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## What Makes Customers Satisfied with the Local Government Agency: A Case Study in Rural Michigan

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# **What Makes Customers Satisfied with the Local Government Agency: A Case Study in Rural Michigan**

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to report on how a local government agency in rural Michigan, USA, tried to understand residents' perceptions of the community features, facilities, and services available to them, in order to better leverage customer value to benefit its current and potential customers and increase customer satisfaction with the city as a whole. A total of 705 questionnaires were completed, collected, and analyzed using SPSS. The results suggested that although customers and residents were satisfied with most of the services currently provided, they had concerns about several amenities made available by the provider. In addition, bivariate correlation analysis showed that 13 variables were significantly related to overall satisfaction with the local authority. These findings have important implications for research and practice. Recommendations are to the local authority are offered for remaining relevant to customers in the provision of services.

**Keywords:** Customer satisfaction, resident satisfaction, local government, small town development, rural local government

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## **1.0 Introduction**

To compete in the turbulent market environment, organizations need ways to create value for their current and potential customers, which leads to increased market share. To achieve this, superior customer value is needed. According to Mothersbaugh and Hawkins (2016), providing superior customer value requires knowledge of customer behavior. Understanding customers' needs and wants is mission-critical for marketers and organizations alike to achieve long-term customer satisfaction (Grewal & Levy, 2016). Although customers' needs and expectations change in different stages of life (Mothersbaugh & Hawkins, 2016), organizations need to focus on their customers and aim at achieving long-term customer satisfaction. This requires continuously providing superior value, establishing a sustainable competitive advantage, and using an integrated organizational effort to achieve objectives (Ho, 2012).

Walker, Brewer, Boyne, and Avellaneda (2011) argued that public organizations perform better when they behave like for-profit organizations that compete with rivals to meet customer demands. For decades, many public sector organizations have been adopting private-sector practices, such as offering high-quality services

and good customer care, to better serve their customers (Hvidman & Anderson 2014; Mergel & Desouza 2013; Walker et al., 2011). Customer satisfaction is important to success not only in for-profit organizations but in non-profit organizations too (Ho, 2019). One of the best practices for learning about customers' behavior and understanding their needs and wants is to communicate directly with the target audience (Hair, Celsi, Ortinau, & Bush, 2017).

According to Giannoccaro, Costantino, Ludovico, and Pietroforte (2008), 'high-quality service' is a major goal of many public organizations, particularly local government agencies. The past few decades have been marked by an expansion of local government functions, and there has been a shift in emphasis away from the traditional focus on 'services to property' and toward more expansive 'services to people' (Woods, Artist, & O'Connor, 2016). A typical example is the "continuous administered survey aimed at assessing the quality services provided to citizens by local public agencies" (Giannoccaro et al., 2008, p. 12).

In this study I investigate how one local government, that of the City of Big Rapids in rural Michigan, tries to understand its residents' needs in order to better leverage customer value to benefit current and potential customers (i.e., residents of Big Rapids) in its served market and increase customer satisfaction.

## **2.0 Literature Review**

### ***2.1 Importance of Customers' Satisfaction of Local Government Agency***

In the past few decades, researchers have conducted studies to explain the importance of customers' perceptions of and satisfaction with local government agencies (LGAs). Kaliannan, Puteh, and Dorasamy (2014) said that the responsibility of LGAs is to provide services and facilities for improving residents' lives and wellness. Local citizens, whether customers or users, take advantage of LGAs' services at the same time as they are integral parts of the government, "given their influence and support through ballot and taxes" (Giannoccaro et al., 2008, p. 2). In other words, they try to get involved with public authorities by demanding service quality, efficiency, and effectiveness, and by continuously interacting with their LGAs (Giannoccaro et al., 2008).

Nigro and Císaro (2014) argued that for all LGAs, keeping residents satisfied with the services they offer is important because "citizens are a core group in the process of the city branding" (p. 154). They explained, "citizens interact with other citizens, tourists and visitors by means of social networks, communities, towns and cities. These are specific, uncontrollable, either repeated or ongoing interactions, which often occur through word of mouth....If there are negative events in the everyday life of a citizen, dissatisfaction can damage the brand image of the city" (Nigro & Císaro, 2014, p. 154).

Overall citizen satisfaction can be defined as "a citizen's summative judgment regarding the performance of his or her local government with respect to the quality of basic urban services" (Van Ryzin, 2004, p. 11). A diverse range of roles, responsibilities, and activities are required for local governments to efficiently and innovatively deliver a range of services that address the community's and stakeholders' needs, and "without an effective local government, local economies and communities would struggle to operate" (Woods et al., 2015, p.). Although the structures of LGAs vary between countries (Pierre, 2014), most depend on higher levels

of government (e.g., federal or state) for capital and project funding. However, local governments have long been targets of federal and state governments' cuts (Laffin, 2016).

