

Memo To: Westminster Master Plan Committee
From: Stephen Wallace, Town Planner
Date: April 10, 2012
Subject: Citizen Survey Results

The Details:

- Twenty-one questions covering such topics as land use, zoning, housing, economic development, open space, recreation, and municipal services.
- Sent to every household in Westminster (approximately 2,630 households)
- There were 1,222 responses received for a total response rate of 46.5%.

Question #1: What do you like about living in Westminster? The top three responses were:

- Small town character (654 #1 votes)
- Low crime rate (471 #1 votes)
- Access to highways (380 #1 votes)

Not far behind were....

- Schools (318)
- Open spaces (291)

The results for Question #1 indicate a clear preference for a quiet, rural, crime-free community, where open space is valued.

Question #2: What do you find undesirable about living in Westminster? The top two responses were:

- High taxes (642 #1 votes)
- Lack of retail shopping opportunities (288 #1 votes)
- Excessive traffic (221 #1 votes)

Not far behind was lack of employment opportunities (196 #1 votes)

It should come as no surprise that high taxes ranked number one as the most undesirable thing about living in Westminster. That a majority of respondents (52.5%) listed this as their number one dislike should be cause for concern. I've reviewed other Master Plan citizen surveys I've been involved with and none of them listed the Town's high tax rate as the number one most undesirable thing about living in their community.

Question #3: What buildings and/or sites in Westminster do you believe are worthy of historic preservation efforts (either through the Massachusetts Historical Commission or the National Register of Historic Places)?

The top five responses were: the Cracker Factory, Old Town Hall, Upton Building, Academy Hill and Library.

Question #4: Would you support zoning for a traditional New England village in the Town Center?

- Yes: 605
- No: 178
- Not Sure: 380

The results for Question #4 indicate a moderately strong desire for New England village zoning in the Town Center, with close to half of the respondents (49.5%) responding in favor. For the large number of respondents that were “not sure”, perhaps more explanation of what would be involved is in order. This will be our charge once we get to the Land Use chapter.

Question #5: To preserve the Town’s rural character, would you be in favor any of the following? (You can check more than one.)

- protect open space 784
- design guidelines 683
- scenic roads designations 359
- create historical districts 331

The results for Question #5 indicate that a majority of respondents favor open space protection (64.1%) and design guidelines for Town Center (55.9%). It is interesting to note that there was not as much support for scenic road designations or creating historic districts.

Question #6: What types of recreation opportunities would you like to see more of in Westminster?

- Bike trails 449
- Hike trails 344
- Ice skating 269
- Performing arts 258
- Playgrounds 207

Question #7: What types of housing do you think Westminster needs more of?

- Elderly housing 433
- Assisted living 326
- Single family 287
- In-law apartments 258

While there was not the support for housing that we found for character preservation techniques, there does seem to be a good deal of support for housing typically associated with seniors: elderly housing, assisted living facilities and in-law apartments.

Question #8: Do you favor zoning changes that would allow for new construction/conversion of existing buildings, in order to provide housing for low/moderate income households?

- Yes 259
- No 488
- Not Sure 396

The results for Question #9 indicate that there is not a lot of support for building new housing or converting old homes for low/moderate income households. However, the fact that so many respondents were “not sure” leads me to believe that quite a few respondents did not understand the question, or needed more information.

Question #9: Would you be in favor of expanding the municipal sewer & water systems for the following uses?

- Pollution abatement 523
- Residential development 464
- Commercial development 332
- Industrial development 261

Question #9 indicates a preference for expanding the municipal water & sewer systems for the purposes of abating pollution and residential development.

Question #10: How satisfied are you with the Town’s access to internet services?

- Very satisfied 324
- Somewhat satisfied 561
- Not satisfied 183

Question #11: How satisfied are you with the Town’s cell phone coverage?

- Very satisfied 283
- Somewhat satisfied 570
- Not satisfied 281

While the majority of residents are very satisfied to somewhat satisfied with the Town’s internet access and cellphone coverage, there are significant numbers of people that are not satisfied.

Question #12: What types of renewable energy would you like to see the Town support?

- Solar 804
- Wind 803
- Geothermal 387
- None 98

Clearly a majority of respondents are in favor of solar power and wind power (65.8%) as renewable energy sources.

Question #13: Residentially-based businesses are currently allowed as of right throughout Westminster. Do you have any objections to how in-home businesses are regulated?

- No 590
- Not sure 376
- Yes 118

Almost a majority of respondents do not have a problem with how the Town currently regulates home-based businesses, but the large number of “not sure” responses leads me to believe that quite a few respondents did not understand the question or needed more information.

