects on Willingness to Pay

To examine whether voters respond differently to quality of life versus economic development framings of the same investments, median willingness to pay ratings across all 12 investment areas were compared.

Table 8 shows that, overall, quality-of-life framing produced slightly higher support, with a median score of 2.8 compared to 2.6 for economic development framing. This suggests that Reno County voters may be modestly more receptive to investments framed in terms of community well-being rather than economic growth, though both framings still fall on the "willing" side of the scale.

Table 8. Median Willingness to Pay by Investment Area and Framing

	Frame	
	Quality-of- Life	Economic Development
Infrastructure Strategies	2.7	2.0
Housing Strategies	2.5	3.0
Business Growth Strategies	3.0	3.0
Public Safety Strategies	2.0	3.0
Childcare Strategies	3.0	2.7
Property Tax Reduction Strategies	3.0	3.0
Overall Median	2.8	2.6

At the individual investment level, some variation emerged in how specific strategies responded to different framings.

- Childcare Strategies showed the strongest preference for quality-of-life framing (median 3.0) compared to economic development framing (2.7).
- Housing Strategies, conversely, resonated more strongly when framed as economic development (3.0) than quality-of-life (2.5).
- Public Safety Strategies showed the strongest preference for economic development framing (3.0) compared to quality-of-life framing (2.0).
- Infrastructure Strategies showed a notable preference for quality-of-life framing (2.7) over economic development framing (2.0).
- Business Growth and Property Tax Reduction Strategies showed no difference between framings (median 3.0 for both), suggesting consistent strong support regardless of how this investment is positioned.

Most investment areas showed differences of 0.3 points or less between the two framings, with three areas showing no difference at all. These patterns suggest that while quality-of-life framing has a slight overall advantage (median 2.8 vs. 2.6), the magnitude and direction of framing effects vary considerably by investment type.

Willingness to Pay by Public Interest and Demonstrated Trust

Public Interest

Public interest levels show a strong relationship with willingness to pay across all investment strategies, regardless of frame. Respondents with low public interest are more likely to be "Definitely Not Willing" to pay, while those with moderate public interest cluster in the "Probably Willing" category, reinforcing their persuadability. County road maintenance showed no relationship with public interest levels, likely because it garnered near-universal support (91 percent) regardless of commitment to the public interest.

Demonstrated Trust

Demonstrated trust shows an even stronger relationship with willingness to pay than public interest. Every investment strategy shows significant differences based on trust levels. The pattern is consistent across all strategies: respondents with low demonstrated trust are significantly more likely to be “Definitely Not Willing” to pay, while those with high trust are significantly more likely to be “Definitely Willing.” Moderate trust respondents fall in between, showing conditional support but rarely strong commitment. These findings underscore that trust in past investments is a critical factor in the willingness to fund future ones.

Willingness to Pay by County Commission District

Willingness to pay for investment strategies did not vary significantly across the five county commission districts. This consistency suggests that priorities and tax willingness are relatively uniform across Reno County's geographic areas.

Willingness to Pay Additional Sales Tax Amounts

After rating specific investment strategies, respondents indicated their willingness to pay three different sales tax amounts: one-half cent (\$0.0050), three-quarter cent (\$0.0075), and one cent (\$0.01). As expected, willingness to pay decreases as the tax amount increases.

Table 8. Willingness to Pay Additional Tax by Amounts

	Willing to Pay	NOT Willing to Pay
One-half cent (\$0.0050)	70%	30%
Three-quarter cent (\$0.0075)	51%	49%
One cent (\$0.01)	40%	60%

A clear majority (70 percent) indicates a willingness to pay a one-half cent sales tax increase, representing the strongest consensus for a specific tax amount. Support drops sharply for higher amounts; only 51 percent support three-quarter cent and 40 percent support one cent. The 19-percentage point drop between one-half cent and three-quarter cent suggests a meaningful sensitivity threshold, with a ballot measure of a three-quarter cent sales tax likely being an uphill battle.

