

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY REPORT

**City of Bellingham  
Residential Survey 2013**

**January 2014**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### BACKGROUND

The City of Bellingham (the City) contracted with Applied Research Northwest (ARN) to conduct a survey of Bellingham's residents. This survey was conducted on-line and by phone from mid-November to early December, 2013. It is part of the planning process for City programs and to evaluate the progress the City is making towards its nine *Legacies and Strategic Commitments*.

This survey followed similar efforts conducted in 2008 and 2010. The 2013 survey repeated many of the questions asked in 2008 and 2010 in an effort to identify changes over time. Results of opinion surveys such as this one are among numerous ways the City is measuring its performance and determining if City programs and services are meeting long-term goals. An overview of the City's *Legacies and Strategic Commitments* can be found in the appendices to this report, and more information about these goals and City performance measurement can be found on the City website ([www.cob.org](http://www.cob.org).)

### PURPOSE

The purpose of the survey was to better understand people's perceptions of and experiences with City services and to measure the City's performance in delivering results on community priorities. Included in the survey were questions that provide information for the City of Bellingham's nine long-term legacy goals. These nine goals cover:

1. Clean, Safe Drinking Water
2. Healthy Environment
3. Vibrant Sustainable Economy
4. Sense of Place
5. Safe and Prepared Community
6. Mobility and Connectivity
7. Access to Quality of Life Amenities
8. Equity and Social Justice, and
9. Quality, Responsive City Services

Survey questions included two different types of measures: Community indicators which require community involvement to change and City Performance Measures which reflect the City of Bellingham's current perceived performance.

## METHODOLOGY

The survey was administered by delivering letters from Mayor Kelli Linville's office to about 3,500 randomly sampled households with Bellingham zip codes. The letter stated that the Bellingham City Council and the Mayor are seeking residents' input about City government services and issues facing our community. The letter indicated that the survey could be taken either on-line, for which a web-link was provided, or by telephone, for which a toll-free number was provided.

The survey consisted of 48 questions; 42 were substantive and six demographic questions for statistical purposes. Surveys took a median of 15-½ minutes to complete. The survey garnered a 17% response rate and yielded a margin of error of 4%. The data were examined and all complete surveys from City of Bellingham residents were included in the final sample of 597 residents.

## MAJOR FINDINGS FOR EACH LEGACY

Below is a summary of the significant findings for each City legacy.

### Clean, Safe Drinking Water:

- The vast majority of residents (91%) of residents said that it was at least *somewhat important* that the City prevent further development in the Lake Whatcom watershed to protect drinking water. The importance was particularly high among older residents, females and lower income residents.

### Healthy Environment:

- The vast majority of residents viewed the City's job protecting the environment positively with 80% saying it was *good* or *excellent*, up from 73% in 2010, and 68% gave similar ratings to the job the City is doing leading local and regional efforts to reduce human impact on the environment.
- The importance of the City promoting the use of renewable energy was rated as *very* or *extremely* important by 63% of respondents, more so by females and those with lower incomes than males or those of moderate or higher incomes. Similarly, 61% gave such a rating the importance that the City reduce auto trips by improving transit, bike and pedestrian choices.
- Some residents (10%) identified environmental concerns as among the most important problem facing Bellingham today.

### Vibrant Sustainable Economy

- 46% of residents rated the job the City is doing encouraging economic development and business growth as *good* or *excellent*. These ratings showed an increase of 7% over 2010 ratings. Women gave more favorable ratings as did younger residents and those of lower incomes.
- The economy was the most prevalent topic addressed when respondents were asked what the most important problem was facing Bellingham that City leaders can do something about (19% of responses). Some residents (7%) viewed Bellingham as needing more and better paying jobs, while others focused on business development (5%).
- Concerns about impacts from the proposed coal terminal (17%) and waterfront redevelopment (13%) were also frequently mentioned.

## Sense of Place

- Residents' ratings and responses to open-ended questions indicate a high degree of satisfaction with Bellingham life. Community characteristics, natural environment, recreation opportunities and public services and amenities were noted by 78% of respondents as what they value the most about Bellingham.
- Residents' ratings of close-ended questions and responses to open-ended questions describe growth and related issues as significant problems that are impacting the lives of residents. Almost 10% of people responding to open-ended questions identified growth-related issues as the important problems facing Bellingham.
- Over two-thirds (70%) of the residents in the survey rated the City as doing an *excellent* or *good* job protecting the livability of Bellingham's neighborhoods. However, in 2010 76% gave the city as high a rating. Similarly, residents' ratings of the job the City is doing planning for growth declined slightly from 44% in 2010 to 41% in 2013.

