2019 Downtown Survey Report

PHOTO: RYAN HASERT

Method

In May 2019, the City of Bellingham (COB) and the Downtown Bellingham Partnership (DBP) distributed an online survey inquiring about people's opinions and experiences of downtown. The purpose of the survey was to assess changes in public opinion since the last downtown community survey in 2011. The survey was issued via emailed press release to interested organizations and media outlets, posted to social media by both agencies, and advertised at the COB Ski to Sea booth on May 26. Small poster cards were posted in popular areas (e.g. library, coffee shops, government offices) and low-income housing centers downtown.

The Pew Research Center cites several reasons why online polls can be considered inaccurate including: People who do not use the internet are demographically different from people who do and therefore may overrepresent certain groups; and people who volunteer to take a poll may be more willing to because of an extreme position or strongly-held bias. [https://www.pewresearch.org/2010/12/29/how-accurate-are-online-polls/]

By the numbers

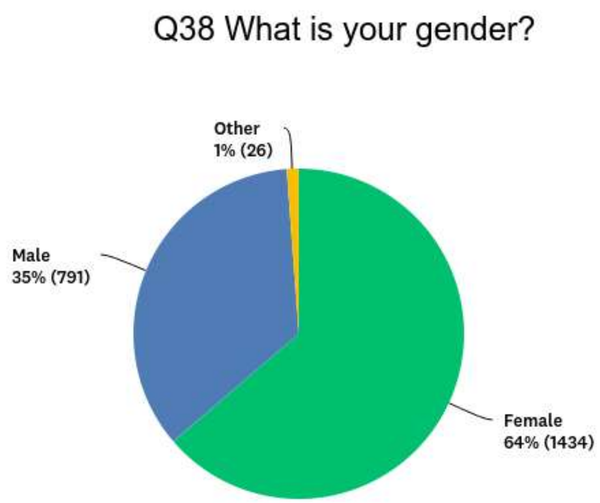
- Estimated population of Bellingham = 90,110
- Number of survey respondents = 2,608 people (~ 3% of the population)
- Survey completion rate = 86%
- Average survey time = 7 minutes 36 seconds
- Survey time period = May 13 through June 1, 2019
- Number of survey questions = 43 open-ended and multiple-choice

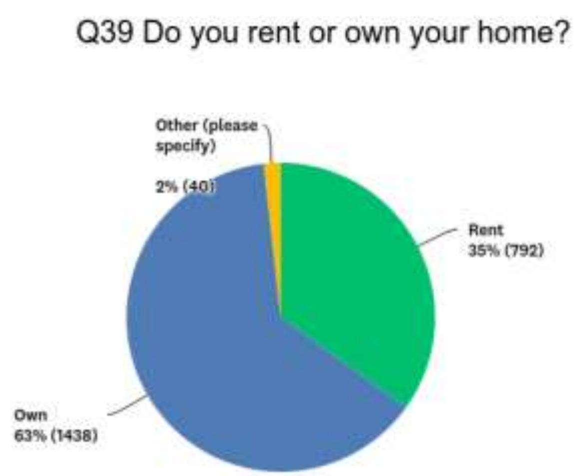
Report contents

The full survey results are provided in **Attachment 1**.

Who took the survey?

They survey respondents represented a variety of groups, including downtown residents, business owners, and employees. More females than males responded, and more homeowners than renters.