Relationship with Public Interest and Demonstrated Trust

Both public interest and demonstrated trust show statistically significant ($p < 0.00001$) relationships with willingness to pay all three tax amounts; however, the patterns differ importantly between the two indices.

For demonstrated trust, the relationship is bidirectional: respondents with low trust are significantly more likely to be “Definitely Not Willing” to pay any amount, while those with high trust are significantly more likely to be “Definitely Willing” across all three amounts. This mirrors the pattern seen with specific investment strategies.

For public interest, the relationship is unidirectional: respondents with low public interest are significantly more likely to be “Definitely Not Willing” to pay any amount, but high public interest does not always significantly correlate with the response “Definitely Willing.” This suggests that while a lack of commitment to the public interest creates resistance to taxation regardless of amount, commitment alone may not be sufficient to overcome concerns about the tax burden. Other factors like trust, specific priorities, or household finances likely play a role.

Conclusion

This survey offers Reno County some baseline data on voter priorities and willingness to pay for community investments through an additional sales tax. Several patterns emerge that have important implications for ballot measure design and strategy.

Strong Foundation and Clear Constraints

Reno County benefits from a solid foundation of community connection and demonstrated trust. The 67-82 percent approval ratings for previous investments indicate that county leadership has established credibility. Strong social ties (86 percent cite proximity to family and friends as why people live here) and commitment to staying (84 percent expect to remain for at least five years) suggest an engaged population invested in the community's future. However, voters show clear sensitivity to tax amounts. While 70 percent support a half-cent sales tax increase, support drops sharply to 51 percent for three-quarter cent and 40 percent for one cent. This drop indicates voters have limits on acceptable tax levels, likely driven by concerns about cumulative tax burden rather than opposition to specific investments. (See Appendix B)

The Role of Trust and Public Interest

The strong correlation between demonstrated trust and willingness to pay across all investment strategies underscores a critical finding: trust in past investments is a key component of willingness to fund future ones. While 88 percent of respondents showed moderate (79 percent) to high (9 percent) public interest, demonstrated trust showed the most consistent relationship with respondents' willingness to pay for investment strategies. This suggests that maintaining and building on existing trust through transparent communication about use of revenues and achieved results should be a priority alongside any ballot measure campaign. The moderate groups are particularly important. These respondents show conditional support that can be strengthened through effective messaging, accountability measures, and demonstrated results. They represent the persuadable center that could make the difference in success or failure.

Framing and Investment Priorities

Quality of life framing produced a modest overall advantage (median 2.8 vs. 2.6 for economic development), though this varied significantly by investment type. Most investment areas showed minimal differences between framings. These findings suggest voters evaluate each investment on its own merits rather than responding uniformly to a single frame. A ballot measure that tailors messaging to specific investment types may be more effective than adopting a single unified approach.

Support levels across the 12 strategies tested ranged from 90 percent for county road maintenance to 45 percent for relocating the Sheriff and Emergency Management departments to the expanded jail facility. Business growth incentives, infrastructure grants for small cities, housing programs, and property tax offsets all showed strong majority support.

The divergent patterns between general support and willingness to pay—with public safety and tax relief maintaining or exceeding support levels while other investments showed typical decline—further reinforces these strategic priorities. Voters demonstrate they are willing to overcome conventional resistance to taxation for investments they consider most critical to community well-being. Willingness to pay did not vary significantly across county commission districts.

Considerations for Moving Forward

Several factors should inform next steps. The March 2026 Hutchinson city sales tax vote creates uncertainty, as voter attitudes may shift based on that outcome. Sampling limitations mean the findings reported here should be considered exploratory.

Despite these limitations, this survey provides valuable insights into voter priorities. The findings suggest that a carefully designed ballot measure could achieve majority support. Success will likely depend on maintaining and building the demonstrated trust that voters currently express in Reno County's stewardship of public funds.

