

2022 Recreation Needs Assessment

Executive Summary

The Bellingham Parks and Recreation Department conducted a Recreation Needs Assessment during the spring of 2022.

The purpose of the Needs Assessment was to assess how the community currently uses recreational facilities and programs, levels of satisfaction and knowledge of existing services, and to help inform future planning efforts and budget priorities.

Methodology

Survey

A comprehensive 30-question community survey was conducted over 3 months. The survey focused on recreational facilities, aquatic facilities, and recreation programs and events. The survey was promoted on a variety of platforms, including social media, email lists, newsletters, and flyers. Our goal was 800 survey respondents. We exceeded that goal with 1,236 respondents. The survey results have a margin of error of +/-2.72% with 95% confidence.

Engage Bellingham

Nearly 3,500 visitors viewed the Engage Bellingham page during the data collection period, and 36 contributors made over 70 suggestions regarding recreational services.

Community Meetings

Three community meetings were held to gather additional feedback from recreational service providers, educators and the general public.

Key Findings

Recreation Facilities

Indoor community recreation centers, covered, well-lit outdoor areas, more aquatic space, more ice, and more pickleball courts were common themes in survey responses and meeting forums. Nature play areas, outdoor classrooms and adventure play (ziplines, climbing, slackline etc.) also ranked high in future facility desires.

67% of respondents reported they travel outside of Bellingham to use recreational facilities.

Lack of time is the primary reason people don't use local recreational facilities more frequently, with facility conditions closely following.

Aquatic Facilities

Lap lanes, family/leisure pools and hot tubs/therapy pools ranked higher on aquatic needs compared to competitive swimming and diving. However, an increase in colder water lap lanes is needed to adequately serve existing program levels.

Recreation Programs

Physical and mental well-being, stress reduction and connection with nature are the primary reasons people stated for participation in recreational programs. Lack of time is cited as the number one reason for not participating more frequently.

Over 80% of respondents are not aware of our scholarship program, which annually grants qualifying families \$200 per person, per household. The \$200 can be applied to nearly all recreation division programs and events, as well as community garden plot rentals. The department also received grant funds to support a supplemental scholarship program which allowed kids to go to camp for free in 2022.

64% of respondents reported having an excellent or very good experience participating in programs, and 30% rated their experiences as satisfactory.

Respondents would like to see more youth and adult sports opportunities. This response was further articulated in the community meeting forums. Lack of cohesiveness, hard to obtain information, and lack of equity and opportunities to participate are critical issues in need of further examination and action.

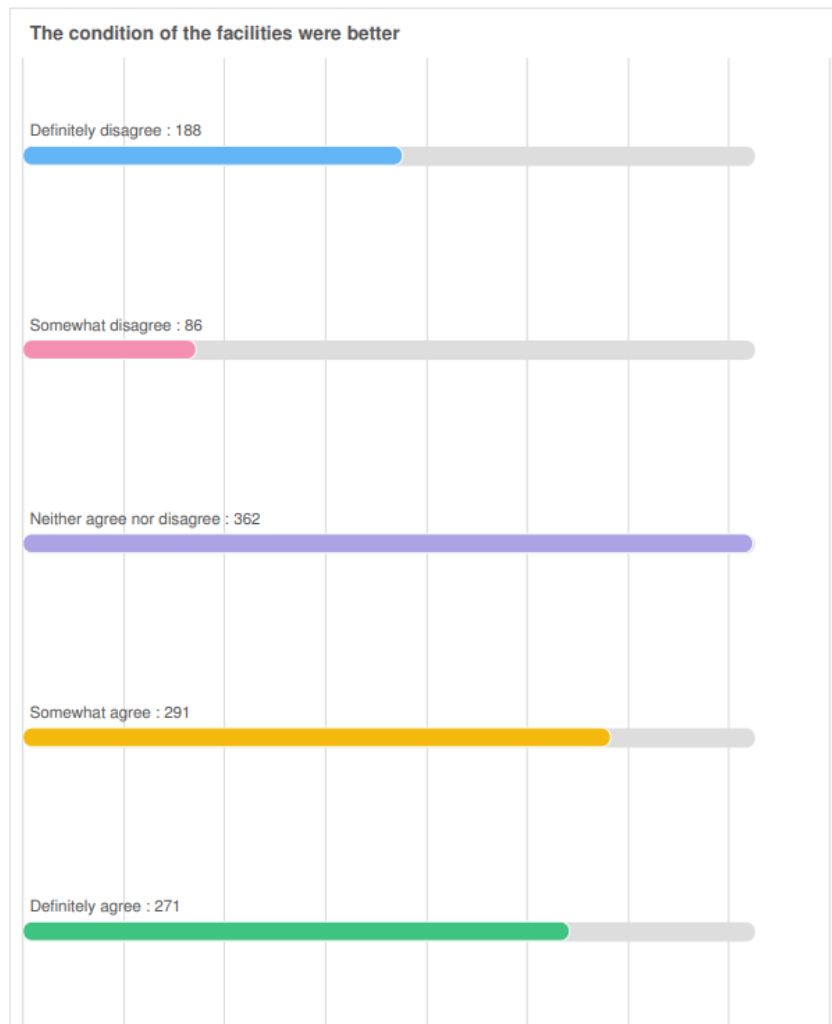
Willingness to Pay

Respondents are willing to pay for recreational facilities and services. In addition to stating facilities and services are worthy of tax dollar investment, 97% of respondents are willing to pay directly out of pocket to have accessibility to recreational facilities and programs.