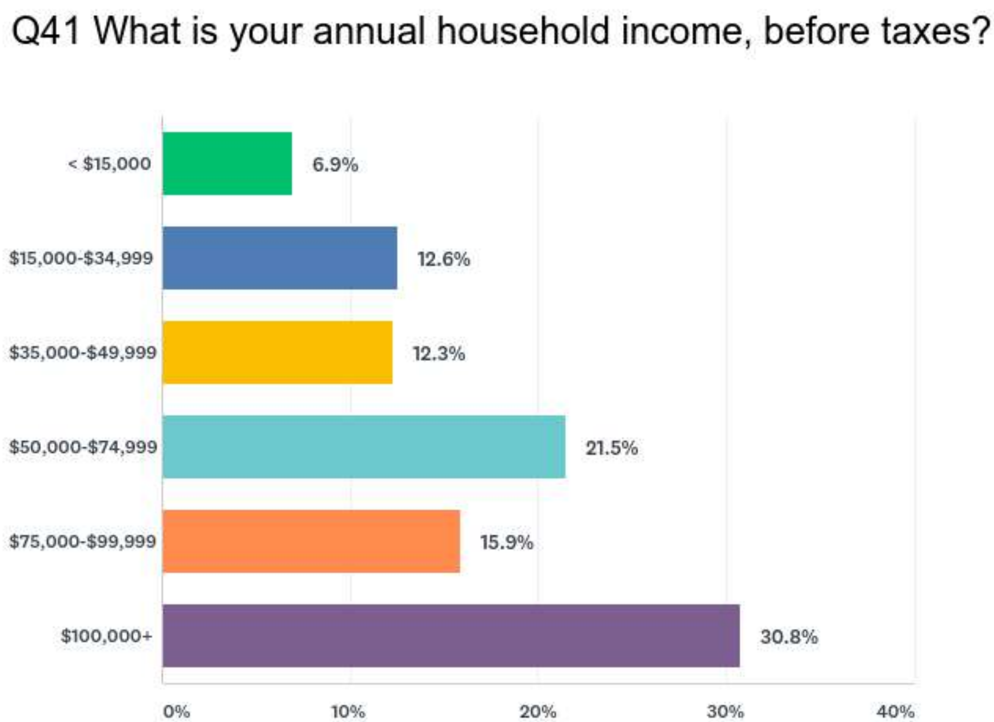


Many of those who selected the "other" category indicated they live with their family or parents, and eight indicated they are homeless/living in an unsheltered situation (car, tent, etc.).

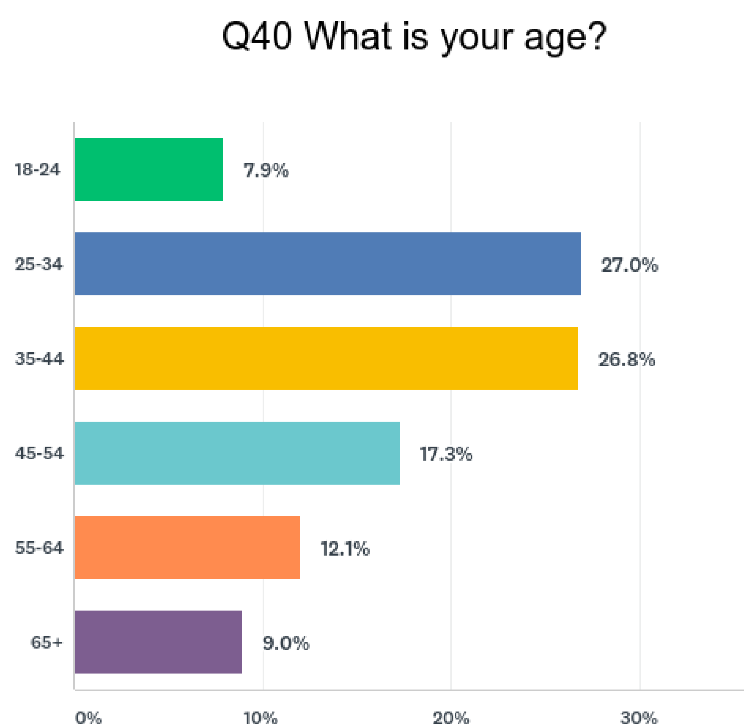
7% are enrolled as a full-time student at a college or university.

Survey respondents' incomes were very consistent with the income distribution of the total population of Bellingham (compared to the 2013-2017 American Community Survey[1]).

[1] https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=CF



Compared to the total population of Bellingham, there were more respondents in the 25-44 age groups, and fewer respondents in the 18-24 age group.



Living downtown

Close to half (48%) of survey respondents live within 5 miles of downtown. A quarter live less than 1 mile and another quarter live more than five miles away. 6% said they lived in downtown.

72% of respondents living downtown choose to do so because of proximity to services and entertainment. Other reasons included preferring an urban lifestyle (53%) or being close to school/work (45%). In the 2011 survey, more residents indicated affordability and friends/family as reasons they choose to live downtown.

"Why do you choose to live downtown?"

	2011 survey	2019 survey
Close to services and entertainment	67%	72%
Prefer urban lifestyle	58%	53%
Close to work	49%	45%
Affordable	**38%**	**17%**
Friends/family	**20%**	**10%**
Other	16%	8%

66% of the general survey respondents would not consider living downtown. The primary reasons (selected by between 45-50% of these respondents) were: preference for a less urban environment, parking, safety concerns and available housing options (size, pet-friendly, etc.). Noise was selected as a reason by 39% of these respondents, and cost by 30%. Cleanliness of the area and behavioral issues were also cited by over 70 respondents as a factor in the open-ended comments as to why people wouldn't consider living downtown.

Working downtown

Business interests

186 respondents indicated they own or manage a downtown business or are a property owner, developer, financier or real estate agent with interests downtown. More of these respondents were male (45%) than the general survey respondents (35%) and were more likely to be in the 45-54 age range (32%) or highest income bracket (42%) compared to the general survey population. They represented a wide range of business types, including: real estate, health care, food/beverage service, construction, arts/entertainment and spanned years of operation from less than a year to more than 10 years. Those with business-related interests rated downtown Bellingham as a better place to do business than they did in the 2011 survey.