Appendix A: Respondent Demographics

Following are the demographic details of Reno County residents who answered this survey.

Respondents by County Commission District

District 1	20%
District 2	18%
District 3	27%
District 4	20%
District 5	15%

Household Composition

Respondents were asked how many adults and kids (under 18) live in their household. A majority of respondents indicated two adults. A similar majority indicated two kids.

	Adults	Kids (under 18)
0	-	67%
1	14%	18%
2	66%	10%
3	12%	4%
4	6%	1%
5	0.3%	0.3%
6	2%	-

Years Living in Reno County

0-4 years	6%
5-9 years	6%
10-14 years	5%
15-19 years	8%
20+ years	75%
I don't live in Reno County	0%

Total Household Income

Less than \$20,000	5%
\$20,000 - \$39,999	12%
\$40,000 - \$59,999	10%
\$60,000 - \$79,999	25%
\$80,000 - \$99,999	13%
\$100,000 or more	35%

Gender

Female	44%
Male	51%
Non-binary	0.3%
Prefer to self-describe	0%
Prefer not to say	5%

Ethnicity

Hispanic/Latino	6%
Not Hispanic/Latino	94%

Business Owner

Yes	18%
No	82%

Housing Status

Own	81%
Rent	10%
Other	2%

Race

American Indian or Alaska Native	1%
Asian	0%
Black or African American	2%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0.3%
White	96%
Other	2%

Educational Attainment

Highest Level of School Completed	
Did not finish high school	1%
High school graduate or equivalent (GED)	12%
Some college credit, no degree	25%
Associate's degree	18%
Bachelor's degree	28%
Graduate degree	16%

Age

	Sample	Weighted Sample/Population
18-24	2%	12%
25-34	6%	16%
35-44	9%	16%
45-54	11%	14%
55-64	17%	15%
65-74	33%	16%

Appendix B: Themes from Comments

The PPMC used a qualitative coding method to analyze 117 open-ended comments made by unique survey respondents. The following are the most common themes that emerged, including those with twenty or more mentions by respondents. They are presented in order of prominence, starting with those that were most mentioned.

Taxes Are Already Too High

Respondents expressed the straightforward position that current tax levels are excessive and that additional taxation is unaffordable or unreasonable (both positions elaborated on in subsequent themes). These comments often used language like “taxed to death,” or described Reno County taxes as “ridiculously high,” usually in comparison to other communities. Unlike the following “rising cost of living concerns” theme which focused on competing household expenses, these respondents emphasized the cumulative tax burden itself as the primary issue.

A significant subset highlighted property taxes as particularly burdensome, with some expressing preference for sales tax over property tax as a means of tax relief rather than for a revenue increase.

Several respondents connected high taxes to economic development concerns, noting that limited job opportunities and/or low wages make the existing tax burden especially difficult to bear. For these respondents, the fundamental objection is to increasing the overall tax load in any form, reflecting a belief that residents are already shouldering as much taxation as they can reasonably manage or that the community’s tax levels are already disproportionately high.

Management of Current Tax Dollars

Respondents expressed skepticism about the need for additional taxation, citing concerns about how existing tax revenue is currently managed. These comments reflected a belief that the County has sufficient resources but lacks fiscal discipline or efficient allocation practices. Some respondents provided specific examples of perceived waste. Others criticized the cost of the survey itself as an example of unnecessary spending.

A subset of comments focused on disagreement with current spending priorities, arguing that tax dollars should be limited to “basics” like law enforcement, fire protection, and roads rather than social programs. Several respondents suggested that churches and nonprofits, rather than government, should handle services like childcare. For these respondents, the primary issue is how current resources are used, suggesting that better management and prioritization could address community needs without additional taxation.