Although a growing number of LGAs inside and outside the United States use customer surveys to measure the outcomes of their service provision efforts and to obtain feedback (Giannoccaro et al., 2008; Oktay, Rüstemli, & Marans, 2009; Van Ryzin, 2005), these surveys can also be used to show decision makers from federal or state governments that funding cuts will hurt both the local government and customers its agencies serve.

## **2.2 Research on Customers' Satisfaction of LGAs**

For many LGAs, "surveys of citizen satisfaction with local public services have become widespread, with the results increasingly used to reorganize services, to allocate budgets, and to hold managers accountable" (Van de Walle & Van Ryzin, 2011, p. 1436). This trend reflects a renewed emphasis on performance measurement and an interest in making LGAs more customer focused and responsive (Van Ryzin & Immerwahr, 2007).

Cripps, Ewing, and McMahon (2002) studied the division of a large LGA, the City of Perth in Western Australia, into four smaller LGAs, and the impact this had on the customer satisfaction among the residents in Perth. They investigated whether the division affected customer satisfaction and whether the services provided or the population demographics had any impact on levels of customer satisfaction. They mailed out 1,500 surveys, and 364 were completed and returned, representing a response rate of 24.3%. Overall, the residents of Perth were more satisfied with the services they received in the new, smaller suburban LGAs of Cambridge, Victoria Park, and Vincent. Residents considered the smaller LGAs to have better local leadership and to be more customer focused and responsive to their needs than the larger Perth government, which seemed distant and uninterested. This reflects the idea that the public has become disenchanted with big, expensive, and remote government and is now more concerned with fundamental social and economic needs (Cripps et al., 2002).

In a research conducted for the Ministry of Housing and Local Government in Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia, Mohit, Ibrahim, and Rashid (2010) examined residents' satisfaction with newly designed low-cost public housing built by the ministry. Their survey results indicated that although the residents of this housing were moderately satisfied with their new dwellings, they were highly satisfied with neighborhood facilities and support services, and with public facilities made available to them by local authorities. Mohit et al. concluded that residents' overall satisfaction with their neighborhoods can be enhanced through improvements to services and facilities that benefit them (e.g., road infrastructure, shopping opportunities, cleanliness of parks and recreation areas, garbage collection, public safety).

Scott and Vitartas (2008) conducted an empirical study of the development and testing of constructs that were used to investigate the effects of involvement and attachment on satisfaction with services delivered to residents by a local government body, namely a city council in New South Wales, Australia. On the basis of their findings, they argued that on average, "respondents who felt a strong sense of attachment to the city had rated the council's performance as being more satisfactory than those respondents who exhibited lesser feelings of attachment" (Scott & Vitartas, 2008, p. 54). Their research also indicated that some residents felt attachment

to the community but were not involved with it. At the same time, the interaction effects indicated that some respondents showed both involvement and attachment.

Sirgy, Gao, and Young (2008) empirically tested a model explaining how residents' satisfaction with community services provided by an LGA (housing development, job availability, shopping, leisure resources, etc.) influenced their customer satisfaction and quality of life satisfaction. The study revealed that satisfaction with many community services tends to affect community well-being both directly and through satisfaction in various life domains. In addition, residents' demographics (e.g., age, education, gender, income, marital status, occupation) played an important role in their satisfaction with local government services. The authors argued that their research could help local governments recognize the importance of the behavioral phenomenon of satisfaction with community services, given that their results clearly showed that such a construct leads to important outcomes such as overall community satisfaction and overall quality of life satisfaction (Sirgy et al., 2008).

In summary, an important task for LGAs aiming for greater customer satisfaction is to look at their markets and understand who their customers are—both current and potential—and how those customers perceive the community features, facilities, and services available to them. Although the literature on this topic is extensive, much of the research focuses only on LGAs in large metropolises and suburbs. The aim of this study is to fill this gap by examining the perceptions of rural customers to determine how well one LGA, the City Big Rapids, has succeeded in delivering such service to its customers.

### ***2.3 Achieving Customer Satisfaction with LGAs***

In 2009, the City of Big Rapids' Master Plan Working Committee and Planning Commission adopted the 2009 City of Big Rapids, Michigan Master Plan, which laid out how the city intended to attract new residents and businesses, retain current ones, and keep itself efficient and prosperous by providing specific features, facilities, and services (City of Big Rapids, 2018a). The local government has been developing and implementing this plan for several years now; it is the summation of all of the community features, facilities, and services the city offers its residents. One of the city's goals was to understand and fulfil its customers' needs and wants, and then to increase customer satisfaction to convert itself into a 'customer-focused' public organization. The city's administrators understood that it was important to deliver the services residents wanted on a reasonable scale and a feasible budget. But data are necessary to determine what services residents actually want. This project was conducted to gain insight into Big Rapids residents' satisfaction with the Master Plan.