> *"[Downtown] still has a small-town vibe. That is a good climate for a small business like mine."*
>
> *"Tight-knit community that is supportive of entrepreneurs who want to invigorate the town."*

"How would you rate downtown Bellingham as a place to do business?"

	2011 survey	**2019 survey**
Excellent	**9%**	**15%**
Good	**48%**	**40%**
Fair	33%	38%
Poor	10%	8%

The biggest challenges of doing business downtown were cited as parking and social problems, including cleanliness and behaviors associated with the presence of people who are homeless.

Those with business interests had some habits and preferences that were different than the general survey population. They travel to downtown more often by car, and bike more than walk. They were more interested in adding more bike racks/lockers (37% compared to 27% of general survey respondents) and more fine dining options (44% compared to 35%). Those with business interests were less interested in adding more public benches (22% compared to 32%). 41% of this group said they'd consider living downtown, compared to 36% of the general survey respondents.

The majority of those with business interests characterized their current business performance as steady (39%) or moderately growing (33%) and rated their overall confidence in the economic future of downtown as high (27%) or moderate (52%).

Downtown employees

A quarter of survey respondents said they work downtown, with a third of them indicating employment in a nonprofit or government organization. More people in this group (34%) were in the 25-34-year-old age bracket than the general survey population (27%). Over a third of employees said they'd consider living downtown, and more cited cost or available housing options as reasons they wouldn't, compared to the general survey respondents.

Most consider downtown an excellent (22%) or good (55%) place to work or do business, especially due to access and proximity to other businesses, services and dining options.

Parking was cited as the biggest challenge of working downtown (37%), along with the presence and behavioral issues often associated with the homeless population. Downtown employees prioritized redevelopment of vacant buildings and properties (including historic preservation) over beautifying and cleaning public spaces/sidewalks compared to the general respondents. They wanted more grocery stores downtown compared to the general respondents (53% versus 45%) and had less interest in gift/clothing shops and entertainment/arts venues.

I like:
"Feeling like part of a larger business community."
"Being close to food and shops so on my lunch breaks or after work I can walk to these places."
"The energy of being in the middle of everything."
"Supporting local business, employees, owners."

Downtown redevelopment and activities

Compared to the 2011 survey, there was a stronger level of agreement that "downtown is an exciting an active place".

"Downtown is an exciting and active place"

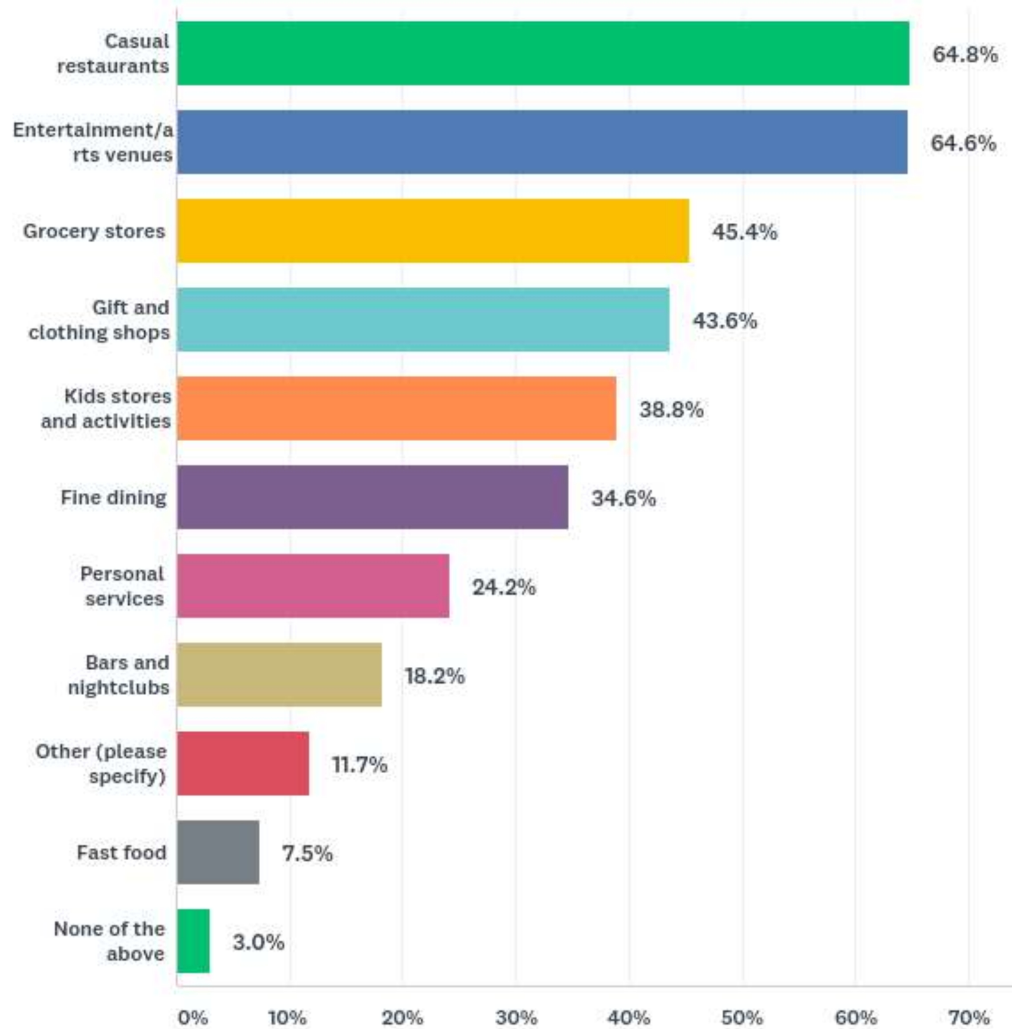
	2011 survey	2019 survey
Strongly agree	**10%**	**18%**
Somewhat agree	50% *("agree")*	52%
Neutral	**25%**	**16%**
Somewhat disagree	13% *("disagree")*	10%
Strongly disagree	3%	4%

68% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they'd recommend downtown as a visitor destination (up from 63% in 2011).

"Redeveloping vacant buildings and properties, including historic preservation" was ranked as the third most important project for improving respondents' downtown experience and "introducing new businesses and strengthening existing businesses" was ranked fourth.

45% of survey respondents agreed that downtown needs more public gathering spaces and 40% agreed that it needs more community events.

Q34 What types of businesses would you like to see more of downtown? (Check all that apply)



Casual restaurants and entertainment venues were the most popular types of desired businesses (65% each), followed by grocery stores and gift/clothing shops (45% and 44%). Other popular choices mentioned in the open-ended comments included: recreational/outdoor/sporting goods, hotels, ethnic restaurants/businesses owned by people of color, computer/electronics, bookstores, office supplies, activities (karaoke, escape rooms, skate/amusement park, gym) and community spaces to gather that don't serve alcohol (e.g. pool hall, non-bar music venue, community center, tea house, etc.).

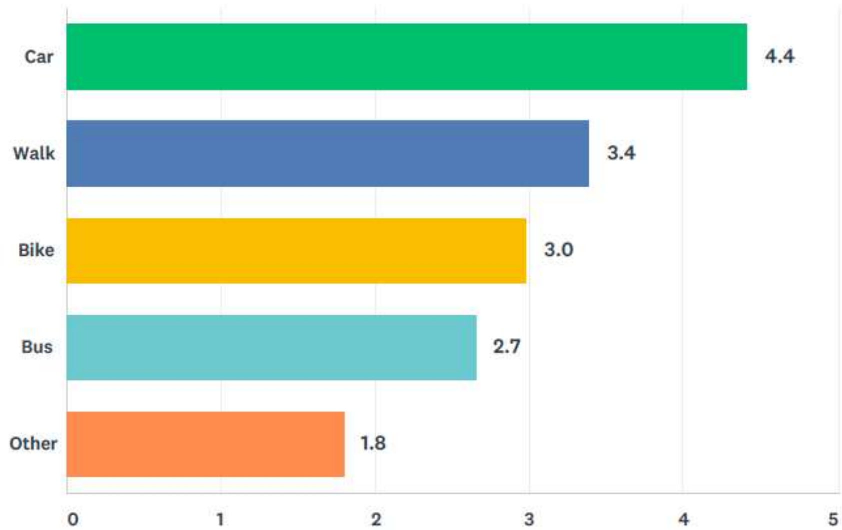
Downtown transportation

Getting downtown

Travel to downtown by car continues to be the primary mode for about 2/3 of respondents (71% ranked this as most common mode in 2019, 67% in 2011), followed by walking (16% indicated this as primary mode). 10% of respondents indicated their primary mode as by bicycle and 7% by bus. Weighted scores for each of these modes is provided in the chart below.

Q23 How do you normally travel to downtown? (Drag and drop the answers in order or use the drop down menu to rank from highest-1 to lowest-5)

Answered: 2,367 Skipped: 279



	1	2	3	4	5	TOTAL	SCORE
Car	71.12% 1,650	12.84% 298	6.94% 161	3.75% 87	5.34% 124	2,320	4.41
Walk	16.47% 312	33.84% 641	27.82% 527	16.31% 309	5.54% 105	1,894	3.39
Bike	10.01% 180	26.42% 475	27.70% 498	23.19% 417	12.68% 228	1,798	2.98
Bus	6.75% 116	21.87% 376	22.45% 386	28.68% 493	20.24% 348	1,719	2.66
Other	1.53% 23	8.19% 123	13.86% 208	21.25% 319	55.16% 828	1,501	1.80

"Improving safety, facilities and amenities for bicyclists" was ranked lowest compared to other projects that would improve respondent's experience downtown.