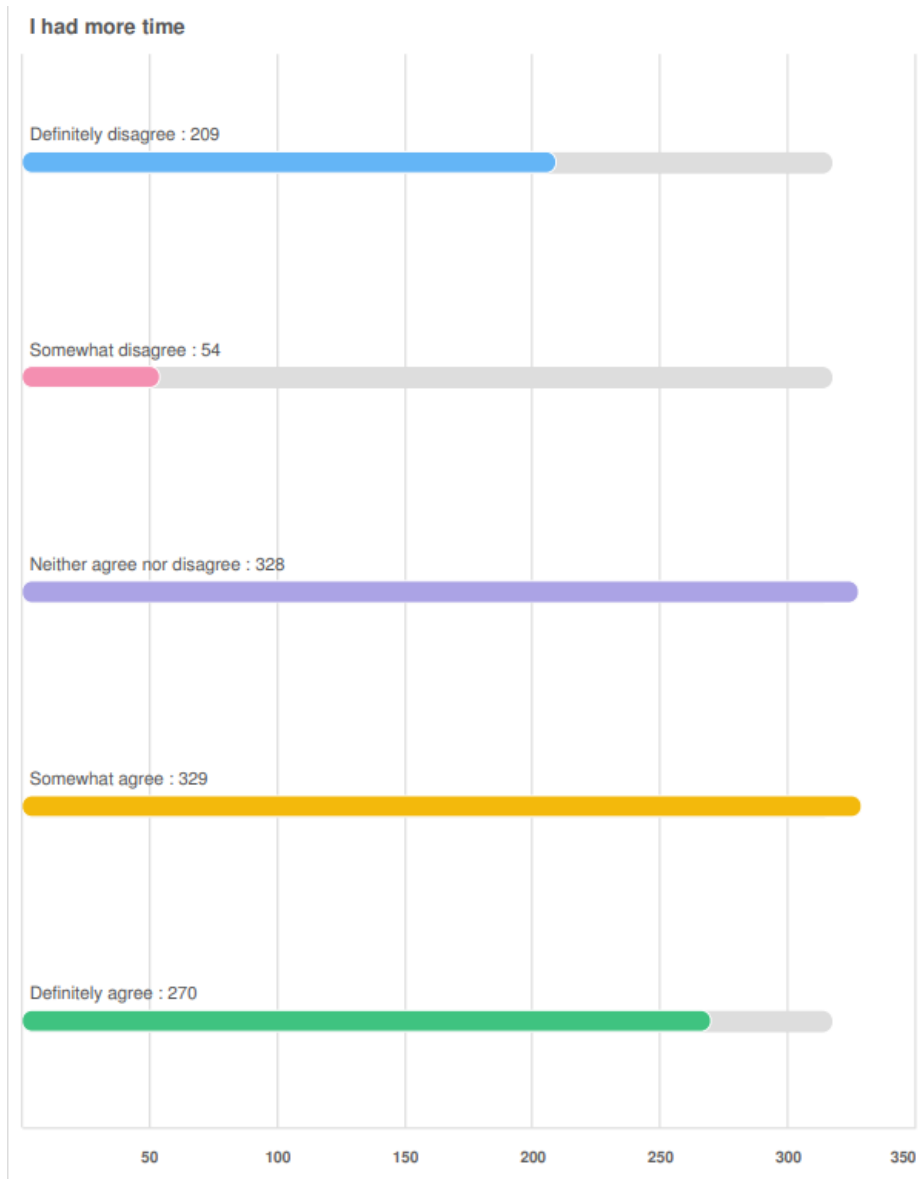
KEY FINDINGS: FACILITIES

We asked a series of facilities based Likert scale and open ended questions to understand the public's constraints and motivations to using existing resources, what types of facilities and amenities people are most interested in, where and why people travel to access recreational facilities, and their willingness to pay for such facilities. Key findings are discussed throughout this section.

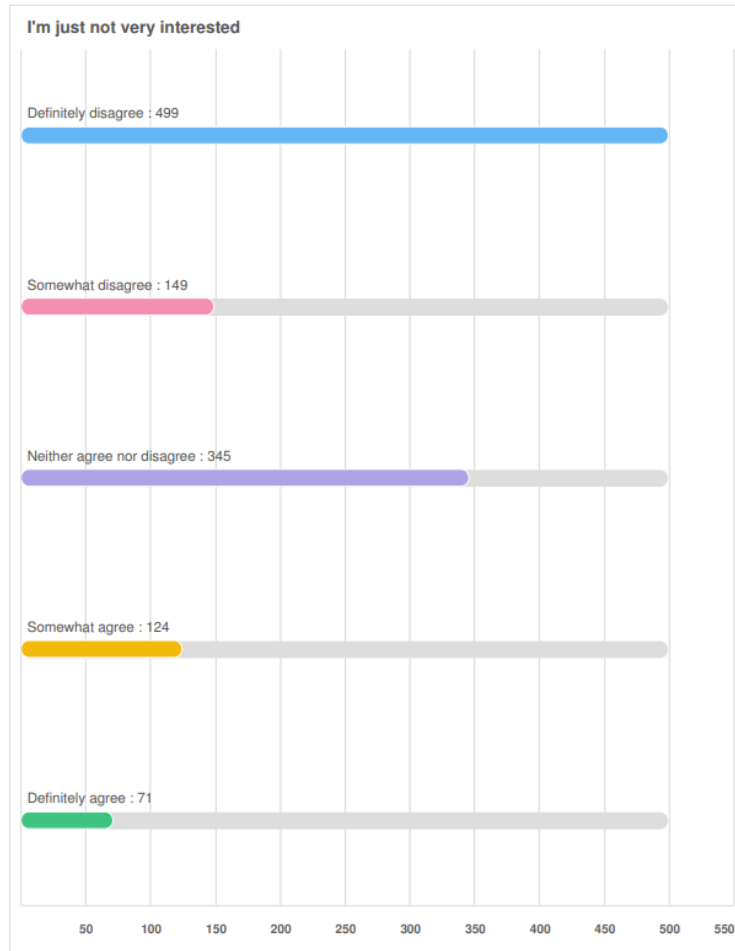
- a) 562 respondents reported they would use existing recreational facilities more frequently if the condition of facilities were better.



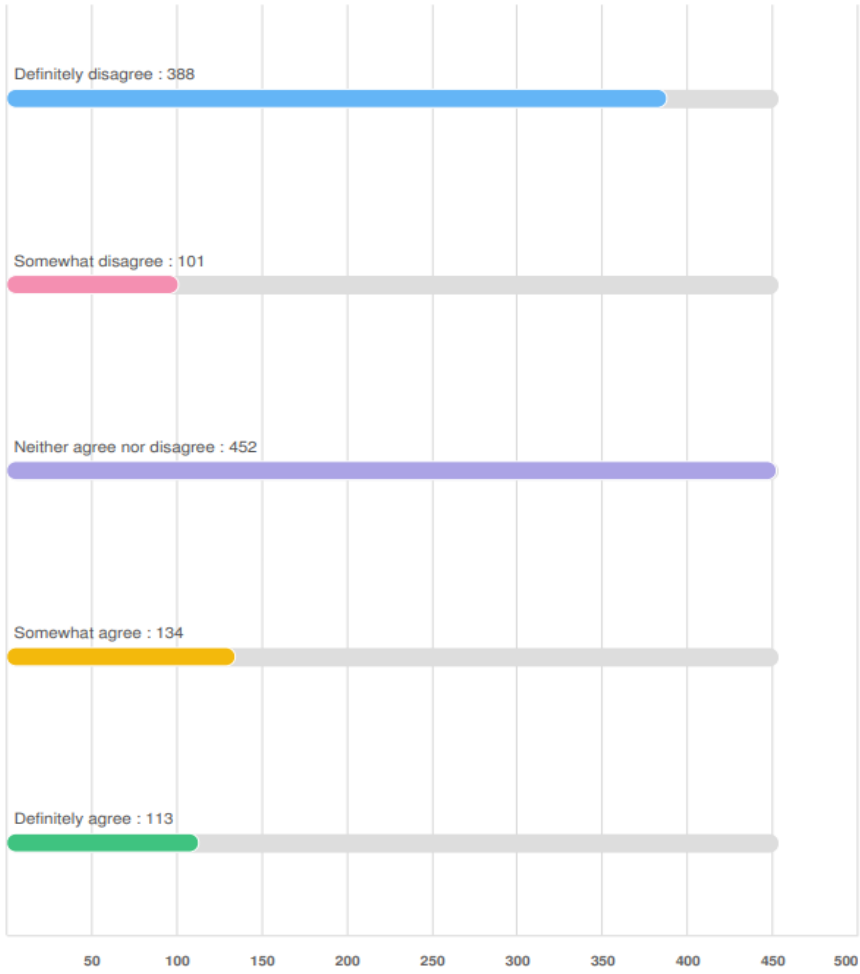
- b) Lack of time is also a leading factor, with nearly 600 respondents identifying lack of time as a constraint to recreational facility use.



- c) Lack of interest and money not leading factors in facility use constraints: Only 71 respondents indicated lack of interest as a constraint, and 247 respondents somewhat or definitely agreed that money is leading constraint to use.



