

THE NCSTM
The National Citizen SurveyTM

Ashland, VA

Community Livability Report

2017



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Contents

About..... 1

Quality of Life in Ashland..... 2

Community Characteristics 3

Governance 5

Participation 7

Special Topics..... 9

Conclusions 12



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The NCS™ is presented by NRC in collaboration with ICMA.

NRC is a charter member of the AAPOR Transparency Initiative, providing clear disclosure of our sound and ethical survey research practices.

About

The National Citizen Survey™ (The NCS) report is about the “livability” of Ashland. The phrase “livable community” is used here to evoke a place that is not simply habitable, but that is desirable. It is not only where people do live, but where they want to live.

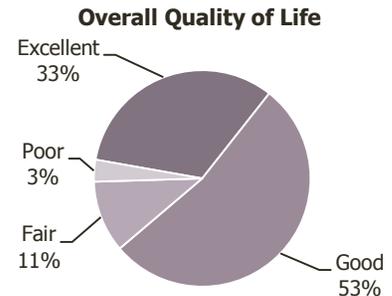
Great communities are partnerships of the government, private sector, community-based organizations and residents, all geographically connected. The NCS captures residents’ opinions within the three pillars of a community (Community Characteristics, Governance and Participation) across eight central facets of community (Safety, Mobility, Natural Environment, Built Environment, Economy, Recreation and Wellness, Education and Enrichment and Community Engagement).

The Community Livability Report provides the opinions of a representative sample of 417 residents of the Town of Ashland. The margin of error around any reported percentage is 5% for all respondents. The full description of methods used to garner these opinions can be found in the *Technical Appendices* provided under separate cover.



Quality of Life in Ashland

A majority of residents rated the quality of life in Ashland as excellent or good. This was similar to ratings in comparison communities (see Appendix B of the *Technical Appendices* provided under separate cover).



Shown below are the eight facets of community. The color of each community facet summarizes how residents rated it across the three sections of the survey that represent the pillars of a community – Community Characteristics, Governance and Participation. When most ratings across the three pillars were higher than the benchmark, the color for that facet is the darkest shade; when most ratings were lower than the benchmark, the color is the lightest shade. A mix of ratings (higher and lower than the benchmark) results in a color between the extremes.

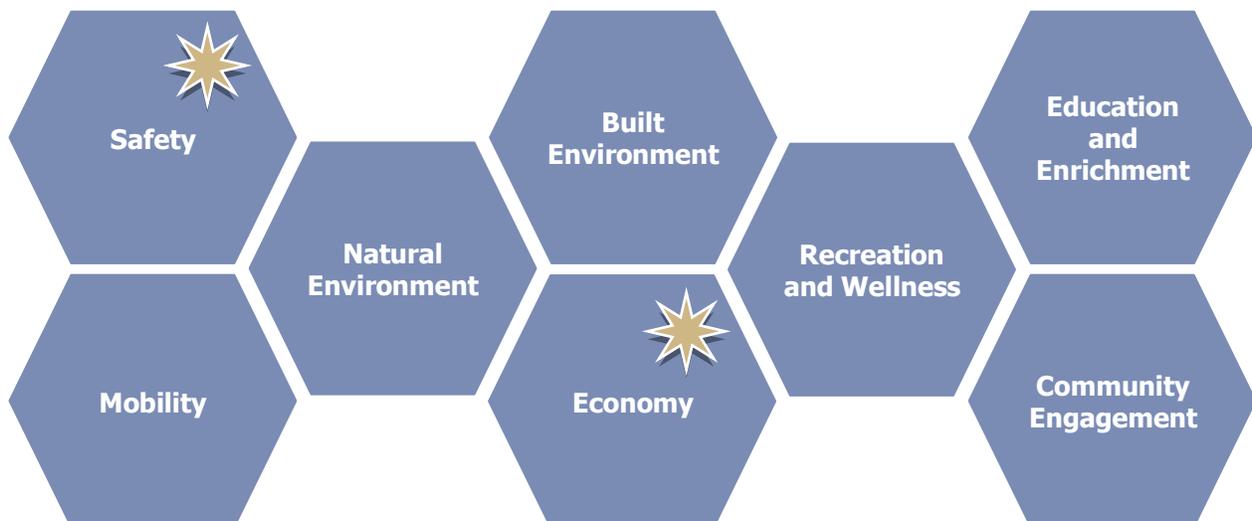
In addition to a summary of ratings, the image below includes one or more stars to indicate which community facets were the most important focus areas for the community. Residents identified Safety and Economy as priorities for the Ashland community in the coming two years. Ratings for all eight facets were positive and similar to other communities. Linking quality to importance offers community members and leaders a view into the characteristics of the community that matter most and that seem to be working best.