Question #14: What do you see as the benefit(s) of encouraging business/industrial development in Westminster?

- More tax dollars to ease residential tax burden 940
- More in-town jobs 723
- More tax revenues to help maintain current services 593
- More tax revenues to help improve services 527
- More retail stores 369
- More services 320

The fact that 77% of the respondents see easing of the residential tax burden as the number one benefit of encouraging economic development is another indication that taxes are taking their toll on local residents.

Question #15: What do you see as the disadvantage(s) of encouraging economic development?

- More automobile traffic 676
- More truck traffic 615
- Changing town character 564
- Loss of open space 509
- Damage to the environment 417
- Disruption of neighborhoods 408

Question #16:

Preferred land uses for the Town Center:

- Restaurants 451
- Small-scale retail 358
- Services 331
- Professional offices 315

Preferred land uses for Simplex Drive:

- Research & development 419
- Light manufacturing 397
- Biotechnology 372
- Office parks 371
- Warehouse & storage 343

Preferred land uses for the Westminster Business Park:

- Light manufacturing 404
- Research & development 384
- Warehouse & storage 366
- Biotechnology 338
- Office parks 333

Preferred land uses for Route 140 Commercial District:

- Office parks 258
- Light manufacturing 251
- Warehouse & storage 245
- Hardware stores 233
- Research & development 231
- Professional offices 217
- Biotechnology 213
- Restaurants 210

Preferred land uses for Village Inn Road Commercial District:

- Restaurants 348
- Professional offices 313
- Small-scale retail 243
- Hardware stores 211

I'm relieved to see that the respondents want to keep industrial uses in the industrial districts and commercial uses in the commercial districts. The uses preferred for the Town Center are consistent with those of a typical New England village.

Question #17: Rate the services.

Westminster's municipal services ranked by level of satisfaction:

- Fire Department – rated excellent or good by: 97%
- Police Department – rated excellent or good by: 96%
- Schools – rated excellent or good by: 91%
- Library – rated excellent or good by: 90%
- Transfer Station – rated excellent or good by: 86%
- Board of Health – rated excellent or good by: 84%
- Highway Department – rated excellent or good by: 78%
- Conservation – rated excellent or good by: 77%
- Water Department – rated excellent or good by: 76%
- Council on Aging – rated excellent or good by: 76%
- Recreation – rated excellent or good by: 76%
- Administration – rated excellent or good by: 76%
- Building/Inspection – rated excellent or good by: 74%
- Sewer Department – rated excellent or good by: 68%
- Planning Board – rated excellent or good by: 67%

With a few exceptions, the responses here are very typical of what is usually seen from other citizen surveys: fire/police/emergency always rate very high (usually above 90% good/excellent), and planning/building/conservation (boards that occasionally have to say “no”) usually score between 65% and 75% good/excellent. However, the fact that the Planning Board received the lowest satisfaction score should provide the Board with a bit of humility as it plans for the Town's future.

For the people that took the time to answer the question on additional tax dollars for our municipal services (more, less or the same), the vast majority of respondents were in favor of less tax dollars for all services, another indication that the Town's high tax rate has become burdensome to residents.

Question #18: In general, how satisfied are you with how easily you can access Town services and offices?

Approximately 91% of survey respondents said they were satisfied with how easily they can access Town services and offices.

Question #19: Have you visited the Town's NEW website?

This question received a very interesting response. Of the paper surveys returned, only 42% of respondents said they had visited the Town's new website. However, of those who took the survey on-line, 85% said they had visited the Town's new website. So for the on-line survey takers that haven't visited the Town's new website, just how did they find the survey then?

Reasons for visiting the Town’s website included: looking for meeting agendas, contact information, hours of operation and to pay taxes.

Question #20: Any suggestions for improving the Town’s website?

This question didn’t get many responses, but for those that did, here’s what they said: check all links to make sure they work, put assessor maps on line, keep the meeting information up to date, many committee pages have incomplete information, provide a link to public transportation, put more forms on line, and put property tax information on line.

Question #21: With the Town’s growth and the ever increasing complexity of managing a municipality, do you believe it is time to revise the Town Charter?

- Not sure 605
- Yes 231
- No 220

The high number of people who responded that they weren’t sure, indicates that many survey takers did not understand the question and that more explanation was needed. The “yes” and “no” responses were fairly evenly divided, indicating that there is not presently a groundswell of support for changing the Town’s Charter.