I had more money

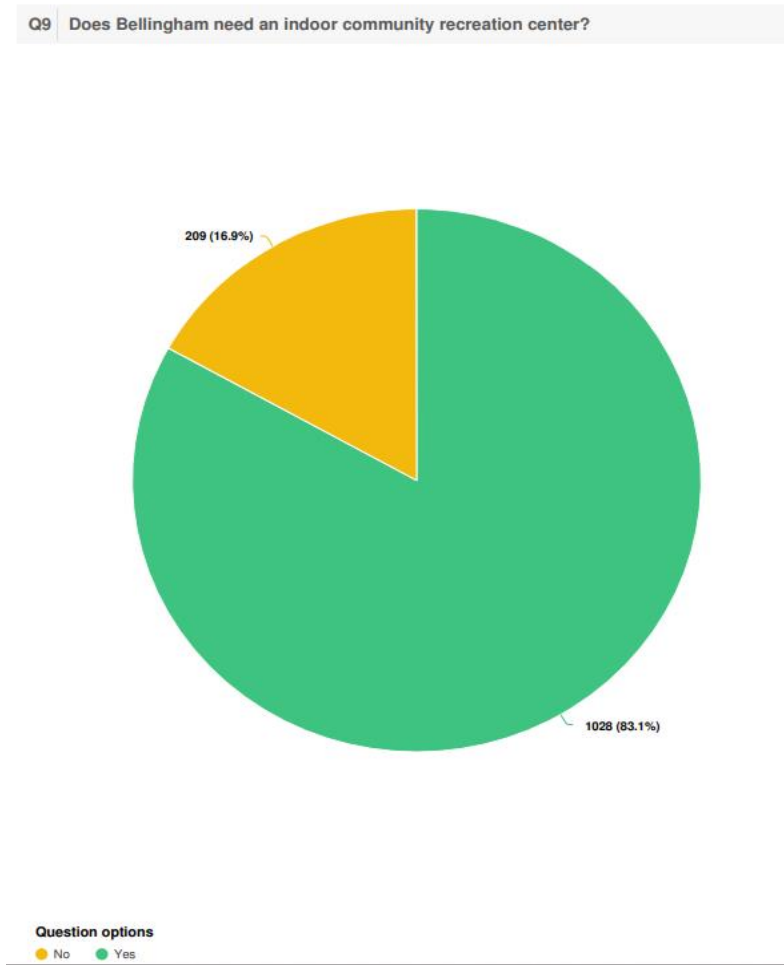


d) Respondents had the opportunity to tell us what types of Recreational Facilities they wish to see more of in Bellingham. Respondents could choose as many facilities as they wished in their response.

Nature play areas, nature centers and adventure parks (e.g., ziplines, climbing walls, slack lining etc.) rated higher than expected, with indoor recreational facilities closely following for desired facilities. More baseball fields and softball fields did not rank well in direct comparison, but demand for these facilities was more fully realized in community meetings and open-ended questions.

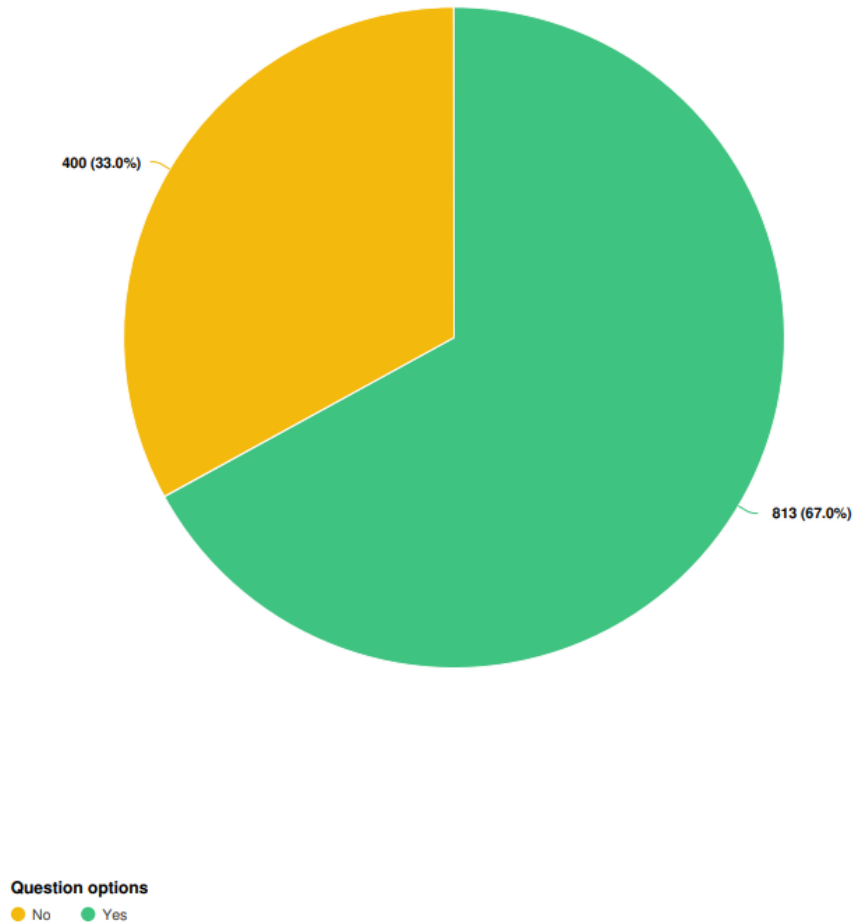


e) 83.1% of respondents informed us they believe Bellingham needs an indoor community Recreation Center:



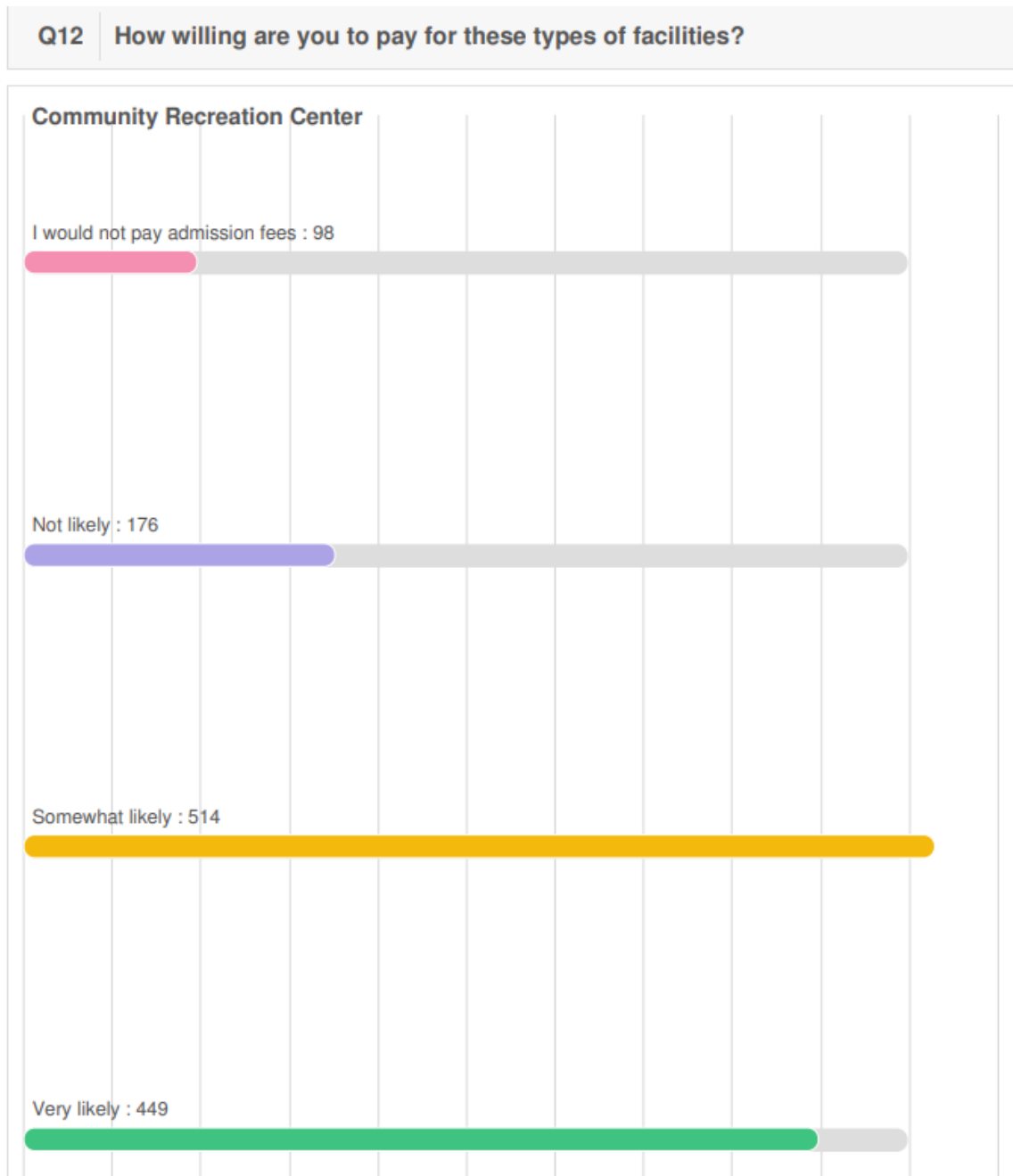
This question is important as it relates to the theme of a lack of covered and indoor recreational spaces that emerged throughout the Needs Assessment process, including the following data from the question set regarding out-of-town travel for access to recreational facilities:

Q16 Do you travel outside of Bellingham to use recreational facilities?