Details that support these findings are contained in the remainder of this Livability Report, starting with the ratings for Community Characteristics, Governance and Participation and ending with results for Ashland's unique questions.

Legend

- Higher than national benchmark
- Similar to national benchmark
- Lower than national benchmark

★ Most important



Community Characteristics

What makes a community livable, attractive and a place where people want to be?

Overall quality of community life represents the natural ambience, services and amenities that make for an attractive community. How residents rate their overall quality of life is an indicator of the overall health of a community. In the case of Ashland, 93% rated the Town as an excellent or good place to live. Respondents' ratings of Ashland as a place to live were similar to ratings in other communities across the nation.

In addition to rating the Town as a place to live, respondents rated several aspects of community quality including Ashland as a place to raise children and to retire, their neighborhood as a place to live, the overall image or reputation of Ashland and its overall appearance. At least three-quarters of respondents rated each aspect positively and all ratings were similar to the national benchmarks.

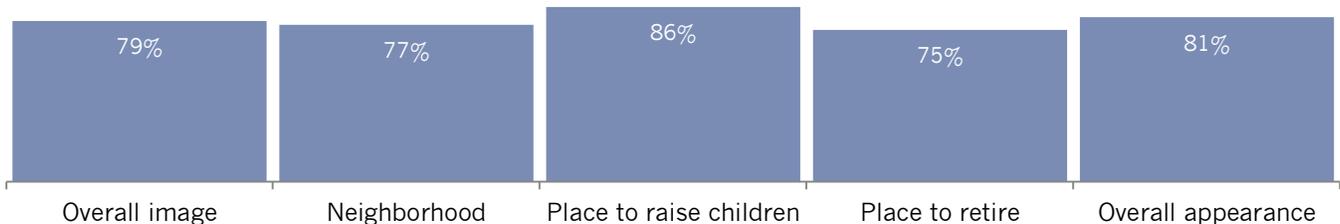
Delving deeper into Community Characteristics, survey respondents rated over 40 features of the community within the eight facets of Community Livability. About 8 in 10 or more residents rated each aspect of Safety and Natural Environment positively and all were similar to the national comparisons. Residents rated two aspects of Recreation and Wellness lower than the national comparisons (preventive health services and recreational opportunities); further, compared to 2014, three aspects saw a decrease in ratings (fitness opportunities, recreational opportunities and food) while two saw an increase (health care and mental health care; see *Trends over Time* provided under separate cover for more detail). Ratings within Mobility were the strongest overall, with residents awarding positive ratings to overall ease of travel, ease of walking and travel by bicycle, all above the benchmark, though just one-quarter praised the ease of travel by public transportation (yielding a rating lower than the benchmark and lower than the rating given in 2014).



Percent rating positively (e.g., excellent/good)