## **3.0 Research Objectives and Hypothesis**

The following were the main objectives of this research project:

- To measure satisfaction with current city features, facilities, and services.
- To measure attitudes about future development and growth, including public funding of development.
- To measure community involvement in local activities.

We propose the following five hypotheses:

- H1: Senior residents (55+) are more satisfied with the quality of life in Big Rapids.

- H2: Senior residents (55+) are more satisfied with the performance of public services in Big Rapids.
- H3: Younger residents (18–39) are more demanding of additional city parks in Big Rapids.
- H4: Satisfaction with the quality of life in Big Rapids is positively correlated to satisfaction with community features available in the city, including performance of public services (H4a), variety of available housing (H4b), condition of the streets (H4c), condition of the downtown business area (H4d), shopping opportunities (H4e), local leadership (H4f), and public recreation and entertainment opportunities (H4g).
- H5: Satisfaction with the performance of public services in the city is positively correlated to respondents' involvement in activities in the city, including recreational walking (H5a), visiting the community library (H5b), attending community meetings (H5c), interacting with public safety officers (H5d), interacting with city staff (H5e), and dining or shopping in the downtown business district (H5f).

#### **4.0 Case Study: The City of Big Rapids**

Big Rapids is a city of about 10,395 people, located within the vacation–recreation region of west-central Michigan (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). It is the county seat of Mecosta County. It is also home to Ferris State University (FSU), a comprehensive public institution serving a diverse multicultural population of more than 14,000 students. The main campus of FSU is in Big Rapids, and approximately 11,000 of its students are studying there at any time (Ferris State University, n.d.).

The city's manager reported that the services and facilities provided by the city mainly served three groups of target customers: (a) residents of the city, (b) residents of nearby cities and counties who work in Big Rapids, and (c) college students at the main campus of FSU (City of Big Rapids, 2018b). These groups are all generally classified as residents by the administrators because many of them pay taxes to the city. There are approximately 24,000 residents, in this sense, with access to the services and facilities offered by the city.

The major facilities and services offered by Big Rapids include: (a) a farmers market, (b) fire protection services, (c) the Roben-Hood Airport, (d) water and sewage, (e) law and code enforcement, (f) planning and zoning, (g) street maintenance, (h) public transit, (i) community libraries, (j) city parks and recreation, (k) trash removal, and (l) recycling.

Other community features available to the residents include: (a) public services, (b) a variety of available housing, (c) management of street conditions, (d) a downtown business area, (e) shopping opportunities, (f) local leadership, (g) public recreation, and (h) entertainment (City of Big Rapids, 2018b).

Big Rapids also has many parks, including (a) Hemlock Park, (b) Mitchell Creek Park, (c) Northend Riverside Park, and (d) River Street Park, all of which are made available by the city.

## **5.0 Methodology**

The research design was descriptive, and the research was conducted using a quantitative method of surveying. Descriptive statistics were deemed appropriate for this study, as this was believed to be better suited to providing a clear understanding of residents' overall views on the services offered by the city. The benefits of questionnaire surveys include ensuring that the responses are gathered in a standardized way (Ho, 2017) and allowing large amounts of data to be collected from large numbers of respondents quickly and cost-effectively (Hair et al., 2017).

### **5.1 Population and Sample**

As indicated by the city's manager, the target population for this study should include all Big Rapids residents and residents of neighboring communities who have access to public services and facilities offered by the city. The potential respondents were sorted into age group as follows:

- 18–24 (a young adult group),
- 25–39 (a special-interest group, due to retention struggles),
- 40–54 (including people with families),
- 55+ (pre-retirement and retirement).

Self-selection sampling can lead to self-selection bias or cause the sample to not be representative of the population being studied, which could exaggerate the value some findings (Hair et al., 2017). Nonetheless, self-selection sampling was used in this research in order to encourage the participation of residents who have particularly strong feelings or opinions about the research or who simply want to help the City of Big Rapids.

Yamane's (1967) approach to identifying the best sample size for a survey was used in this research, as his proposal has been commonly accepted among social science researchers for more than four decades (see Babin & Zikmund, 2016; Hair et al., 2017; Ho, 2019; Sarmah, Hazarika, & Choudhury, 2013; Silver, Stevens, Kernek, Wrenn, & Loudon, 2016; Singh & Masuku, 2014). Yamane argued that although a larger sample group can yield more accurate results, the excessive responses can also be costly. Hence, a predetermined margin of error and level of confidence should be used to determine a representative sample size. A 95% confidence level is suggested for most research (Silver et al., 2016). For this research, a sample of 378 residents was considered appropriate for the population being studied (population size 24,000, confidence level 95%, margin of error 5%), as indicated by the Survey System's Sample Size Calculator (Creative Research Systems, n.d.).