- f) 67% of respondents report they travel outside of Bellingham for access to recreational facilities. A text analysis of the open-ended question of **where** people travel and **why** revealed people frequently travel to British Columbia and the greater Seattle area for access to modern, **indoor** recreational, ice (e.g., hockey, figure skating) based and aquatics facilities. People also travel to use roller derby and roller-skating facilities, sports courts for pickleball, volleyball, basketball etc., and skateparks. Sports tournaments were also noted as a reason for out of area travel. Text analysis files are attached in the appendices.
- g) Willingness to pay for access to these types of facilities needed to be examined to make future planning recommendations. The leading responses are illustrated below. A community recreation center, indoor hockey, indoor sports and aquatics facilities were identified as facilities

people are willing to admission fees to use. The full survey dataset can be found in the appendices.



Indoor Aquatic Center

I would not pay admission fees : 108



Not likely : 256



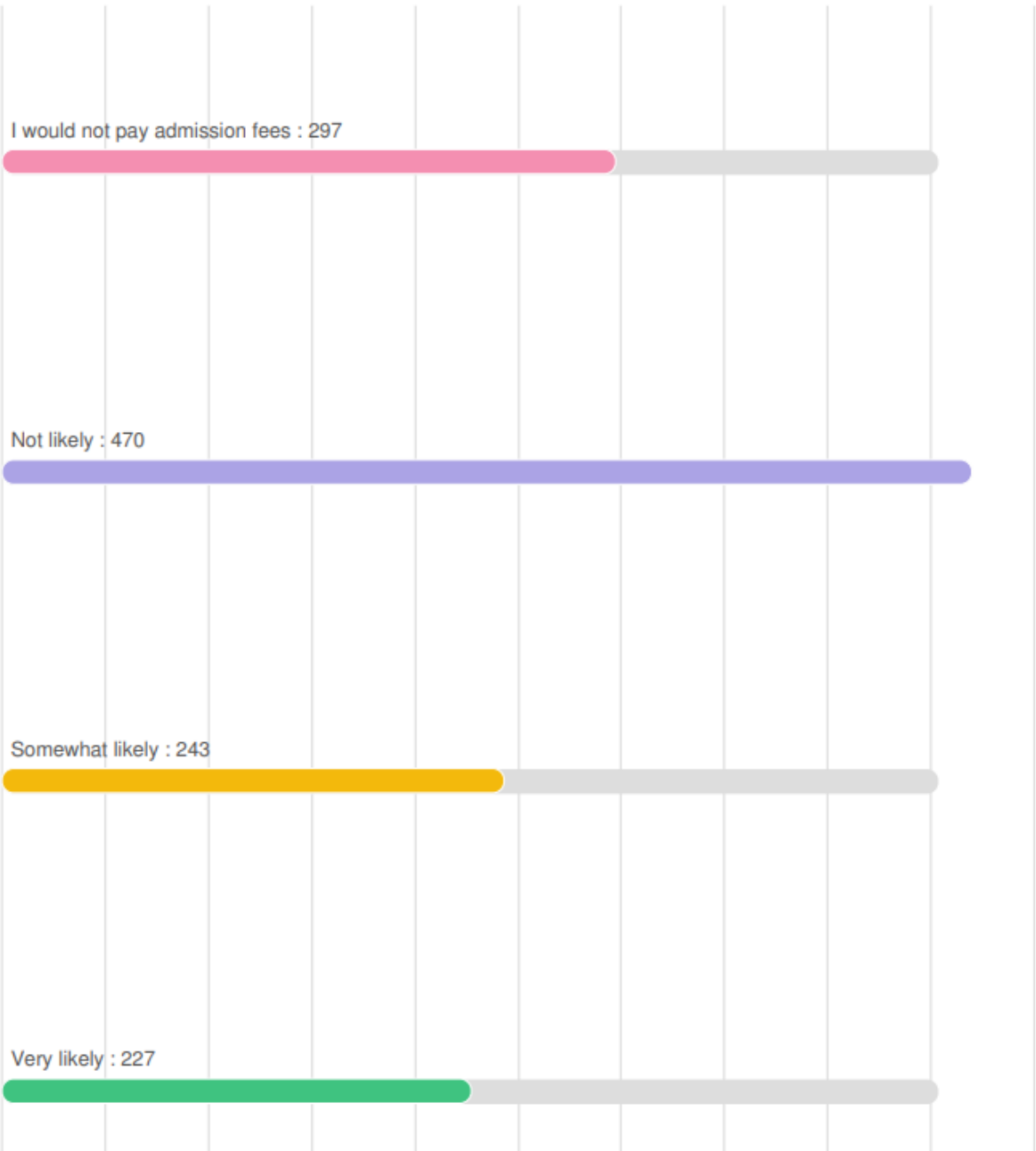
Somewhat likely : 357



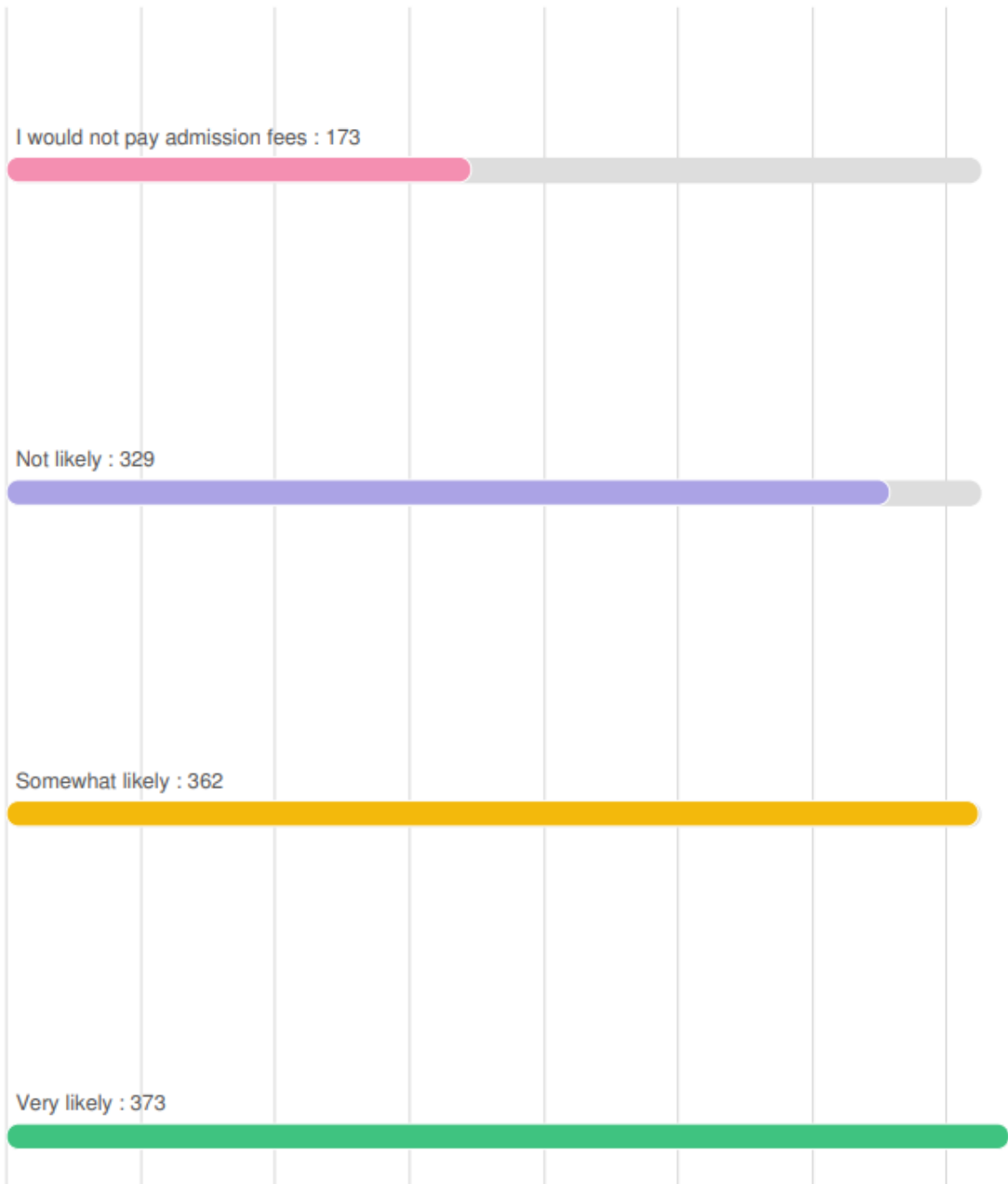
Very likely : 516



Indoor Hockey



Indoor Volleyball, basketball, pickleball, soccer



Indoor Aquatic Center

I would not pay admission fees : 108



Not likely : 256



Somewhat likely : 357

