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## Study: Fox Cities at 'tipping point'

**Post-Crescent, The (Appleton, WI)** - June 9, 2006

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There is much to like about the Fox Cities, from their arts opportunities and quality education to their strong work ethic, safe surroundings, pull-together attitude and plentiful water resources.

Yet the Fox Cities may be nearing what researcher Lora Warner calls a "tipping point" as certain trends converge, particularly the shifting job market, job training and employability, and the ripple effect that could have on income and quality of life.

Warner, who spoke today at a breakfast for about 200 community leaders, highlighted good news and bad news in the newest **LIFE Study** conducted by United Way Fox Cities, Community Foundation for the Fox Valley Region, the Fox Cities Chamber of Commerce & Industry and the Fox Cities Economic Development Partnership.

The report was posted Thursday on the Web site [www.foxcitieslifestudy.org](http://www.foxcitieslifestudy.org).

Based on what residents and community leaders revealed last fall in surveys and focus groups, "The Fox Cities is at a point where the direction it is heading in is still good, but this is a very key period of time," said Warner, president of Planning & Evaluation Associates Inc., Green Bay, and **LIFE Study** project manager. "We could go either way."

The study's "snapshot" of local living conditions and trends shows that satisfaction with the quality of life is high, with 40 percent of residents saying it "excels" as a place to live, compared with 21 percent in 2000-01. Some 68 percent of community leaders and 58 percent of residents said the Fox Cities is headed in the right direction.

The challenges, according to the survey respondents, is dealing with a changing economy, thinning government services, greater needs brought on by poverty, aging and mental illness, and environmental concerns.

Warner said 14 areas that need improvement are cited, including the lack of affordable housing and quality child care, health care costs and services and child care to more transportation alternatives to automobiles, but the common thread is economics.

"Most issues are similar to what was found in 2001, but the need for economic development and higher paying jobs is probably the new one."

That theme surfaced in surveys, focus groups and what she and staff found in trends in the data and statistics, she said, and "came up really strong" in community leaders' responses.

Decline in jobs with health benefits, the shift from higher paying manufacturing to lower paying service jobs, the need for more higher wage jobs to prevent a slide in per capita income and more adult training -- all have become a concern as the local economy, although still strong, weathered layoffs in recent years.

It is not just workers laid off as the result of corporate downsizing that need further training, Warner noted.

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"There is concern about the employability of those not too well equipped to have more than a minimum-wage job," she said. "What can we do to improve their wage earning ability, decision making, parenting and other life skills?"

One of the attendees at the breakfast at Bridgewood Resort and Conference center, Debra Cronmiller, executive director of the Emergency Shelter of the Fox Valley in Appleton, said a priority for her is to improve access to community resources for people who are poor.

"We still have too many people in that extremely poor category who do not have insurance and do not understand how to access free health care in this community," Cronmiller said. "Until you are well, you really won't perform to the greatest extent that you can."

One issue that did not make the top 14, but raised a red flag for Warner is the achievement gap between poor fourth-graders and their peers on reading and math scores.

"If I had to pick one thing to try to do something about as a long-term factor, this is it," Warner said. "If you help poorer kids succeed in school you are going to solve a lot of these other problems."

Warner said several issues require long-term investments, rather than quick fixes, but she has high hopes the community will do a lot with the report because of its history of working together effectively.

"I'm very sure this won't sit on the shelf," she said. "I hope people will be supportive of initiatives that get started because of this."

Gayle Hardt, United Way community development director and LIFE steering committee member, said the last study generated several initiatives, from the Fox Cities Rotary Multicultural Center to the New North initiative promoting economic development. "We were very gratified the community took it and ran with it," Hardt said. "This community is so generous and so concerned about improving quality of life."

The Rev. Roger Bertschausen, of Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, planned to attend the breakfast with Common Ground, a group he described as "bringing people together from across the religious spectrum to work on ways to improve the quality of life and health of our community."

Common Ground is intent on finding a local issue to "learn about and then find ways to mobilize the considerable resources of the faith community to bring to bear on and that issue and help solve it," he said. "We're looking for some great ideas, inspiration and focus."