### **5.2 Questionnaire Design and Data Collection**

The questionnaire was designed on the basis of a thorough review of the literature and detailed discussions with the managers and administrators of the City of Big Rapids. The survey consisted of questions about residents' opinions on (a) current and potential community benefits, (b) public funding initiatives, (c) future property development, and (d) the multiple services, facilities, and activities offered in the city. A five-point Likert scale (1 = very dissatisfied, 2 = dissatisfied, 3 = neutral, 4 = satisfied, 5 = very satisfied) was used in most of the questions to measure

residents’ views on the community features, facilities, and services offered by the city. All other questions were either nominal or open-ended.

The survey was both self-administered—online via Survey Monkey—and person-administered—via mall intercept. An invitation letter to complete the survey online was attached to water bills and distributed to local households to create awareness of the survey. Target respondents were also intercepted in several public areas, such as the community library, bank, and restaurants, where interviewers read the questions from an Android tablet and entered the responses directly into Survey Monkey. A total of 705 responses were completed during the four-week data-collection period

## 6.0 Findings and Discussions

### 6.1 Demographic Information

In the 705 completed surveys, more than 76% of respondents reported living in the City of Big Rapids. Almost 24% said that they did not live in the city but were employees of companies based there. Essentially, all the participants either lived or worked in the city. Most of the respondents came from two age groups: 18–34 (>31%) and 55+ (>24%). On questions about living arrangements, two-thirds (66.91%) reported living in single-family homes, and one-third (about 33%) in apartments. More than 56% were classified as homeowners and about 43.7% as renters.

### 6.2 Satisfaction with Community Features

Residents were asked to indicate their satisfaction with several community features provided by the city on a five-point Likert scale, from 1, ‘very dissatisfied’, to 5, ‘very satisfied’. As Table 1 shows, most of the residents were either satisfied or very satisfied with these community features. The highest ratings were for *Public services performance* and *Quality of life*, with mean scores of 3.64 and 3.7 respectively. The only area that fell below the ‘neutral’ rating was *Shopping opportunities*.

Table 1. *Respondents’ Satisfaction with Community Features*

	Very Dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Neutral	Satisfied	Very Satisfied	Mean (Standard Deviation)
Quality of life	1.71%	7.85%	25.53%	48.93%	15.98%	3.7 (0.89)
Public services performance	2.00%	5.71%	31.71%	47.00%	13.57%	3.64 (0.86)
Variety of available housing	6.85%	21.11%	37.09%	29.96%	4.99%	3.05 (0.99)
Condition of streets	4.27%	24.36%	32.62%	33.48%	5.27%	3.11 (0.97)
Downtown business area	2.45%	15.11%	28.06%	45.90%	8.49%	3.43 (0.93)



Table 1 (continued)

	<b>Very Dissatisfied</b>	<b>Dissatisfied</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Satisfied</b>	<b>Very Satisfied</b>	<b>Mean (Standard Deviation)</b>
Shopping opportunities	12.02%	30.04%	27.32%	26.90%	3.72%	2.80 (1.08)
Local leadership	3.44%	7.60%	49.93%	29.99%	9.04%	3.34 (0.87)
Public recreation/ Entertainment opportunities	6.02%	18.19%	30.23%	34.96%	10.60%	3.26 (1.06)

\*N = 705, 1 = *Very Dissatisfied*, 5 = *Very Satisfied*

An extension of this section let residents indicate their level of agreement with certain community projects, housing plans, and green space allocations, using a five-point Likert scale from 1, ‘strongly disagree’, to 5, ‘strongly agree’ (see Table 2).

Table 2. *Respondents’ Levels of Agreement with Different Community Projects*

	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Mean (Standard Deviation)</b>
Additional single-family housing should be developed	1.87%	8.63%	42.16%	34.39%	12.95%	3.48 (0.89)
Multi-family housing (apartments) should be developed	4.18%	17.15%	40.20%	29.68%	8.79%	3.22 (0.97)
Preservation or improvement of residential areas is important	1.59%	2.02%	19.36%	50.00%	27.02%	3.99 (0.83)
A historic district should be established	6.06%	9.67%	43.87%	29.15%	11.26%	3.30 (1.00)
Development of new commercial areas should be encouraged	2.02%	8.07%	28.10%	41.35%	20.46%	3.70 (0.95)
Additional city parks should be developed	4.61%	11.82%	34.01%	35.59%	13.98%	3.43 (1.02)

\*N = 705, 1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 5 = *Strongly Agree*

### 6.3 Satisfaction with Current Facilities and Services

Respondents were also asked to indicate their levels of satisfaction with twelve specific facilities and public services provided by the city, from 1, ‘below average’, to 5 ‘above average’. These included, (a) Farmers’ Market, (b) Fire Protection Services, (c) Roben-Hood Airport, (d) Law Enforcement, (e) Code Enforcement, (f) Planning and Zoning, (g) Public Transit, (h) Community Library, (i) City Parks and Recreation, (j) Street Maintenance, (k) Trash Removal & Recycling Service, and (l) Water/Sewer Service.