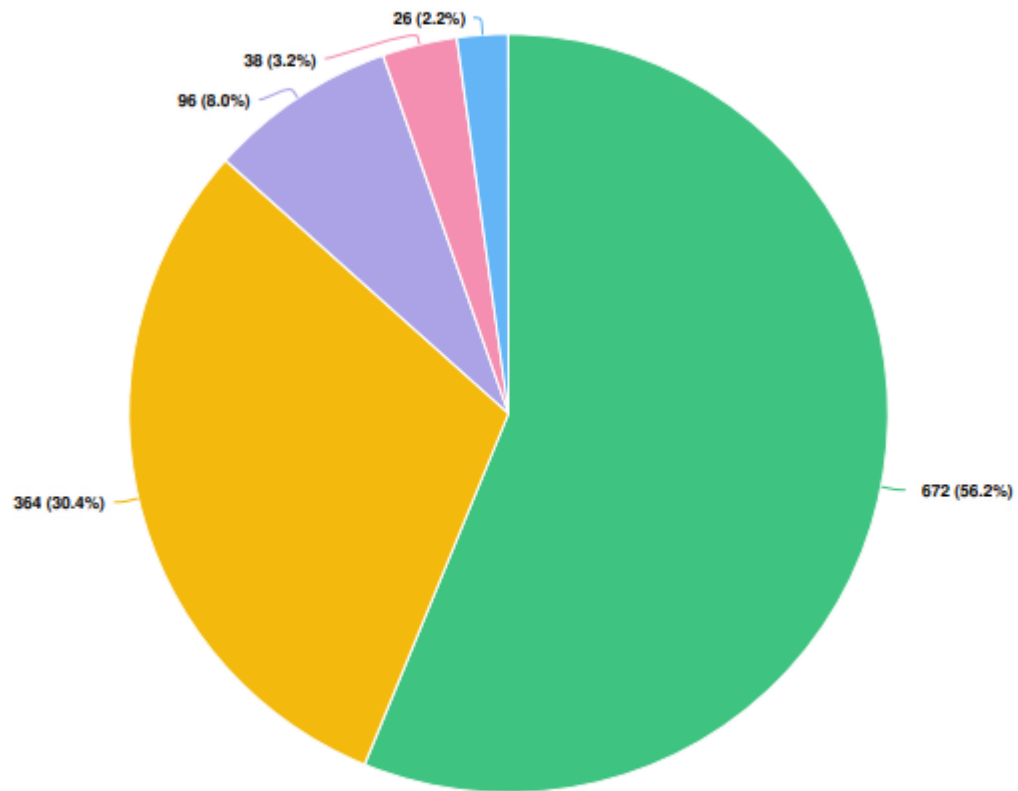


Very likely : 516



In addition to be willing to pay, the survey asked how much expendable income people are willing to pay per month to access recreational facilities. This data shows us only 2.2% of respondents aren't willing to pay anything to access recreational facilities, while 56.2% of respondents are willing to pay up to \$50 a month, and 30.4% are willing to pay up to \$100 per month to use recreational facilities.

Q13 How much money per month are you willing to spend on using recreational facilities?
Please answer for your entire household.



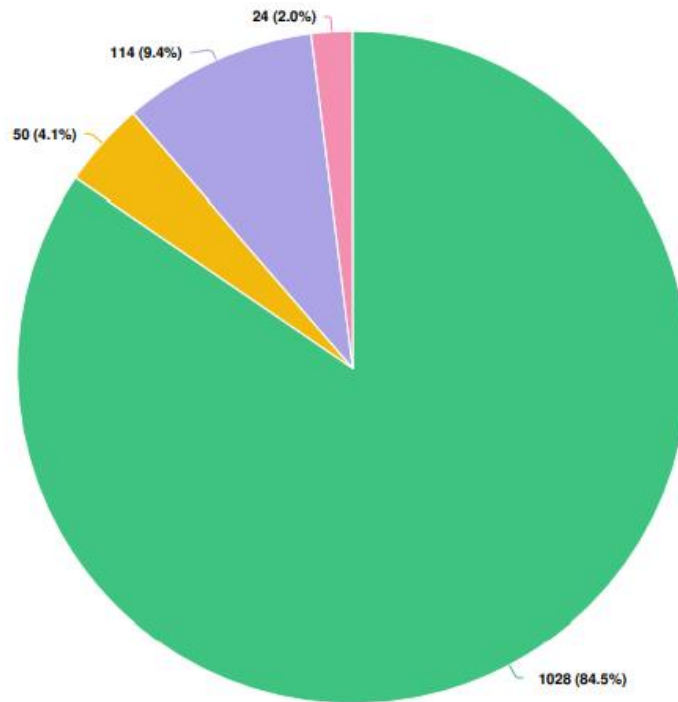
Question options

- I am not willing to spend anything to use recreational facilities
- 250 dollars and up
- 101-200 dollars
- 51-100 dollars
- 1-50 dollars

h) The final key finding relating to recreational facilities and willingness to pay regards community sentiment of tax dollar investments in addition to paying admission fees. It is important to attempt to measure this sentiment because it speaks to how the community values recreational

resources, and the potential success of future funding measures. 84.5% of respondents reported recreational facilities are worth the investment of tax dollars.

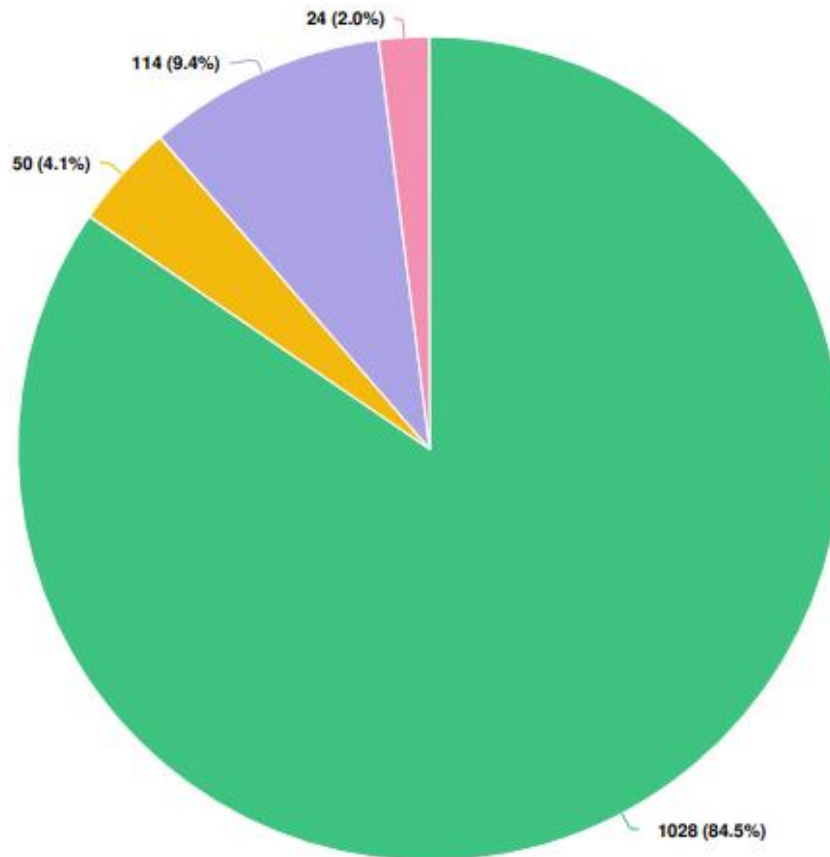
Q14 Do you believe these facilities are worth investment of tax dollars, even if you wouldn't be a frequent user?