#### 2001 LIFE study initiatives

The last study led to the following efforts by Fox Cities' groups:

- \* Local health care providers, health departments and YMCA-Fox Cities began "Walk to Win" in 2002 to promote walking.
- \* Harmony Cafe opened as a 'caf  without walls" in 2003 to offer arts, diversity and leadership programming.
- \* Tri-County Community Dental Clinic opened in 2003, staffed with volunteer professionals to serve needy.
- \* Fox Cities Rotary Multicultural Center opened in 2004 to connect people of different backgrounds.
- \* Housing Partnership completed Peter Street Apartment project in 2004, providing subsidized housing for low-income families and transitional housing. Appleton Wire Works building is being converted to low-to-moderate price housing and Harbor House Domestic Abuse Program now has transitional housing.
- \* Fox Cities Community Health Center transitioned from free clinic to health center in 2005, offering medical, dental and mental health services to low-income people who are uninsured or underinsured.
- \* New North initiative, which promotes economic development in an 18-county area of

Northeastern Wisconsin, was announced in 2006.

\* Venture Center, a collaborative effort of Fox Valley Technical College and the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh, opened this year to support entrepreneurs and enterprise development.

\* Aging & Disability Resource Center is being developed to assist older adults in Outagamie, Calumet and Waupaca counties.

Fox Cities strengths

\* Plenty of Leisure opportunities in the arts, use of libraries, shopping, restaurants and outdoor recreation

\* Consistently high level of public safety

\* Demonstrated quality of higher education and K-12 institutions

\* Clean air, plentiful water, good access to nature preserves

\* Good track record of collaboration among area organizations

\* Community leaders seen as proactive in confronting challenges

\* Health care recognized for array and quality of services

\* Local government and nonprofits viewed as effective and collaborative

\* Area recognized as safe and family and child-friendly

\* For many residents, cost of living compares favorably to other parts of U.S.

2006 Fox Cities **LIFE study**

**LIFE study** snapshot

\* In April 2006, 80 percent of Outagamie, Winnebago and Calumet county board elections were uncontested

\* In 2004 the manufacturing sector in the Appleton area was a larger percentage of the work force (23 percent) than in Wisconsin (19 percent) or the United States (13 percent). This sector's share of the local economy has declined since 2001.

\* The area's minority population has increased between 2001 and 2004, with the number of Hispanics growing by 26 percent and African Americans by 21 percent.

\* In 2004-05, Appleton, Menasha and Neenah low-income fourth-graders scored much lower on both reading and math than their middle and high income peers.

\* The proportion of public school students in the Fox Cities who are eligible for free and reduced lunch rose from 11 percent to 18.7 percent between 2000-01 and 2004-05.

14 key 'opportunities' for Fox Cities

\* Make leadership more inclusive of minorities, young people and women

\* Create economic development and higher paying jobs as jobs shift from manufacturing to services with lower earnings

\* Create transportation alternatives for people with lower incomes, people with disabilities, the elderly, youth and others without cars

\* Increase access to treatment for mental illness and addiction, especially for those with low incomes

\* Increase access to health care as jobs with insurance benefits decline and out-of-pocket costs grow

\* Increase support, via adult training and development, for employment, literacy, parenting and financial skills

- \* Create a regional vision and collaboration by public agencies to create efficiencies and cost savings
- \* Develop a long-term focus on such issues as health promotion, education, child care, aging, support for disabilities and mental illness and disaster preparedness
- \* Help increasing number of people with lower to middle incomes unable to afford basics
- \* Help elderly and growing number of adults and children with disabilities as services are cut back
- \* Develop more opportunities for "average" youth ages 16-21 in the arts and physical activities
- \* Increase quality childcare for low- to middle-income families, better quality services and more pre-school and early childhood opportunities
- \* Strengthen environmental preservation to deal with urban sprawl and fragmented ecosystems, and their impact on drinking water quality, transportation, safety, recreation and health
- \* Develop bigger supply of affordable housing to keep pace with demand as more people seek financial help for rent and utilities.

2006 Fox Cities **LIFE study**

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