The survey asked whether respondents would be in favor of a bike or scooter-share service coming to Bellingham. About 50% said yes, 35% said no, and 16% said they were unsure. Those who were unsure typically said they needed more information, were uncertain whether this type of product would be used in Bellingham or questioned the potential impacts (such as safety concerns, visual clutter, or blocking of sidewalks).

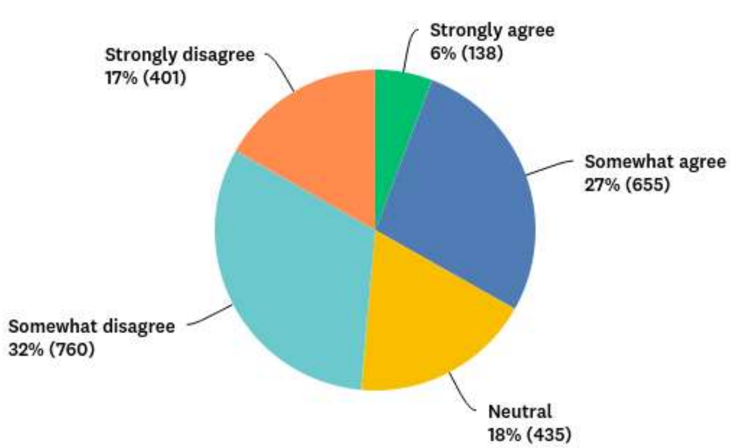
Parking downtown

Downtown parking continued to be a top issue of concern for some survey respondents. However, managing and adding parking was ranked fifth in order of importance for improving respondent's experience of downtown. Many commented on the increased difficulty of finding on-street parking, and parking was mentioned as one of the biggest challenges of doing business downtown.

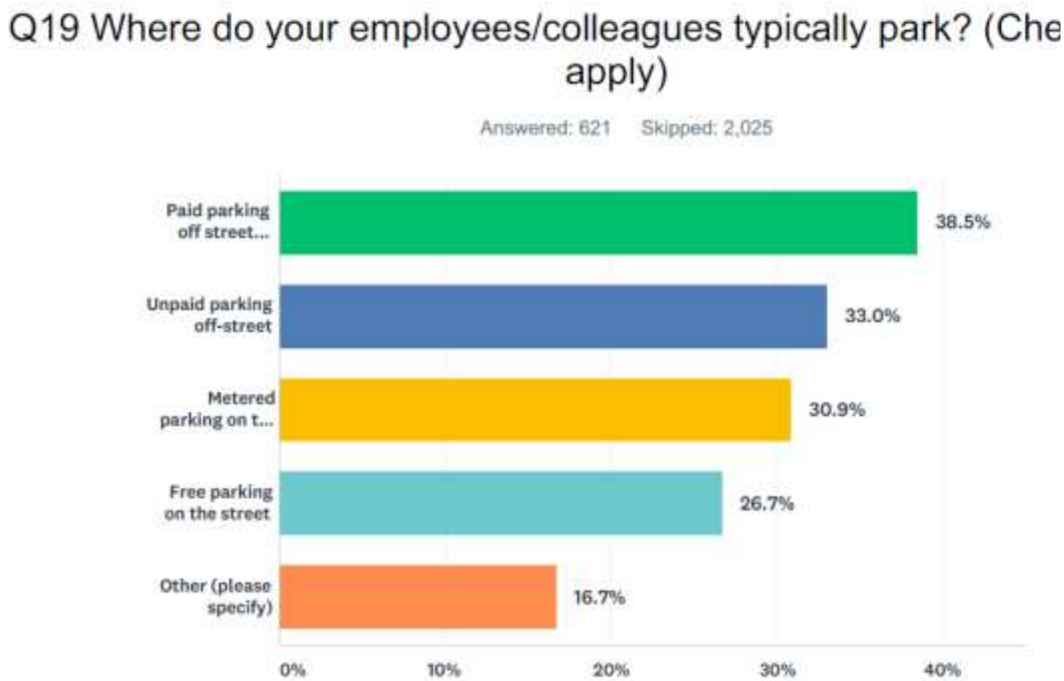
PHOTO: KARI QUAAS

Levels of agreement with the statement “it’s usually convenient to park downtown” were similar to the 2011 survey, with those who somewhat agree or somewhat disagree with the statement fairly evenly matched. The number of respondents indicating they “strongly disagree” rose from 11% in 2011 to 17% in 2019.

Q28 It's usually convenient to park downtown.



Those who work or have other business interests downtown estimate that 68% of their employees or colleagues drive to work and need parking, and that most park in paid (39%) or unpaid (33%) parking off-street.