Question options

- Other (please specify)
- Not sure
- No
- Yes

Q14 Do you believe these facilities are worth investment of tax dollars, even if you wouldn't be a frequent user?



Question options

Other (please specify) Not sure No Yes

Optional question (1216 response(s), 21 skipped)

KEY FINDINGS: AQUATICS

The City of Bellingham receives frequent feedback from interest groups regarding Arne Hanna Aquatic center capacity. The city is aware of the needs of competitive swim teams and advanced level swimmers as a result of consistent stakeholder feedback. While the need for colder water facilities to serve the competitive swim community should not be understated, we also needed data from the general public to better articulate the community’s aquatic needs. The data shows that the leading aquatic needs are increased lap lanes, family oriented “leisure” pools, and therapeutic warm water pools. More publicly available outdoor pools were also identified as an aquatic need.

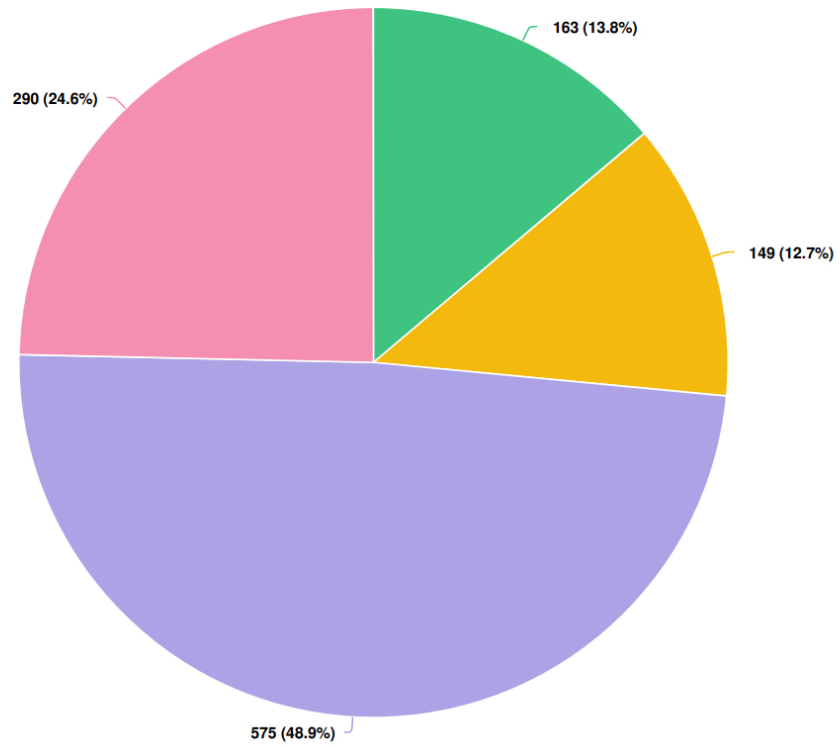


KEY FINDINGS: Recreation Programs

The Recreation Division's Community Recreation work group offers a diverse range of enrichment programs, community events and volunteer opportunities. The Programs section of the Needs Assessment focused on gathering information regarding level of satisfaction of current program offerings, understanding people's motivations for participation, awareness of our scholarship program, and learning more about what types of programming people wish to have available.

a) 75% of respondents participate in departmental recreation programs at least a few time a year.

Q21 How often do you participate in Bellingham Parks and Recreation programs or events?

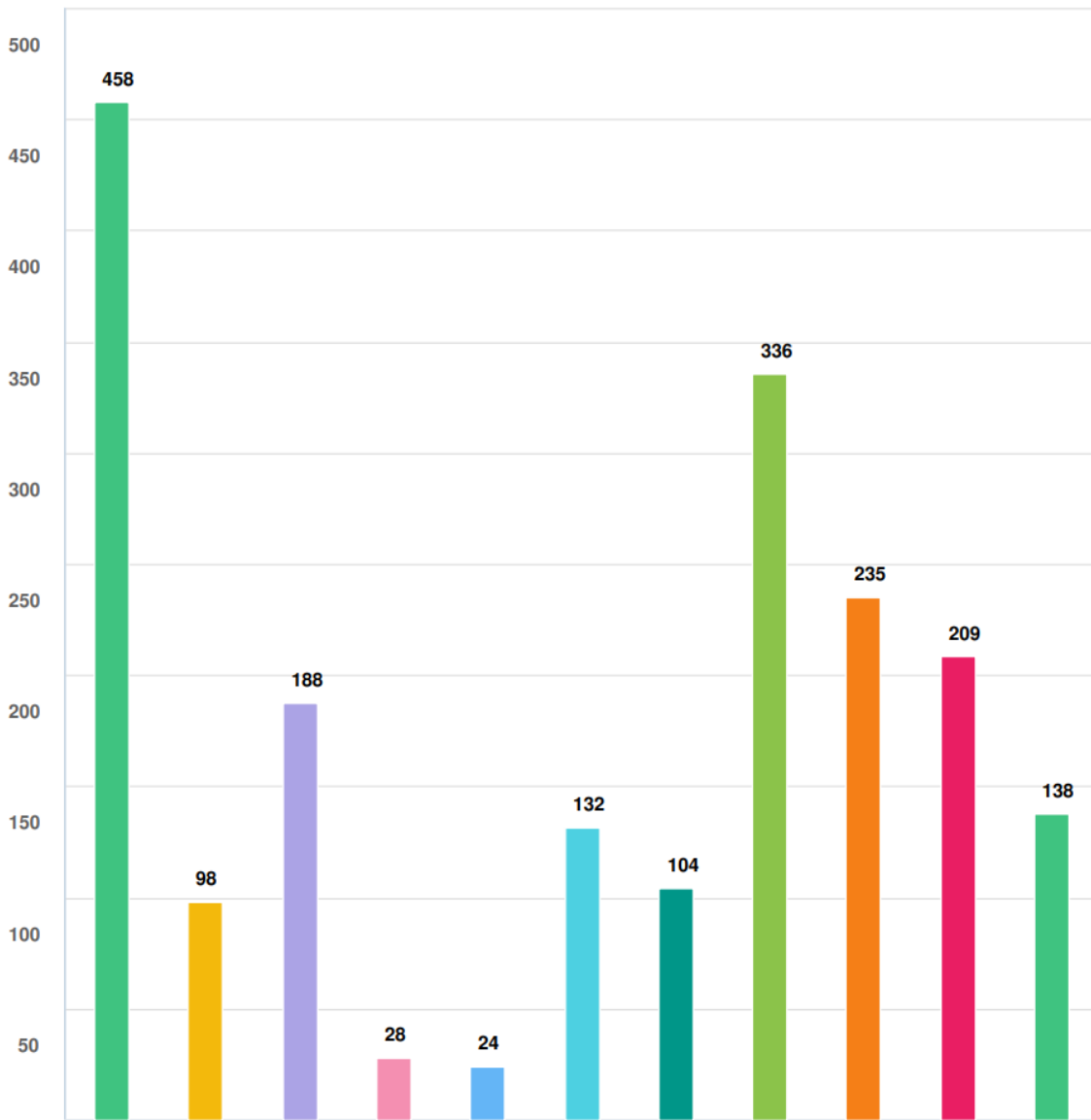


Question options

- I never participate in these programs
- A few times a year
- 6 or more times a year
- Once or more a month

b) Lack of time is again the leading constraint for participation. Lack of access to information, and the timing of programs also stand out.