## Safe Prepared Community

- Overall, the ratings of the job the City is doing providing safety services (fire, police and Medic-One) were highly positive, with 88% saying the City is doing a *good* or *excellent* job. Separate ratings of fire services, emergency medical services and crime prevention work also showed increases over 2010. Homeowners rated crime prevention slightly higher than did renters.
- More than half of all residents (61%) indicated that they feel *very* or *extremely* safe when walking alone at night in their neighborhoods. However, this is not the case for a minority of City residents. Over one in ten (12%) said they feel *not very* or *not at all* safe in their neighborhoods at night.
- More residents felt unsafe alone in the downtown area at night (41%) than those who felt safe there (19%). People's sense of safety downtown during the day declined from 77% feeling *extremely* or *very safe* in 2010 to 70% in 2013. Females were particularly likely to report feeling *not very* or *not at all* safe downtown at night (52% vs. 33% of males).
- Some residents' responses to open-ended questions indicated they value Bellingham's low crime rate and feeling of safety (8%), while others (6%) indicated public safety issues are important problems.
- Just over half (56%) of Bellingham residents reported that they were prepared to sustain themselves and their families for 72 hours after a major disaster. Almost another third (29%) reported that they were *somewhat* prepared in case of a major disaster. Emergency preparedness declined substantially between 2008 (64%) and 2010 (54%) and has recovered only slightly since (+2%). Preparedness is higher among those with children in the household, homeowners and those who've lived in Bellingham longer.

## **Mobility and Connectivity Options:**

- The majority of residents (61%) viewed the job the City is doing improving streets as *excellent* or *good* while more than one third of residents (39%) said they are *only fair* or *poor*. Neighborhood street condition was rated as *good*, *very good*, or *excellent* by 79% of respondents.
- The vast majority of City residents (84%) rated walking-distance access to bus stops positively. Similarly, a large portion (90%) rated their access to shopping and other services as *good*, *very good* or *excellent*.
- Neighborhood street safety was rated best for pedestrians (74% *good*, *very good* or *excellent*) followed by traffic speed (70%) and bicyclists (64%). All of these ratings represent improvements over 2010 ratings of street safety.
- Some residents (21%) indicated they valued the community's local and regional ease of access, while others (26%) identified transportation-related concerns as important problems.

## **Access to Quality of Life Amenities**

- Over ninety percent of residents (94%) rated the quality of life in Bellingham *excellent* or *good*. It is especially high among home owners and those over age 50.
- Of residents surveyed, (90%) rated the job the City of Bellingham is doing maintaining parks and trails as *excellent* or *as good*.
- Eighty-four percent (84%) of residents reported that the job the City is doing creating opportunities for education in culture and the arts as *excellent* or *good*. Eighty-seven percent (87%) of residents reported that the job the City is doing providing library services as *excellent* or *good*.
- Many varied factors were mentioned in describing what they valued most about Bellingham, including the size of the community, the relaxed pace of life, and enjoyment of the people who live here.

## **Equity and Social Justice**

- Since 2010 there has been improvement in ratings on housing affordability with 27% saying it is *excellent* or *very good* compared to 18% in 2010. This is the among the most substantial changes for all survey items.
- While opportunity for housing ratings improved, opportunities for living wage jobs were mentioned as a concern in open-ended questions.
- Social service and social justice issues were identified by 8% of respondents as important problems for City leaders to address.

## **Quality and Responsive City Services**

- Resident's ratings of the job the City has been doing using tax dollars responsibly included 56% saying *excellent* or *good*, with the balance saying it was *only fair* or *poor*. A comparison of 2010 to 2013 ratings of the job the City has been doing using tax dollars responsibly shows a change for the better, and is one of the largest shifts in the survey (+8%).
- Just over half of the residents (57%) rated the City's job of involving the public in important community decisions positively. The overall pattern of responses was slightly better in 2013 compared to 2010 (+5%).
- Just over half the residents (55%) rated the City as doing an *excellent* or *good* job communicating with citizens about important community decisions. A comparison of 2010 to 2013's ratings shows promising change with a 8% improvement in ratings.

## **CONCLUSION**

Residents' descriptions of Bellingham were very positive, and many felt there is a very high quality of life here. Aspects of Bellingham life that were highly valued by residents included Bellingham being a right-sized city, with a strong sense of community, a casual, small-town feel and full of friendly, interesting people. Residents appreciated the fact that there are beautiful, natural open spaces within the city and that the City is in close proximity to outdoor recreation and rural areas. Residents valued having beautiful parks and greenways with good trails and having recreation activities and events outdoors. Residents appreciated the presence of art and culture in their midst, lots of entertainment options and the presence of higher education opportunities. Finally, they valued that Bellingham is a safe place in which to live.

Many aspects of City performance on metrics associated with the key legacies showed no change or improvement. Of particular note were four substantial shifts for the better – housing affordability increased 9%, responsible use of tax dollars increased by 8%, communicating with the public increased 8% as did ratings of the job the City is doing protecting the environment. Other improvements were seen in provision of safety service (fire, crime prevention and emergency medical), access to bus stops, shopping and other amenities, and feeling safe in people's neighborhoods.

Areas that may warrant some attention included protecting the livability of neighborhoods, which slipped by 6% in 2013. Ratings of the City's plans for growth were down slightly as was peoples' sense of safety walking downtown, especially at night. Finally, although encouraging economic development was up 6%, still a minority of residents (46%) rated the City as doing an *excellent* or *good job* on this measure.

Aspects of Bellingham life that were considered by residents as important problems that City leaders can address included overcrowding and sprawl, with its concomitant traffic congestion and other growth-related issues. Also mentioned as important problems were Bellingham needing more employment, specifically better paying jobs, and more local and industrial business development.