Participants expressed the highest satisfaction with City Parks and Recreation, Fire Protection Services, and Law Enforcement, with mean scores of 3.66, 3.77, and 3.63 respectively (see Table 3). These three areas are essential to any thriving community (see National Recreation and Park Association, 2017), so it is comforting to see that the residents of Big Rapids are generally satisfied with the work being done. The lowest rating was for the Roben-Hood Airport (mean = 3.01).

Table 3. *Respondents’ Ratings of Current Facilities and Services*

	Below Average		Average		Above Average	Mean & (Standard Deviation)
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	
Farmers’ Market	4.65%	10.76%	47.09%	26.16%	11.34%	3.29 (0.96)
Fire Protection Services	0.58%	1.46%	39.16%	38.14%	20.67%	3.77 (0.81)
Roben-Hood Airport	5.38%	15.40%	57.70%	15.70%	5.83%	3.01 (0.87)
Law Enforcement	3.35%	7.13%	34.06%	34.50%	20.96%	3.63 (1.00)
Code Enforcement	4.87%	9.29%	55.60%	23.01%	7.23%	3.18 (0.88)
Planning and Zoning	3.99%	11.52%	58.35%	20.83%	5.32%	3.12 (0.83)
Public Transit	6.73%	18.30%	39.82%	26.21%	8.93%	3.12 (1.03)
Community Library	2.77%	8.45%	39.65%	33.53%	15.60%	3.51 (0.95)
City Parks and Recreation	1.17%	6.90%	34.95%	39.06%	17.91%	3.66 (0.89)
Street Maintenance	7.41%	16.42%	40.70%	29.22%	6.25%	3.10 (1.00)

Table 3 (continued)

	<b>Below Average</b>		<b>Average</b>		<b>Above Average</b>	<b>Mean &amp; (Standard Deviation)</b>
	<b>(1)</b>	<b>(2)</b>	<b>(3)</b>	<b>(4)</b>	<b>(5)</b>	
Trash Removal & Recycling Service	3.21%	8.60%	40.23%	32.51%	15.45%	3.48 (0.96)
Water/Sewer Service	2.34%	7.03%	48.02%	31.92%	10.69%	3.42 (0.86)

\*N = 705, 1 = Below Average, 5 = Above Average

#### **6.4 Indications of Facilities That Should be Funded by Taxes**

To understand their perceptions of the city’s funding of major facilities in Big Rapids, respondents were asked to indicate their attitudes toward the six major facilities that currently receive funding from the city: (a) Community Center, (b) Community Library, (c) Community Pool, (d) Recreation Authority, (e) Historic Preservation, and (f) Riverwalk.

According to the respondents’ answers (see Table 4), the Community Library and Riverwalk are the most important facilities. Most of the residents believed that both should be funded by the city as usual. Approximately 21% of respondents claimed that Historic Preservation should not be funded.

Table 4. *Respondents’ Attitudes toward Funding for Different Facilities*

	<b>Should not be Funded</b>	<b>Don’t Know</b>	<b>Should be Funded</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>
Community Center	11.16%	39.13%	49.71%	2.39	0.68
Community Library	8.56%	21.34%	70.10%	2.62	0.64
Community Pool	16.52%	28.26%	55.22%	2.39	0.75
Recreation Authority	12.95%	43.67%	43.38%	2.30	0.69
Historic Preservation	21.63%	36.57%	41.80%	2.20	0.77
Riverwalk	8.27%	20.75%	70.97%	2.63	0.63

\*N = 705, 1 = Should not be Funded, 3 = Should be Funded

#### **6.5 Attitudes Toward Future Property Development**

One question asked respondents what they would like to see on the 3.6-acre Hanchett property on North State Street that was recently acquired by the city. Of the 608 residents who answered this question, more than 36% favored making the property a green space. The next most popular opinion, which was not far behind, was making the property mixed-use with professional housing (158 respondents). One problem with this question is that almost 100 respondents declined to answer; it could be that many of them didn’t know where the lot was.