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Paid parking off street (e.g. parking garage)	38.5%
Unpaid parking off-street	33.0%
Metered parking on the street	30.9%
Free parking on the street	26.7%
Other (please specify)	16.7%
Total Respondents: 621	

73% stated that their business or workplace does not offer any incentive for employees to use transportation other than driving alone.

Downtown comfort and image

Less respondents agreed with the statement “downtown is a better place than they did in 2011.

“Downtown is a better place than it was 10 years ago.”

	2011 survey	2019 survey
Strongly agree	**23%**	**16%**
Somewhat agree	**30%** *(“agree”)*	**22%**
Neutral	**15%**	**34%**
Somewhat disagree	**7%** *(“disagree”)*	**13%**
Strongly disagree	**3%**	**14%**
Not applicable	**22%**	-

The responses to this question had the most discrepancy between the 2011 and 2019 survey results. A "not applicable" option was not available on the 2019 survey, which may have accounted for the increase in "neutral" responses to this question.

Q35 What features does downtown need more of? (Check all that apply)

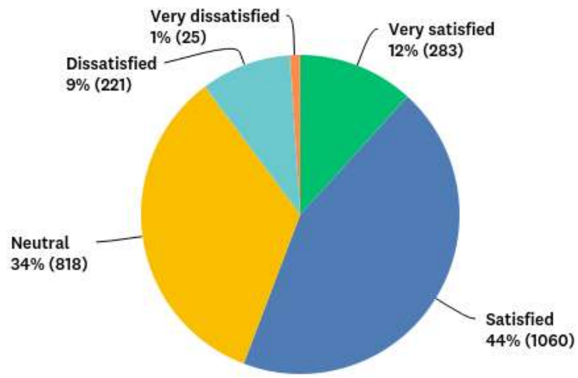
ANSWER CHOICES		RESPONSES
Public bathrooms and/or urinals		53.0%
Artwork, murals and sculpture		51.3%
Greenery/landscaping		49.7%
Public gathering spaces		45.0%
Community events		39.5%
Police presence		39.2%
Garbage and recycling cans/ashtrays		33.9%
Public benches		31.6%
Bike lanes		28.4%
Bike racks and/or lockers		27.3%
Way-finding signs		19.1%
Other (please specify)	Responses	7.0%
None of the above		1.2%
Total Respondents: 2,245		

53% of respondents agreed that downtown needs more public bathrooms/urinals, followed by artwork/murals/sculptures (51%). The lowest ranked feature was wayfinding signs, with only 19% of respondents selecting this as a need.

Landscaping and cleaning

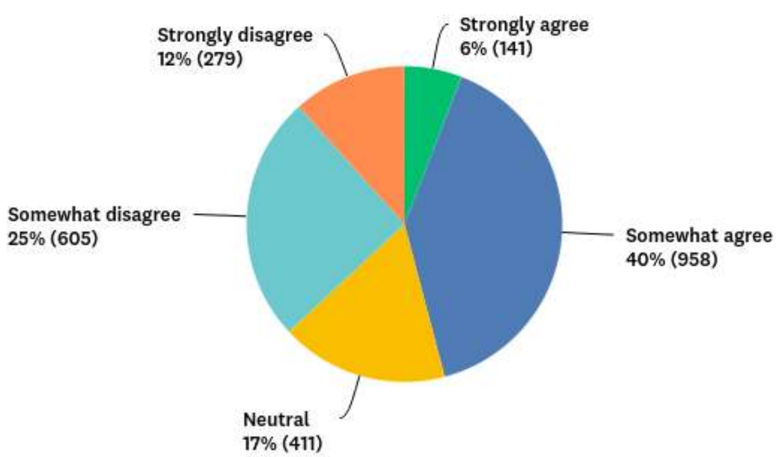
90% of respondents are satisfied or neutral regarding downtown landscaping. However, 50% indicated that downtown needs more greenery and landscaping (the third highest ranked desired feature).

Q22 How satisfied are you with the landscaping (flowers, trees, shrubs, etc.) downtown?



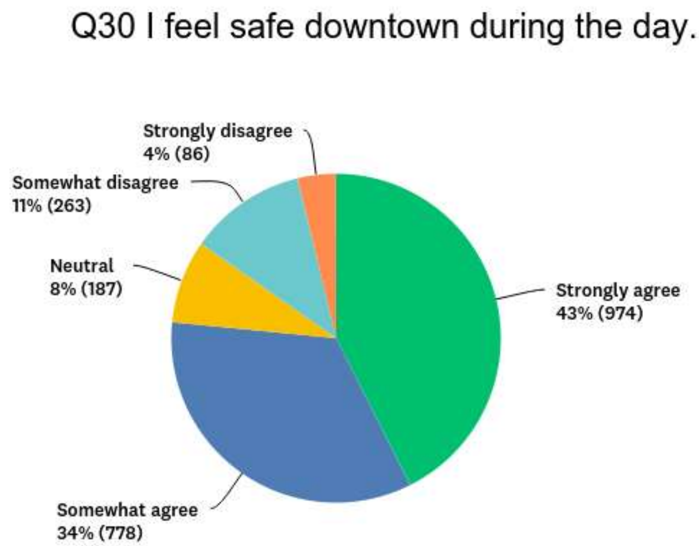
Beautifying and cleaning public spaces and sidewalks was listed as the second highest priority for improving survey respondent's experience of downtown (behind only providing homeless services/managing behavioral issues). This was similar to the 2011 survey results.