Comparison to national benchmark

■ Higher ■ Similar ■ Lower



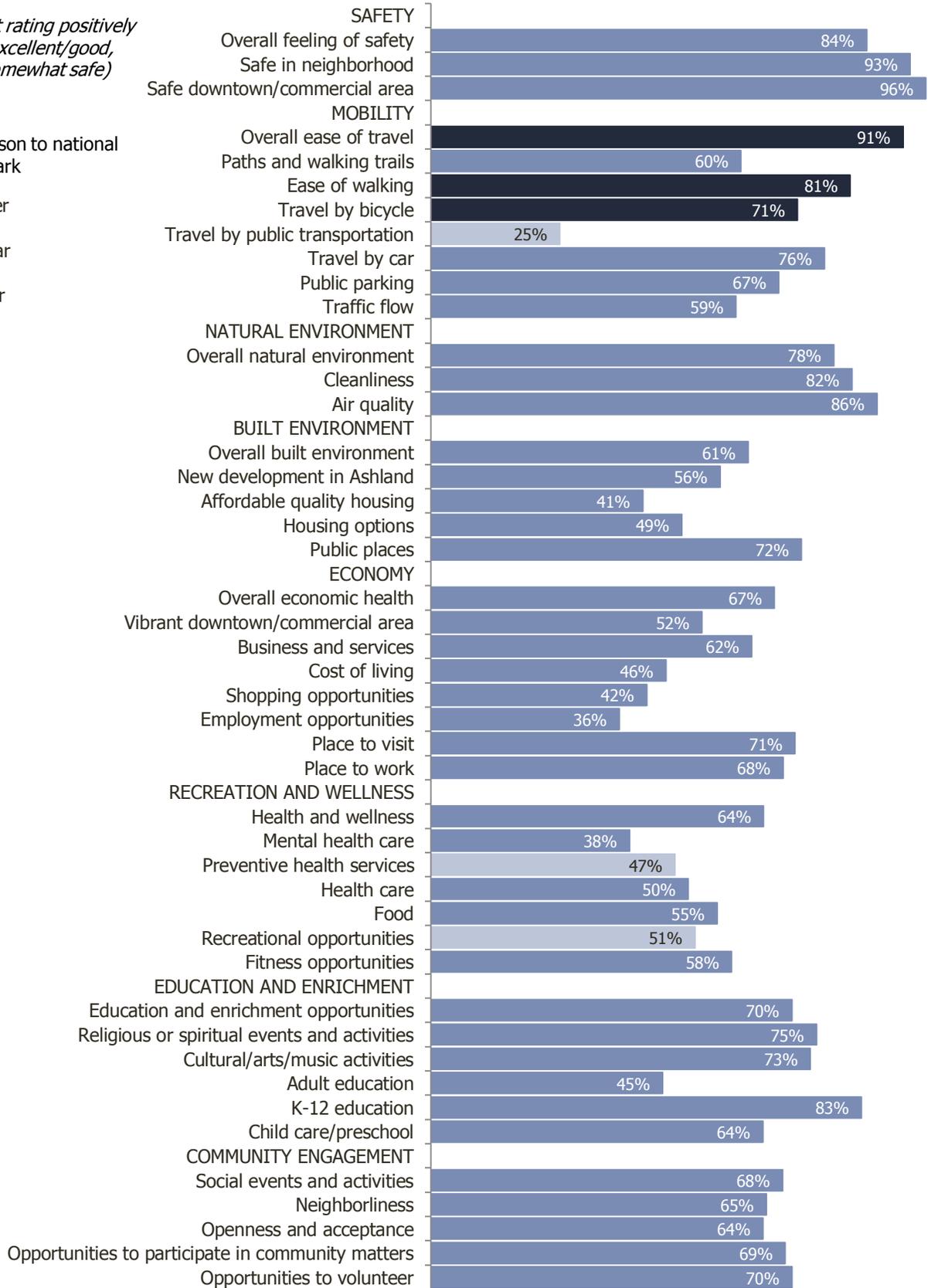
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Figure 1: Aspects of Community Characteristics

*Percent rating positively
(e.g., excellent/good,
very/somewhat safe)*

Comparison to national
benchmark

- Higher
- Similar
- Lower



Governance

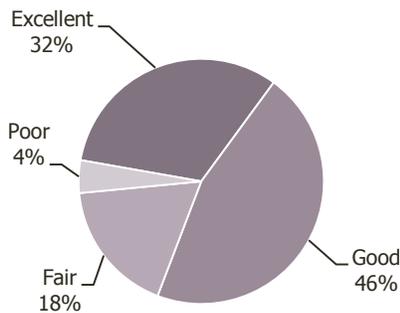
How well does the government of Ashland meet the needs and expectations of its residents?

The overall quality of the services provided by Ashland as well as the manner in which these services are provided is a key component of how residents rate their quality of life. About 78% gave excellent or good ratings to the overall quality of Town services, while about 38% gave excellent or good ratings to the overall quality of services provided by the Federal Government. Both ratings were similar to ratings in comparison communities across the country.

Survey respondents also rated various aspects of Ashland’s leadership and governance. Between 61% and 81% of respondents rated each aspect positively and all ratings were similar to the national benchmarks. When compared to 2014, ratings for customer service provided by Town employees improved in 2017.

Respondents evaluated over 20 individual services and amenities available in Ashland. Most Governance ratings tended to be similar to the national comparisons, though residents praised four aspects within Mobility (street repair, street cleaning, sidewalk maintenance and traffic signal timing) as being higher than the average, as well as one Safety service (crime prevention). Residents were pleased with Safety services and gave positive ratings ranging from 67% for emergency preparedness to 85% for police services and crime prevention. Within Natural Environment, at least 8 in 10 residents offered positive evaluations of garbage collection, recycling and yard waste pickup while about 6 in 10 offered positive evaluations of natural areas preservation and open space.