Rising Cost of Living Concerns

Respondents expressed concern about their ability to afford additional taxes in the context of mounting household expenses. A recurring pattern was comments on challenges faced by residents on fixed incomes, particularly seniors, who emphasized that their income does not increase to match rising costs.

Multiple respondents cited specific financial pressures including dramatic increases in insurance premiums, medical bills, and property taxes. These comments highlighted a sense of being squeezed by multiple simultaneous cost increases, with respondents noting that basic necessities are already difficult to afford.

The theme reflects concern about cumulative financial strain from various sources, not just opposition to new taxes. For these respondents, the question is not whether community investments have merit, but whether households can absorb additional taxation while managing other rising expenses that are outside their control.

Employment and Economic Development Tensions

Respondents expressed complex and sometimes conflicting views about using tax dollars for economic development and business attraction. While acknowledging the need for more employment opportunities and business growth, many respondents were skeptical about traditional economic development approaches, particularly tax incentives for large corporations. A recurring concern was that attracting big businesses would funnel money out of Reno County rather than keeping it circulating locally.

Several respondents emphasized the importance of supporting local businesses and hiring residents to ensure that paychecks are spent within the community. Some comments advocated for workforce development approaches, such as apprenticeship programs to train young workers with sustainable wages and life skills. Others expressed frustration that employers hire workers from outside Reno County, taking income out of the local economy.

This theme reflects tension between wanting economic growth and job creation on one hand, and skepticism about whether conventional business incentives serve the community's best interests on the other. For these respondents, the "right kind" of economic development prioritizes local investment, local hiring, and supporting existing small businesses rather than attracting outside corporations.

Appendix C: Results Compared to Public Survey

A few weeks after the survey was mailed to a random sample of registered voters, a public survey was made available for respondents who were not selected to be a part of the sample or who were not registered voters and did not have a chance to be selected. The purpose of this public survey was to solicit input from the wider community while still capturing a statistically valid sample of responses from registered voters. The public survey was promoted on the County's social media channels.

In total, 549 people engaged with the public survey. After cleaning the responses and removing those with less than 30 percent of the survey completed, 427 responses remained for analysis.

The public survey results are supplementary to the sample survey findings and should be interpreted with caution. Unlike the random sample of registered voters, public survey respondents were self-selected, meaning they chose to participate rather than being randomly selected. This self-selection introduces bias, as participants may be more engaged, have stronger opinions about the topics covered, or differ demographically from the broader population. Additionally, the public survey was open to non-registered voters. For these reasons, the public survey provides valuable supplementary perspective but cannot be used to make statistical inferences about voter preferences or likely ballot outcomes.

The following findings and patterns suggest self-selection bias in the public survey, with respondents who are more critical of current county conditions and less supportive of tax measures being more motivated to participate.

Notable Differences Between Sample and Public Survey Results

- **Community perceptions:** Sample respondents rated Reno County more positively across most measures, with the largest gaps in:
 - Good job opportunities: 31% sample vs 17% public (-14 points)
 - Safe place to live: 77% sample vs 66% public (-11 points)
 - Good public schools: 58% sample vs 43% public (-15 points)
- **Public interest and trust:** Public respondents showed higher commitment to the public interest (14% high vs 9% sample), but less demonstrated trust, with fewer indicating high trust (22% vs 28% sample) and more indicating low trust (11% vs 8% sample)
- **Strategy support:** Public respondents showed notably lower support for public safety strategies (31% vs 45% sample, -14 points) and childcare strategies (average 54% vs 62% sample, -8 points), but slightly higher support for property tax reduction strategies (+4 points). Like the sample survey, public respondents showed stronger support for committing a quarter cent to property tax reduction compared to a half cent.
- **Willingness to pay:** Consistent with their more critical views, public respondents showed lower willingness to support all tax rate levels:
 - Half-cent: 70% sample vs 64% public (-6 points)
 - Three-quarter cent: 51% sample vs 43% public (-8 points)
 - One cent: 40% sample vs 37% public (-3 points)