Q26 Downtown is clean and attractive.

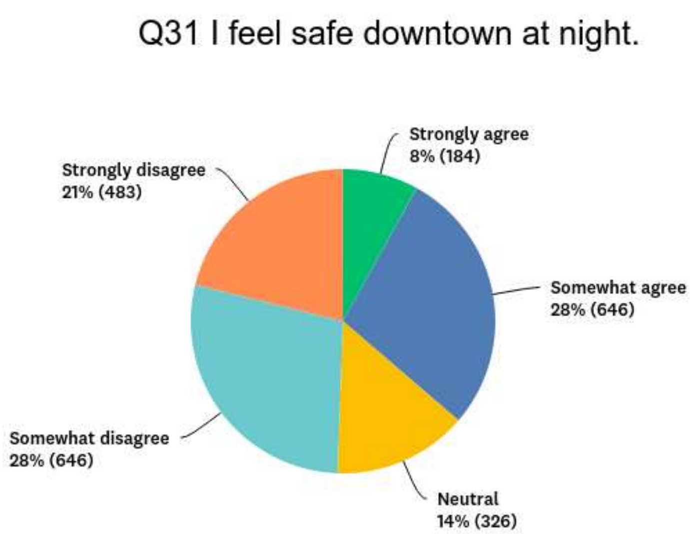


Sense of safety

77% of respondents agreed that they feel safe downtown during the day. This is slightly lower than the 81% who strongly or somewhat agreed with this statement in 2011.



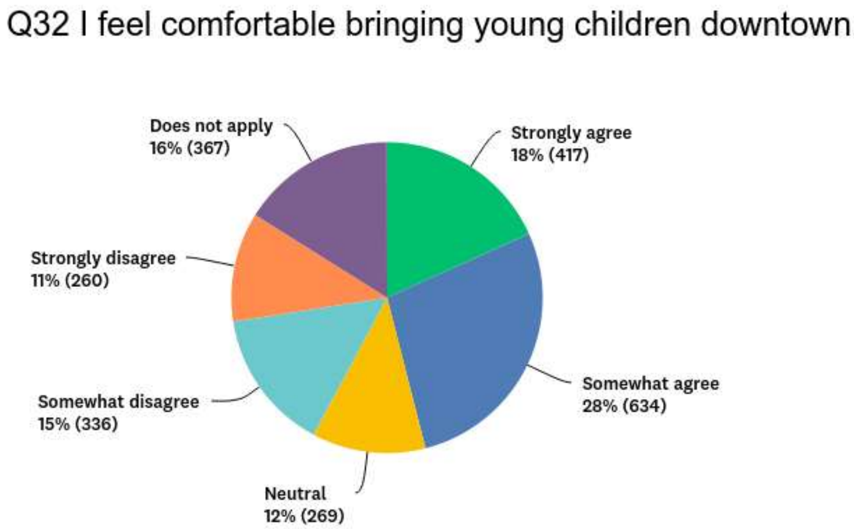
36% agree that they feel safe downtown at night. This is the same percentage as the 2011 survey. However, 48% did not feel safe at night, compared to 40% who strongly or somewhat disagreed with this statement in 2011.



12% of men strongly agreed they felt safe at night compared to 6% of women. 22% of men somewhat disagreed that they felt safe at night, compared to 32% of women. 39% of respondents overall felt more police presence was needed downtown. Despite an overall feeling of safety, many survey respondents expressed frustration in the open-ended comments with behavioral issues often associated with individuals experiencing homelessness or exhibiting symptoms of drug addiction and/or mental illness. Providing homeless services and managing behavioral issues was the highest-ranking project. 42% ranked this as the number one priority for improving their experience of downtown. This was also the highest priority in the 2011 survey.

Downtown for children

46% of respondents feel comfortable bringing young children downtown.



39% would like to see more kids stores and activities downtown.