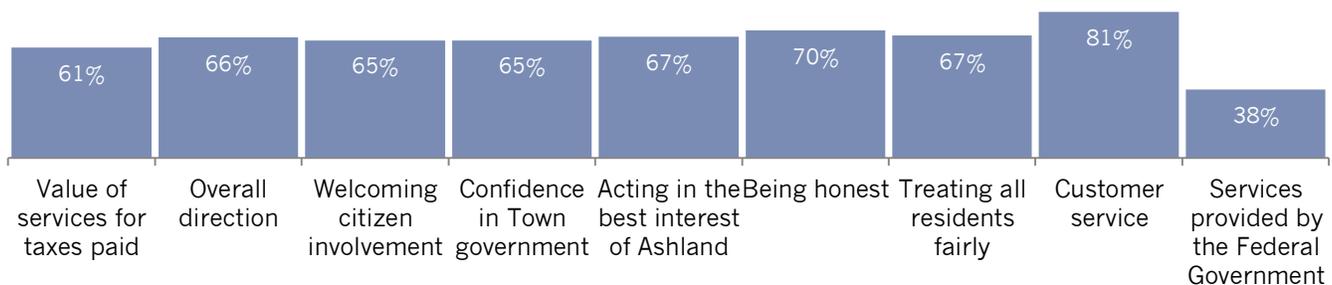
Overall Quality of Town Services



Percent rating positively (e.g., excellent/good)

Comparison to national benchmark

■ Higher ■ Similar ■ Lower



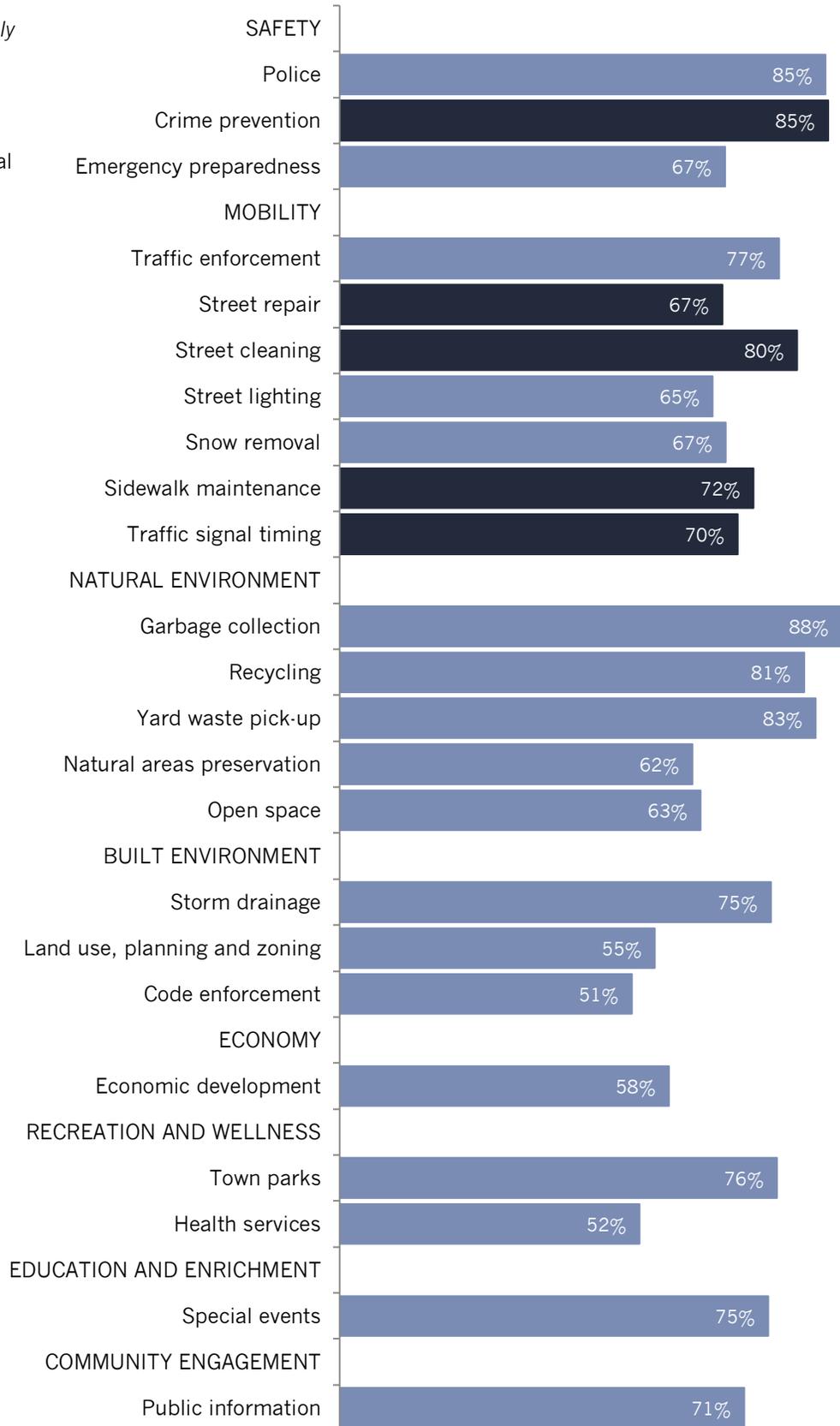
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Figure 2: Aspects of Governance