Q22 I would sign up myself or a family member more if:

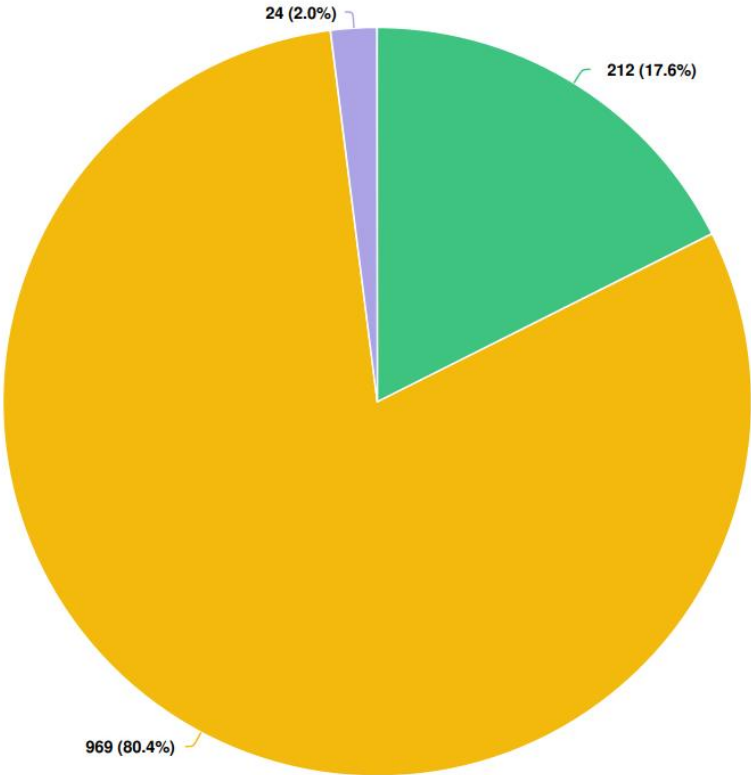


Question options

- Other (please specify)
- You offered more on weekends
- Programs were offered at different days or times
- I had better access to information
- Registration was easier
- I had someone to participate with
- I had stronger skills in a certain area (tell us in the other box below!)
- I had transportation
- I had more money
- I had childcare
- I had more time

c) On the same theme of lack of access to information, over 80% of respondents are not aware of the department's scholarship program.

Q6 Are you aware of our scholarship opportunities for youth and adults?



Question options
Option 3 No Yes

d) People primarily participate in recreational programs to support physical and mental health and wellness, and to reduce stress and anxiety. Enjoying nature is also a key motivator for participation.

Q24 | I/We participate in recreational programs in order to:

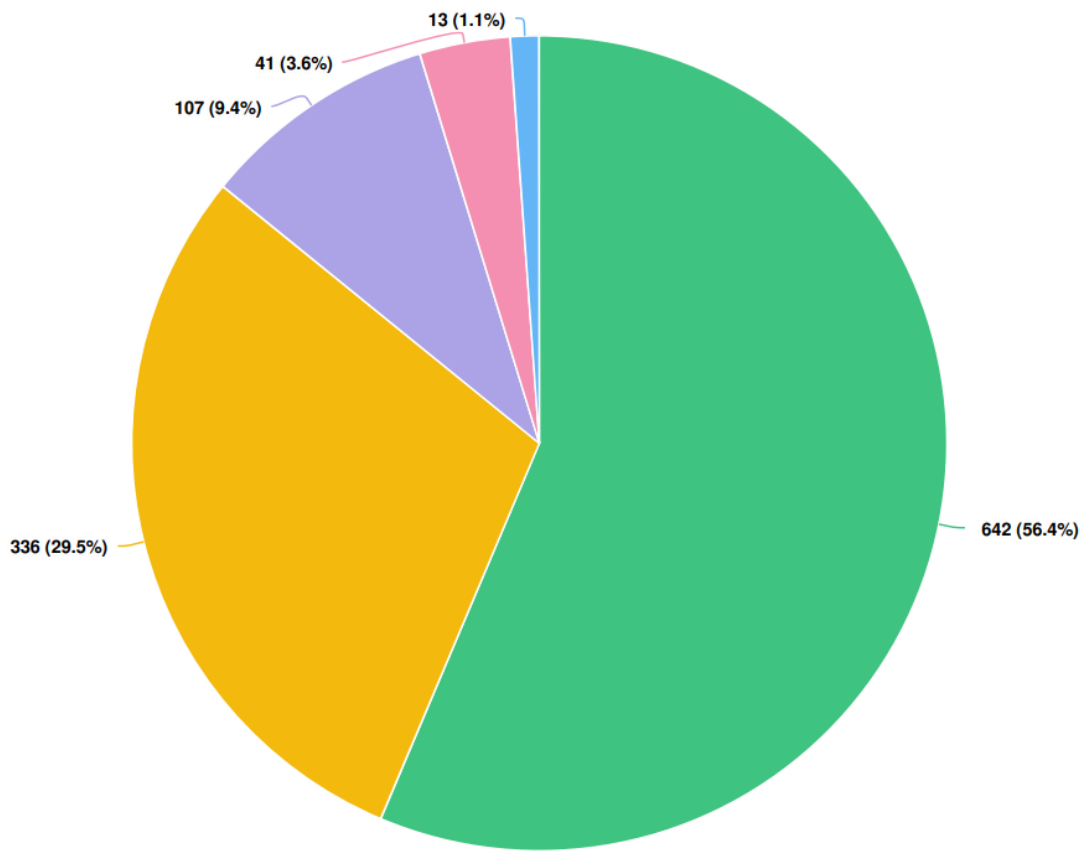


e) The survey also asked people how willing they are to pay for programs. Respondents are willing to pay more most programs, especially for competitive sports leagues and running events, outdoor programs, nature programs and adult education programs.



f) Respondents indicated they are most likely to spend up to \$50 a month on recreational programs. Only 1% of respondents said they aren't willing to spend any money monthly on program opportunities.

Q26 How much money per month are you willing to spend on recreational program/event fees? Answer for your entire household.