### 6.6 Involvement in Activities in the City

Respondents were also asked about their involvement in certain activities made available by the city. Those activities are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Respondents' Involvement in Activities Available in the City

	Never (1)	Occasionally (2)	Monthly (3)	Weekly (4)	Daily (5)	Mean (Standard Deviation)
Recreational walking in Big Rapids	12.76%	38.27%	14.81%	22.87%	11.29%	2.82 (1.24)
Visiting the Big Rapids Community Public Library	43.67%	31.88%	11.64%	10.92%	1.89%	1.95 (1.08)
Attending community meetings	58.98%	30.07%	6.72%	3.21%	1.02%	1.57 (0.83)
Interacting with public safety officers	34.11%	45.10%	10.10%	8.35%	2.34%	2.00 (0.99)
Interacting with city staff	37.11%	37.26%	13.25%	9.72%	2.65%	2.04 (1.06)
Dining and shopping in the downtown business district	5.55%	26.72%	34.31%	29.34%	4.09%	3.00 (0.97)

\*N = 705, 1 = Never, 5 = Daily

The activities that residents reported doing the most were recreational walking in the city and dining and shopping in the downtown business district. The activity with the least time spent on it was community meetings. Almost 59% of respondents said that they never attended community meetings.

### 7.0 Hypothesis Testing

To identify influences on customers' overall satisfaction, the following hypotheses were tested, as directed by the administrators and managers of the City of Big Rapids:

- H1: Senior residents (55+) are more satisfied with the quality of life in Big Rapids.
- H0 (null hypothesis): There is no association between residents' age and their satisfaction with their quality of life.

A cross-tabulation (crosstab) table was used to better describe the variables in H1. As Table 6 shows, 82% of senior residents (age 55+) claimed that they were 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with the quality of life in Big Rapids. By contrast, only 44.3% of the 18–24 group, 62% of the 25–39, and 75% of the 40–54 group said the

same. The probability of the chi-square test statistic (chi-square = 102.806) was also  $p = 0.000$ , less than the alpha level of significance of 0.001 (see Table 7). Therefore, the null hypothesis (H0) can be rejected, and H1 is supported by this analysis: senior residents did tend to be more satisfied with the quality of life in Big Rapids.

*Table 6. Crosstabulation: ‘Please indicate your age group’ × ‘Quality of life’*

		Quality of life					
		Very Dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Neutral	Satisfied	Very Satisfied	Total
Please indicate your age group:	18–24	5	26	88	85	10	214
	25–39	3	14	36	74	12	139
	40–54	1	6	29	79	29	144
	55+	3	8	22	95	57	185
Total		12	54	175	333	108	682

*Table 7. Chi-Square Test*

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	102.806 <sup>a</sup>	12	.000
Likelihood Ratio	105.655	12	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	76.724	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	682		

*a. 4 cells (20.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 2.45.*

- H2: Senior residents (55+) are more satisfied with the public services performance in Big Rapids.
- H0: There is no association between residents’ ages and their satisfaction level with public services performance.

As Table 8 shows, more than 80% of senior residents claimed that they were either ‘satisfied’ or ‘very satisfied’ with the performance of public services in Big Rapids. By contrast, only 42.2% of the 18–24 group, about 55% of the 25–39 group, and close to 66% of the 40–54 group said the same. The probability of the chi-square test statistic (chi-square = 89.526) was  $p = 0.000$ , less than the alpha level of significance of 0.001 (see Table 9). Therefore, H2 is supported by this analysis.

Table 8. *Crosstabulation: ‘Please indicate your age group’ × ‘Public services performance’*

		Public Services Performance					
		Very Dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Neutral	Satisfied	Very Satisfied	Total
Please indicate your age group:	18-24	7	18	98	79	11	213
	25-39	2	3	57	64	13	139
	40-54	1	6	42	72	23	144
	55+	4	12	20	105	44	185
Total		14	39	217	320	91	681

- H3: Younger residents (age 18–39) are more demanding of additional city parks in Big Rapids.
- H0: There is no association between residents’ age and their demand for additional city parks.

Table 9. *Chi-Square Test*

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	89.526 <sup>a</sup>	12	.000
Likelihood Ratio	98.141	12	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	53.378	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	681		

<sup>a</sup>. 4 cells (20.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 2.86.

As Table 10 shows, more than 55% of young residents (56.8% in ages 18–24, 55.8% in ages 25–39) ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ that more city parks should be developed. By contrast, only 36% of senior residents (age 55+) said the same. The probability of the chi-square test statistic (chi-square = 39.491) was  $p = 0.000$ , less than the alpha level of significance of 0.001 (see Table 11). Therefore, H3 is supported by this analysis.

Table 10. *Crosstabulation: 'Please indicate your age group' × 'Additional city parks should be developed'*

		Additional City Parks Should be Developed					
		Very Dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Neutral	Satisfied	Very Satisfied	Total
Please indicate your age group:	18-24	4	14	74	92	29	213
	25-39	5	13	43	53	24	138
	40-54	6	16	49	49	23	143
	55+	17	36	66	48	19	186
Total		32	79	232	242	95	680

Table 11. *Chi-Square Test*

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	39.491 <sup>a</sup>	12	.000
Likelihood Ratio	38.610	12	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	24.647	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	680		

<sup>a</sup>. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 6.49.