Percent rating positively
(e.g., excellent/good)

Comparison to national
benchmark

- Higher
- Similar
- Lower

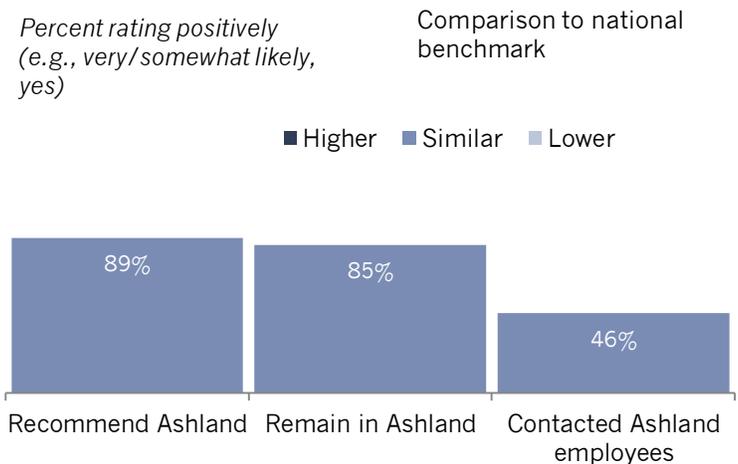
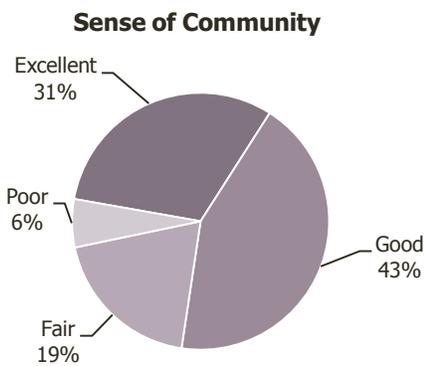


Participation

Are the residents of Ashland connected to the community and each other?

An engaged community harnesses its most valuable resource, its residents. The connections and trust among residents, government, businesses and other organizations help to create a sense of community, a shared sense of membership, belonging and history. About three-quarters of respondents gave high marks to the sense of community in Ashland. About 9 in 10 respondents were likely to recommend living in Ashland and 85% planned to remain in Ashland. Close to half reported that they had contacted a Town employee in the last 12 months.

The survey included over 30 activities and behaviors for which respondents indicated how often they participated in or performed each, if at all. Compared to residents across the country rates of Participation in Ashland were largely similar; however, residents in Ashland reported higher levels of walking or biking instead of driving and lower levels of recycling at home. Within Recreation and Wellness, about 8 in 10 residents indicated visiting a Town park, eating five portions of fruit or vegetables a day and participating in moderate or vigorous physical activity while 6 in 10 felt they were in very good or excellent health. Community Engagement ratings all were similar to the benchmark; one-third or fewer residents participated in five of the listed activities (volunteering, attending and watching local public meetings, etc.) and 8 in 10 or more participated in four listed activities (voting in local elections, doing favors for neighbors, etc.).