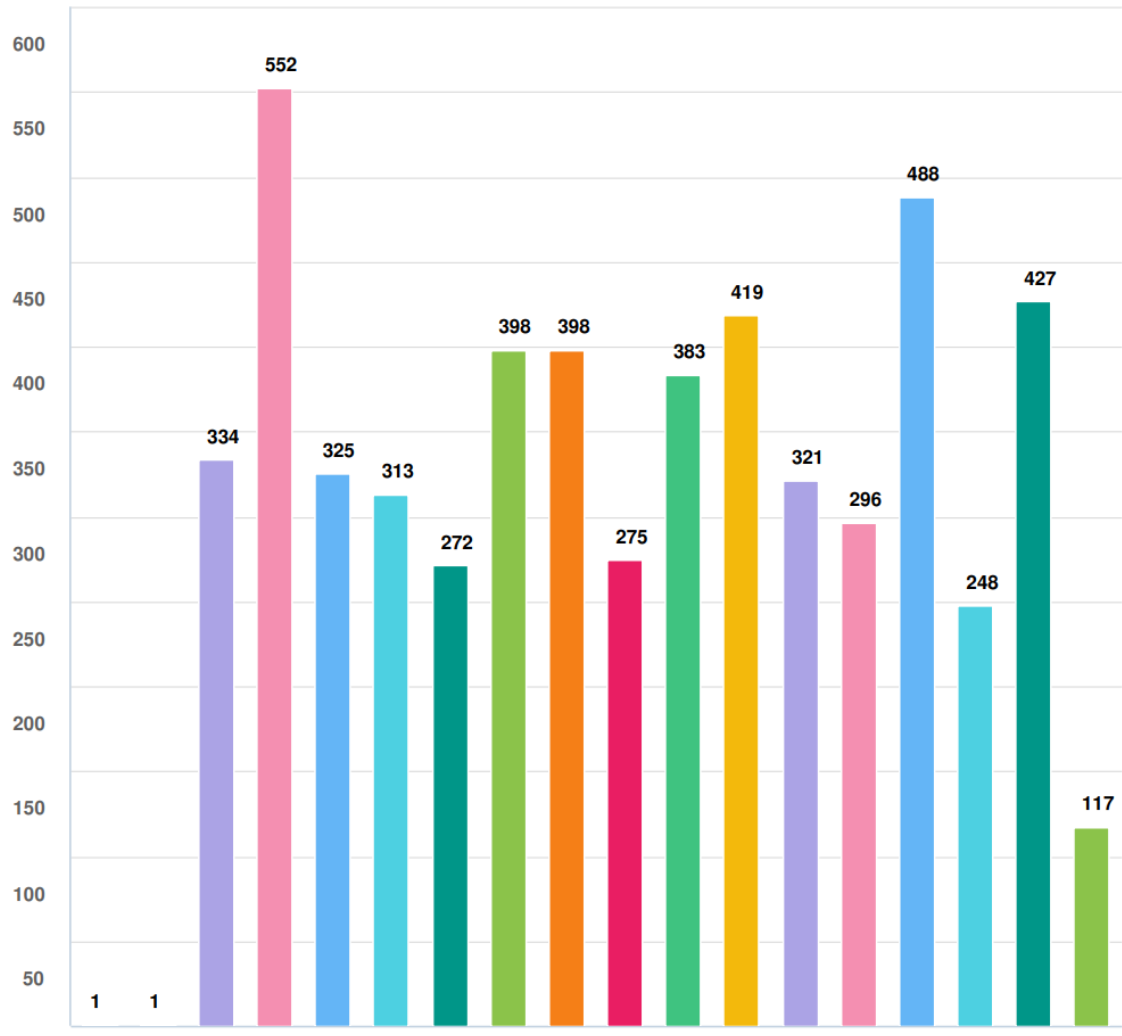


Question options

- I am not willing to spend anything to use recreational facilities
- 250 dollars or more
- 101-200 dollars
- 51-100 dollars
- 1-50 dollars

g) People would like to see a diverse set of program offerings, particularly in adult skill building and general enrichment opportunities, and outdoor and environmental education. Large scale concerts and community events also rated highly.

Q23 What types of programs would you like to see more of? Select as many as you wish.

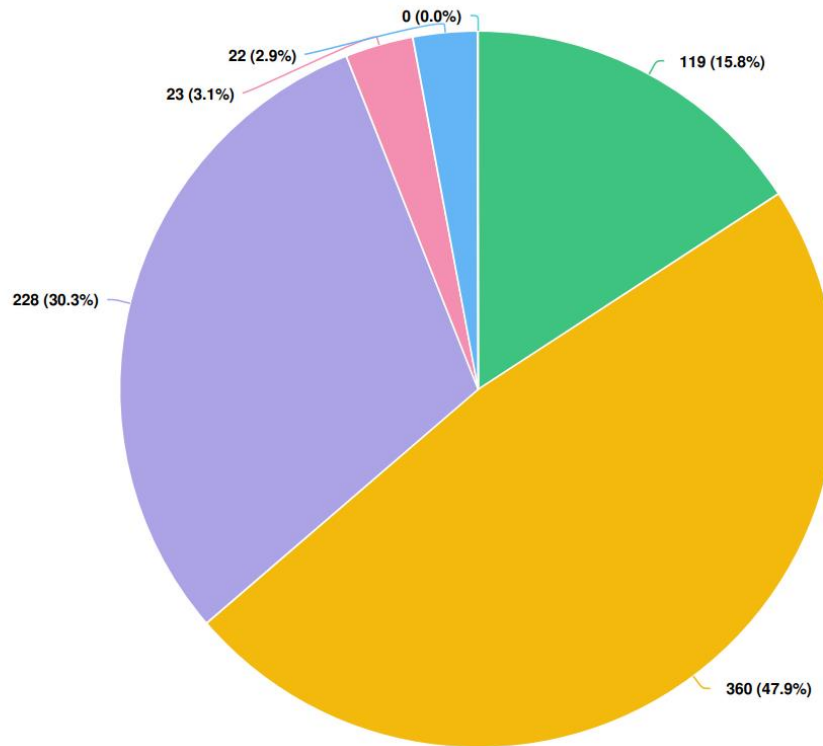


Question options

- Other ● Enrichment (cooking, dancing, crafting etc) ● Senior Citizen programs
- Outdoor and Environmental Education ● After-school programs for grades K-5 (with hours to accommodate working families)
- Youth sports ● Large scale concerts and events ● Winter Activities (skiing, snow shoeing etc.)
- Day trips (mountain trips, Seattle trips, professional sports games etc.) ● Fitness ● Aquatics
- Volunteer opportunities ● Adult Education (cultural awareness, creative writing, foreign language etc) ● Summer Camps
- Skill Building/vocational (woodworking, auto care, bike care, welding, carpentry etc).
- Youth Development (job training, financial readiness, life skills) ● Youth Sports ● After-school programs for grades K-5

h) Respondents who have participated in City offered recreation program report a high level of satisfaction with the quality of their experiences.

Q29 If you have participated in a program or event in the past two years, what did you think?



Question options

- It was terrible, I won't ever participate in anything with you again
- Other (please specify)
- Not great, not sure I would sign up again
- Satisfactory
- Very good
- Top notch, loved it

Key Findings: Community Meetings

The department hosted three community meetings for conversations regarding facilities and programs. The meetings were largely attended by a few well-organized interest groups:

1. Hockey and ice users at the Sportsplex
2. Pickleball Players
3. Youth Sport organizers
4. Disc golf players
5. Skatepark advocates

Common Themes:

1. The conditions of the Sportsplex are of significant concern
2. Capacity and difficulty getting ice time at the Sportsplex
3. We need additional sheets of ice, especially as interest for Hockey grows
4. There is a high level of hockey play and ice skating that occurs at the Sportsplex, and this brings people to town
5. We need more art programs, and senior programs. Seniors travel outside of Bellingham for these opportunities
6. Pickleball is growing faster than we can keep up with
7. We need covered, lighted facilities for all sports, but especially skateparks
8. The youth sport community is disorganized and there isn't a central place to get information
9. There is no girls' softball program (this is not equitable)
10. After very early intro levels, all youth sports become exclusive, pay to play programs. This isn't equitable
11. We don't have enough ballfields designed in a way to support interest or tournaments
12. Offering creative ways to reduce out of pocket registration costs, such as volunteer credits, would encourage participation, especially for college students

Process Limitations

The Needs Assessment, like any public survey process, had some methodology limitations:

- a) While we were able to translate certain outreach materials into Spanish, we were not able to translate the survey into other languages. We likely missed a portion of the population we would like to hear from because of this limitation
- b) We heard after the public comment periods that people were unaware of the Needs Assessment, and they wish they could have participated
- c) The requirement to create an Engage Bellingham profile deterred some people from participating in the survey
- d) COVID-19 meeting restrictions meant all community meetings were held online, as was the survey. People without access to technology were not able to participate in this process

- a) The volume of information collected means deeper, cross tabulated analysis can be conducted, but staff resources are limited

Recommendations

The information we gathered through this process will be used to inform departmental work plans and planning efforts.

Short-term recommendations:

1. Increase public awareness of recreational opportunities and the department's scholarship program, implement policy changes to reduce barriers to scholarship opportunities
2. Create a Sports task force to address organizational issues and make opportunities more equitable
3. Explore options for utilizing local facilities to ease facility constraints for indoor programming (e.g., Salvation Army, Bellis Fair Mall, etc.)
4. Create more adult and general enrichment program opportunities
5. Host several more interest specific meetings to keep the community engaged
6. Create and seek sponsors so department can increase program opportunities

Longer-term recommendations:

1. Engage consultants to explore locations and funding sources for indoor community recreation and aquatic facilities
2. Research options to make existing city facilities more multi-use, such as flooring to accommodate more sports, and how to upgrade Civic Field to accommodate larger scale events
3. Continue to study feasibility options of the Civic Athletic Complex
4. Continue to engage community stakeholders to identify potential service and facility partners