- H4: Satisfaction with the quality of life in Big Rapids is positively correlated to satisfaction with community features available in Big Rapids, including performance of public services (H4a), variety of available housing (H4b), condition of the streets (H4c), the downtown business area (H4d), shopping opportunities (H4e), local leadership (H4f) and public recreation and entertainment opportunities (H4g).
- H0: There is no correlation between quality of life and satisfaction with community features available in Big Rapids.

A Pearson correlation coefficient was used to measure the correspondence between quality of life in Big Rapids and satisfaction with available community features. As Table 12 shows,

- Quality of life was strongly correlated with quality of public services performance (correlation coefficient value = 0.601). Furthermore, the Sig (2-tailed) value was .000 (< .001). In this instance, H4a is generally supported because there is a strong relationship between quality of life in Big Rapids and satisfaction with public services there.

- There was a moderate, positive correlation between quality of life and variety of available housing ( $r = 0.310$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In this instance, H4b is generally accepted because the direction of the relationship is positive (i.e., quality of life and variety of available housing are positively correlated), meaning that these variables tend to increase together (i.e., greater satisfaction with the variety of available housing in town is associated with greater satisfaction with the quality of life).

Table 12. *Correlations*

		<b>Quality of Life</b>
Quality of life	Pearson Correlation	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	
	N	701
Public services performance	Pearson Correlation	.601**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	699
Variety of available housing	Pearson Correlation	.310**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	700
Condition of streets	Pearson Correlation	.220**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	701
Downtown business area	Pearson Correlation	.368**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	694
Shopping Opportunities	Pearson Correlation	.395**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	698
Local Leadership	Pearson Correlation	.461**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	696
Public Recreation/ Entertainment Opportunities	Pearson Correlation	.485**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	697

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).



- There was a low positive association between quality of life and condition of the streets ( $r = 0.220$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Therefore, the null hypothesis can be rejected, and H4c is supported by this analysis.
- There was a moderate positive association between quality of life and the downtown business area ( $r = 0.368$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Therefore, the null hypothesis can be rejected, and H4d is supported by this analysis.
- There was a positive correlation between quality of life and shopping opportunities ( $r = 0.395$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In brief, the relationship was positive (i.e., quality of life and shopping opportunities were positively correlated), meaning that these variables tend to increase together (i.e., greater satisfaction with shopping opportunities in town is associated with greater satisfaction with the quality of life in town). This result supports H4e: There is a relationship between quality of life and shopping opportunities in Big Rapids.
- The tests showed a statistically significant positive relationship between quality of life and local leadership:  $r = 0.461$ ,  $p = 0.00$ . The p-value is smaller than the significance level used (.5), so it can be concluded that there is a significant (medium) positive correlation between satisfaction with quality of life and satisfaction with local leadership, and H4f is supported.
- The results indicated a moderate but statistically significant positive relationship between quality of life and public recreation and entertainment opportunities:  $r = 0.485$ ,  $p = 0.00$ . The P-value is smaller than the significance level used (.001), so we can conclude that there is a significant (medium) positive correlation between satisfaction with quality of life and satisfaction with public recreation and entertainment opportunities in Big Rapids, and H4g is supported.
- H5: Satisfaction with the performance of public services in the city is positively correlated to involvement in various activities in the city, including recreational walking (H5a), visiting the Big Rapids Community Library (H5b), attending community meetings (H5c), interacting with public safety officers (H5d), interacting with city staff (H5e), and dining or shopping in the downtown business district (H5f).
- H0: There is no correlation between public services performance and involvement in activities available in the city.

Once again, the Pearson correlation coefficient test was used to assess the relationship between the variables in H5. As Table 13 shows, there was a low, positive correlation between the variables of public services performance and those of

- H5a: Recreational walking in Big Rapids ( $r = 0.153$ ,  $p < .001$ )
- H5b: Visiting the Big Rapids Community Library ( $r = 0.142$ ,  $p < .001$ )
- H5c: Attending community meetings ( $r = 0.204$ ,  $p < .001$ )
- H5d: Interacting with public safety officers ( $r = 0.127$ ,  $p < .005$ )
- H5e: Interacting with city staff ( $r = 0.286$ ,  $p < .001$ )
- H5f: Dining or shopping in the downtown business district ( $r = 0.176$ ,  $p < .001$ )

H5 is generally supported, as the relationship is positive (i.e., quality of life and involvement in the available activities are positively correlated), meaning that these variables tend to increase together (i.e., greater involvement in the activities available in the city is associated with greater satisfaction with the quality of life).