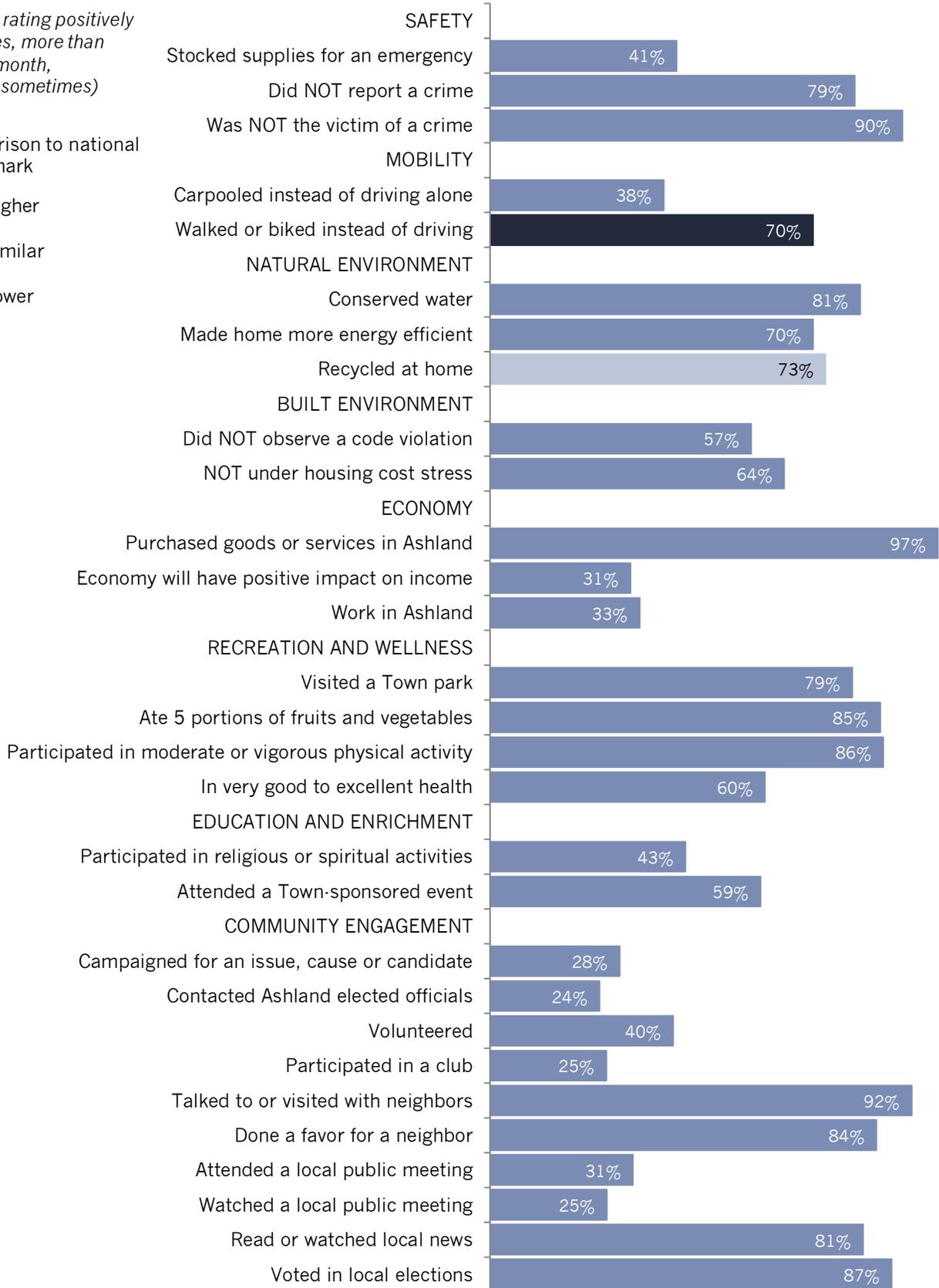
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Figure 3: Aspects of Participation

Percent rating positively
(e.g., yes, more than
once a month,
always/sometimes)