> *"More family-friendly events/activities."*
> *"A public park with a playground."*
> *"Give me one safe route through downtown for kids on a bike!"*
> *"Continue cleaning and making Maritime Heritage Park safer for families."*

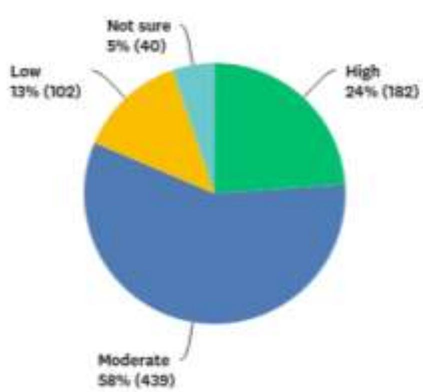
Priorities and next steps

Information gathered in the 2011 downtown survey was used to identify topics for additional public outreach and develop a list of projects and implementation strategy to align public investments with community priorities. Similarly, this survey data will be used to update the City Center Implementation Strategy and assess whether current investments continue to meet the community priorities for improving downtown. Links to more information on investments and actions since 2011 can be found on the City's downtown webpage: www.cob.org/downtown

Q29 How important are these projects to improving your experience downtown? (Drag and drop the answers in order or use the drop down menu to rank from highest-1 to lowest-8)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	TOTAL	SCORE
Providing homeless services and managing behavioral issues	41.86% 923	17.60% 388	10.88% 240	7.94% 175	6.44% 142	4.81% 106	4.35% 96	6.12% 135	2,205	6.18
Beautifying and cleaning public spaces and sidewalks	15.29% 334	15.57% 340	15.98% 349	14.38% 314	14.10% 308	12.50% 273	8.47% 185	3.71% 81	2,184	5.14
Redeveloping vacant buildings and properties including historic preservation	7.95% 176	15.99% 354	18.43% 408	17.30% 383	15.04% 333	14.27% 316	7.68% 170	3.34% 74	2,214	4.94
Introducing new businesses/strengthening existing businesses	8.73% 191	14.12% 309	14.44% 316	15.94% 349	17.86% 391	13.84% 303	10.10% 221	4.98% 109	2,189	4.73
Managing and adding parking	9.07% 198	14.06% 307	13.42% 293	13.28% 290	10.90% 238	11.54% 252	11.64% 254	16.08% 351	2,183	4.36
Providing community events and activities	5.33% 118	7.55% 167	11.39% 252	13.92% 308	16.00% 354	16.68% 369	20.66% 457	8.45% 187	2,212	3.97
Adding more housing options	9.05% 198	10.33% 226	9.51% 208	8.82% 193	10.75% 235	12.71% 278	18.38% 402	20.44% 447	2,187	3.84
Improving safety, facilities and amenities for bicyclists	5.33% 118	6.55% 145	7.00% 155	8.72% 193	8.31% 184	11.79% 261	16.85% 373	35.43% 784	2,213	3.12

Q14 How would you rate your overall confidence in the economic future of downtown?



Q43 List three things you think could be done to improve downtown.

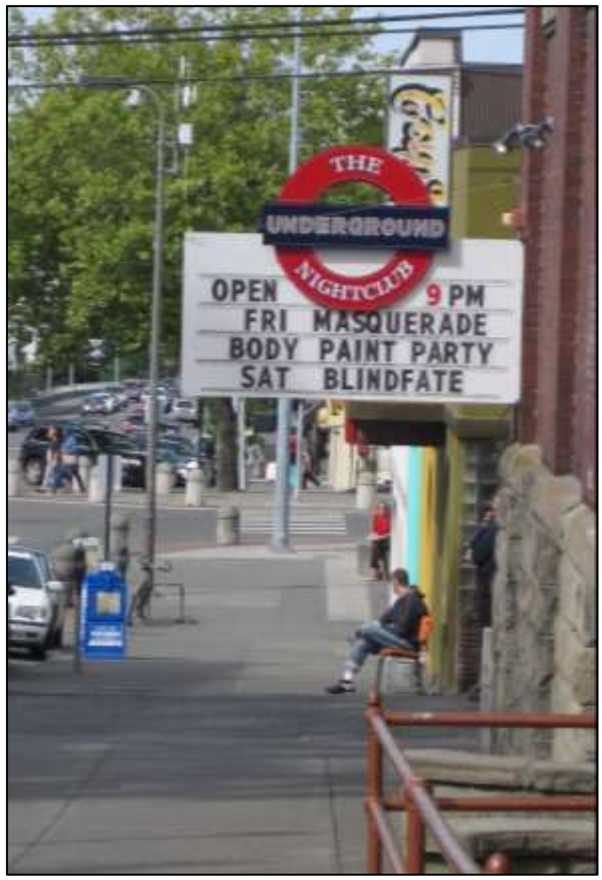
Click the links below for additional information on the following topics:

[How the City is addressing homelessness]

[Downtown parking]

[Downtown codes, planning and public investments]

[Downtown Bellingham Partnership]



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