Table 13. *Correlations*

		<b>Public Services Performance</b>
Public services performance	Pearson Correlation	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	
	N	700
Recreational walking in Big Rapids	Pearson Correlation	.153**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	678
Visiting the Big Rapids Community Public Library	Pearson Correlation	.142**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	683
Attending community meetings	Pearson Correlation	.204**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	681
Interacting with public safety officers	Pearson Correlation	.127**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001
	N	679
Interacting with city staff	Pearson Correlation	.286**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	675
Dining or shopping in the downtown business district	Pearson Correlation	.176**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	681

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

## 8.0 Discussion

This study provides direct and indirect benefits to the city. One indirect consequence is an increased awareness among residents of the services currently offered to them by the local government. In addition, the fact that local authorities initiated the study will create a positive image of city authorities and build trust within the city and the community in the long term.

The direct benefits of the study come from meeting the research objectives: (a) to measure satisfaction with current city features, facilities, and services; (b) to measure attitudes toward future development and growth, including the public funding of development; and (c) to measure community involvement in local activities. The survey revealed a number of facts that the city can take into account. The first significant finding was that residents are indeed satisfied with the quality of life in Big Rapids. Most participants who answered this question said they were satisfied or very satisfied. Maintaining this satisfaction will require the city to keep public services performance and local leadership at good levels. Satisfaction can also be raised by improving the quality of the streets and sidewalks and of the parks and recreational areas.

The study also revealed that residents are content overall with the services provided by the City of Big Rapids. However, senior residents seemed to be more satisfied with the quality of life (see Table 6) and public services (see Table 8). In addition, younger residents seemed to more strongly want new city parks and recreational options (see Table 10). These results show how customers in different stages of the life cycle tend to have different needs and expectations (Mothersbaugh & Hawkins, 2016) and agrees with findings by Sirgy et al. (2008) that residents' age was significantly and positively associated with their overall satisfaction with local government.

This analysis also indicated that satisfaction with the quality of life in the city was significantly influenced by several predictors—community features—in H4, including (a) public services performance, (b) variety of available housing, (c) condition of the streets, (d) the downtown business area, (e) shopping opportunities, (f) local leadership, and (g) public recreation and entertainment opportunities (see Table 12). This result agrees with a study carried out in the low-cost public housing area by Mohit et al. (2010).

With respect to respondents' involvement in local activities, the results (see Table 13) supported H5: residents who are more involved in local activities tend to be more satisfied with the quality of life in Big Rapids. These results add credibility to the findings by Scott and Vitartas (2008) that residents who have a strong attachment to the LGA's activities tend to rate the council's performance as more satisfactory. In simple terms, maintaining quality-of-life satisfaction among residents requires continuously encouraging residents to take part in activities offered by the city.

Two big areas of concern are shopping and satisfaction with local leadership. Shopping was the service that participants were the least satisfied with overall, though they still engaged in it frequently. As for local leadership, only about 39% of respondents were 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied', and close to 50% of respondents chose 'neutral' as their answer (see Table 1). This could be a major concern for city administrators, as residents' satisfaction with the quality of life in Big Rapids is positively correlated to their satisfaction with local leadership (see Table 12).

As mentioned in the literature review, many residents have indicated that a smaller LGA would offer better leadership and be more customer focused and responsive to their needs (see Cripps et al., 2002). This is one approach for the City of Big Rapids to take into consideration in order to achieve a high level of satisfaction with local leadership.

## 9.0 Limitations, Future Research, and Conclusion

This study was limited by both the data collection time and the measures used. However, these limitations do point out promising directions for future research.

The survey was conducted over a relatively short period—four weeks—so the sample size was restricted. If there had been more time for data collection, more respondents might have completed the survey.

The quantitative method used in this research might be a limitation as well. Surveys are good tools for building a general understanding of certain topics, but they cannot go into further detail because every respondent completes the same questions. Diving deeper into the reasoning behind people’s responses would require qualitative approaches, such as focus groups or in-depth interviews.

The researchers and the administrators of the city should conduct this survey annually or biannually to familiarize residents with all the services offered by the city. This will leave residents more informed about the master plan and any new services offered. As this was just the first stage, the investigation was limited to a single LGA. It would be interesting to build on this by undertaking parallel studies at other local government agencies, both inside and outside the U.S., to compare the results, or in the private sector to identify differences in approach.

Local government sectors in the U.S. and overseas can learn several things from these findings. This research project has important policy implications for the City of Big Rapids and other LGAs because data on residents’ perceptions and satisfaction are increasingly being used to motivate service reforms, budget allocations, and management accountability. Overall, the survey proved to be a valuable foundation for future thinking about customers and about sustaining and improving performance. Therefore, it should be treated as a ‘best practice’ model for other local government agencies trying to build better relationships with their customers.

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