Comparison to national
benchmark

- Higher
- Similar
- Lower

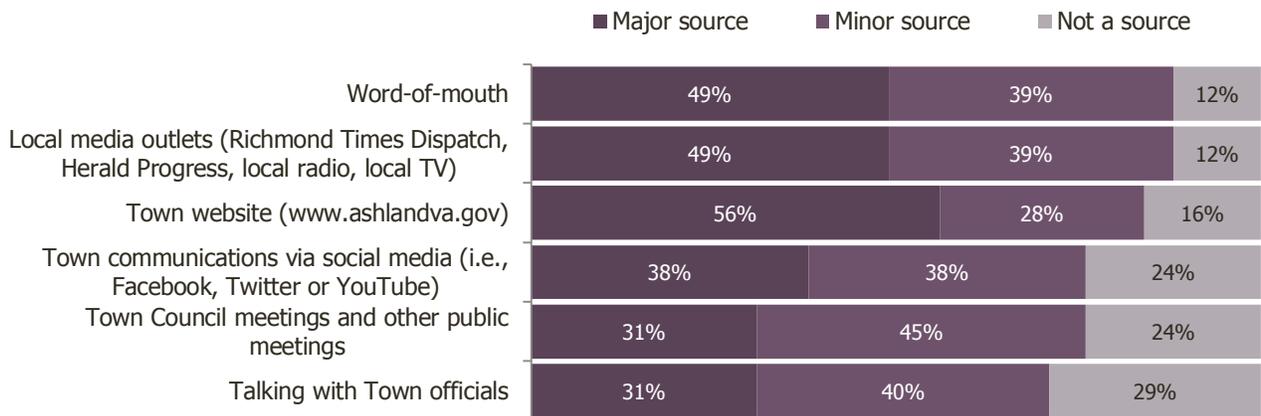


Special Topics

The Town of Ashland included three questions of special interest on The NCS. The first question aimed to understand which information sources residents rely on to obtain information about the Town government and its activities, events and services. While more residents indicated the Town website was a major source (56% of respondents), residents were more likely to use word-of-mouth and local media outlets as a major or minor source (88% major or minor source for each). At the bottom of the list was talking with Town officials with 71% of residents indicating this as a major or minor source of information for them.

Figure 4: Information Sources

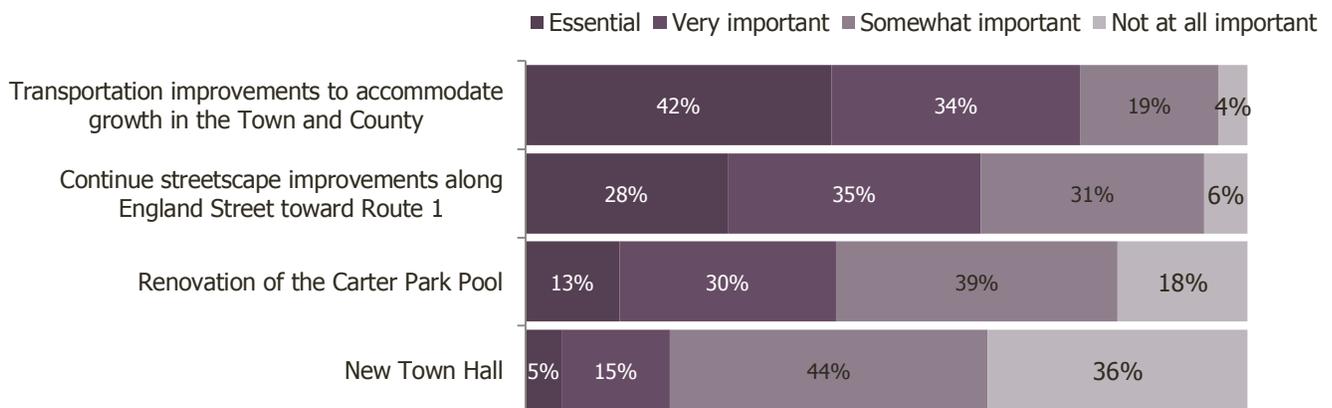
Please indicate how much of a source, if at all, you consider each of the following to be for obtaining information about the Town government and its activities, events and services:



When asked to assess the importance of various Town projects and issues for the Town to address over the next five years, clear focus areas emerged for residents. About three-quarters of residents felt that among the four listed projects/issues, transportation improvements to accommodate growth in the Town and County were essential or very important. Next in importance was continuing streetscape improvements along England Street toward Route 1 followed by renovation of the Carter Park Pool. At the bottom of the list was a new Town Hall with one-third of residents indicating this as not at all important.

Figure 5: Importance of Various Town Projects

Please indicate how important, if at all, each of the following projects and issues will be for the Town to address over the next five years:

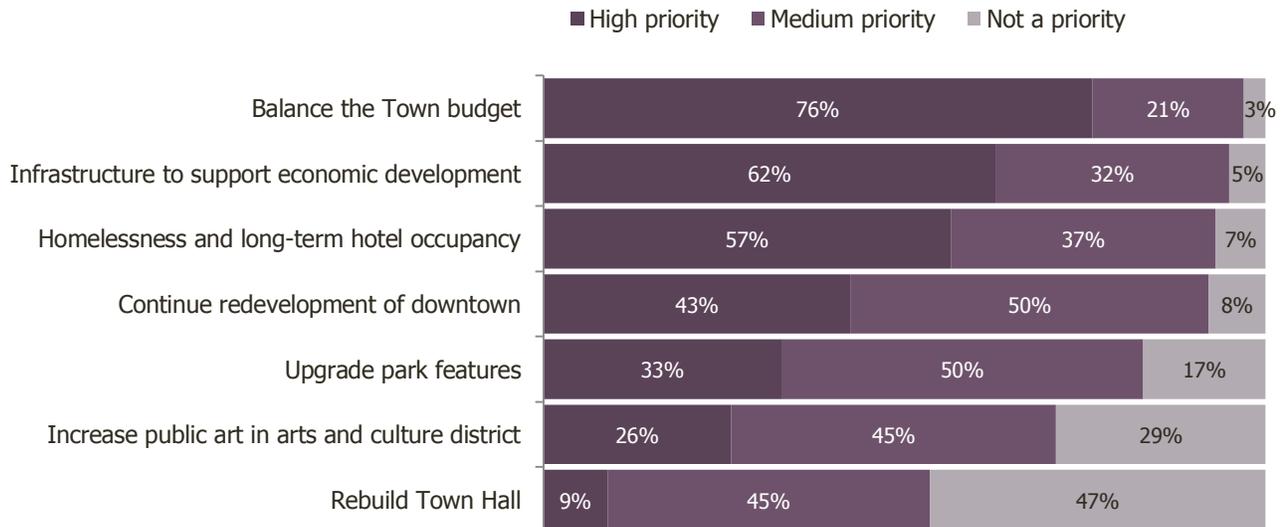


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Residents were given the opportunity to weigh priorities for the Town in the next three years in the final special interest question on the 2017 survey. Balancing the Town budget topped the list followed closely by infrastructure to support economic development, homelessness and long-term hotel occupancy and continuing redevelopment of downtown; each of these priorities was rated as a high or medium priority by at least 93% of residents. Rebuilding Town Hall was the lowest priority, echoing residents' importance ratings from the previous question.

Figure 6: Town Priorities

How much of a priority, if any, should it be for the Town to address each of the following in the next three years?



Conclusions

Residents enjoy a high quality of life and feel safe.

A majority of residents feel their overall quality of life as excellent or good and would be likely to remain in Ashland for the next five years. Additionally, about 9 in 10 residents would be likely to recommend the community to others. About 9 in 10 residents rated Ashland as an excellent or good place to live and at least three-quarters of respondents rated Ashland as a place to raise children and to retire, their neighborhood as a place to live, the overall image or reputation of Ashland and its overall appearance positively; all ratings that were similar to the national benchmarks.

Survey participants not only prioritized the facet of Safety for Ashland to focus on in the coming years, but also rated aspects of this facet positively and similar to the national averages. Residents feel safe in general, as well as in their neighborhood and in downtown/commercial areas. Safety service ratings were strong and generally similar to the national averages (although crime prevention was rated higher) and about 8 in 10 residents indicated they had not reported a crime and 9 in 10 had not been the victim of a crime.

Mobility shines and residents prioritize transportation-related improvements in the Town.

About 9 in 10 residents awarded positive ratings to overall ease of travel in the town (yielding a rating higher than the benchmark); other Community Characteristics that were rated higher than the benchmark include ease of walking and ease of travel by bicycle (and Ashland residents reported higher levels of walking or biking instead of driving compared to residents in other communities across the nation). Ease of travel by public transportation garnered below-average ratings from residents (which also was lower than the rating given in 2014). When considering service delivery, four Mobility services were rated higher than the average (street repair, street cleaning, sidewalk maintenance and traffic signal timing).

Among potential Town projects and issues for the Town to address over the next five years, about three-quarters of residents felt that, among the four listed projects/issues, transportation improvements to accommodate growth in the Town and County were essential or very important.

Residents are healthy and may want more recreational opportunities.

Recreation and Wellness dimensions were generally average, with two below the national comparisons (preventative health service and recreational opportunities). When compared to 2014, two aspects increased in 2017 (health care and mental health care) and three decreased (fitness opportunities, recreation opportunities and availability of affordable quality food). Ratings of Town parks and Town parks health services were similar to the national average. Respondents reported using Town parks, eating five portions of fruit or vegetables a day, participating in moderate or vigorous physical activity and being in very good or excellent health at rates similar to the national benchmark.