

CITY OF BELLINGHAM RESIDENTIAL SURVEY – Executive Summary

CENTER FOR ECONOMIC AND BUSINESS RESEARCH

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Prepared for
The City of Bellingham

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Overview

The 2020 City of Bellingham Residential Survey (Survey) and the corresponding survey of Peer Cities (National Study) is a collaboration between the City of Bellingham and the Center for Economic and Business Research (The Center) to collect information regarding City residents' views about issues facing the community.

This Survey is modeled after similar surveys administered by the City of Bellingham. Results from previous surveys (2008, 2010, 2013, 2016, and 2018) are used in a historical analysis of most questions. Each question is also analyzed to determine whether any significant response differences exist based on demographic subgroups.

About the Authors

The Center for Economic and Business Research is an outreach center at Western Washington University located within the College of Business and Economics. In addition to publishing the Puget Sound Economic Forecaster, the Center connects the resources found throughout the University to assist for-profit, non-profit, government agencies, quasi-government entities, and tribal communities in gathering and analyzing data to respond to specific questions. We use a collaborative approach to help inform our clients so that they are better able to hold policy discussions and craft decisions.

The Center employs students, staff, and faculty from across the University as well as outside resources to meet the individual needs of those we work with. Our work is based on academic approaches and rigor that not only provide a neutral analytical perspective but also provide applied learning opportunities. We focus on developing collaborative relationships with our clients and not simply delivering an end product.

The approaches we utilize are insightful, useful, and are all a part of the debate surrounding the topics we explore; however, none are fail-safe. Data, by nature, is challenged by how it is collected and how it is leveraged with other data sources. Following only one approach without deviation is ill-advised. We provide a variety of insights within our work – not only on the topic at hand but also on the resources (data) that inform that topic.

We are always seeking opportunities to bring the strengths of Western Washington University to fruition within our region. If you are looking for analysis work or have comments on this report, we encourage you to contact us at 360-650-3909 or by email at cebr@wwu.edu.

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The Center for Economic and Business Research is directed by Hart Hodges, Ph.D. and James McCafferty.

About the Survey

The Center for Economic and Business Research, located within the College of Business and Economics at Western Washington University, conducted the research and analysis services for this survey.

The purpose of this study is to seek feedback from Bellingham residents about their experience as citizens of the city of Bellingham. In addition to the Bellingham survey, this year a few questions were also posed to a national sample that included residents from five Peer Cities as identified by the The Center's "[Peer Cities: 2020 Update](#)" report – Flagstaff, AZ; Santa Cruz, CA; Fort Collins, CO; Asheville, NC; and Burlington, VT. A combination of multiple choice, rank order, and open-ended questions aim to gather information from respondents about their demographic details, quality of life, satisfaction with City services, opinions on budget priorities, views on challenges facing the community, and ideas for the future. The Survey is designed in reference to previous residential surveys conducted by the City of Bellingham. Questions aim to gather information surrounding and related to each of the nine Legacies and Strategic Commitments adopted by the Bellingham City Council, including:

- Clean, safe drinking water
- Healthy environment
- Vibrant sustainable economy
- Sense of place
- Safe and prepared community
- Mobility and connectivity options
- Access to quality of life amenities
- Quality, responsive City services
- Equity and social justice

The Center has worked with the City to make question adjustments to previous surveys that are expected to enhance readability, decrease response bias, and reflect the City's current priorities. This report includes historical analysis of most questions based on results from the previous surveys – it is noted when question or response wording differs from year to year.

Survey Methodology

Surveys were taken through an online survey form or by phone (Bellingham survey only) with a Western Washington University researcher. The survey was provided in both English and Spanish; however, no respondents opted to take the survey in Spanish. The Center sent out a letter and reminder postcard to 8,750 randomly selected Bellingham residences, including a description of the Survey purpose, as well as instructions for both phone and online response options. 7,000 addresses were selected randomly by Census Tract, with the sample size from each being primarily based on population size and with slight weighting based on income to gather more responses from lower-income areas, which often have lower response rates to surveys. Similarly, 1,750 of these addresses were a random sample of only renters in the hopes of gathering more responses.

The Bellingham survey was left open from late September to early November and the national survey ran from late October to early November. A total of 1,594 responses were obtained from Bellingham residents and 1,206 responses were received from residents of Peer Cities. With a 95 percent confidence level, the Bellingham survey has a +/- 2 percent margin of error and the Peer Cities survey has a +/- 3 percent margin of error. Respondents were able to skip questions at their discretion, so the total number of responses varies between questions.

The US Census Bureau estimates the 2019 population of Bellingham to be 92,314 based on an estimated 13.7% net migration from the 2010 census.

Executive Summary

The results from the 2020 City of Bellingham Residential Survey and National Study provide important insights about residents' opinions regarding City services and community priorities. While the quality of life in Bellingham is very high, there are notable trends regarding challenges facing the community and the City. We note the following key points and overall trends in reviewing the research.

Respondent Demographics

Respondent demographics from both the Bellingham and Peer City respondents are summarized here:

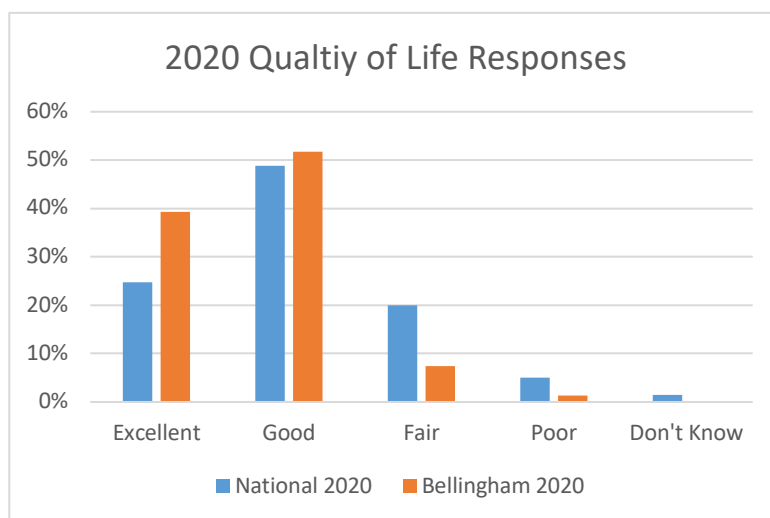
Demographics	Bellingham Census Demographics	Bellingham Survey	Peer City Survey
Residence Type	45% Homeowners	65% Homeowners 35% Renters	52% Homeowners 48% Renters
Gender	50.6% Female	53% Female 42% Male	62% Female 37% Male
Geography	Bellingham	All Bellingham Census Tracts	Peer Cities
Length of Residency	n/a	60% more than 10 years	47% more than 10 years
Age	14% over 65 15% under 18	34% over 65 28% under 40	12% over 65 53% under 40
Income	\$50,844 Median	59% over \$50,000	45% over \$50,000
Number of Respondents	35,694 Households	1,594	1,206
Timeline	Variable	September 28 – November 11	October 20 – November 4

Life in Bellingham

Respondents are **extremely positive about the overall quality of life in Bellingham**. Approximately 91 percent of respondents rated our city's quality of life positively (either *Excellent* or *Good*), while approximately 7 percent give a rating of *Fair*. Only 1 percent of respondents rated the quality of life in Bellingham as *Poor*.

In comparison, the national study showed a less positive perception of quality of life in Peer Cities. Only 74 percent of these respondents rated their city's quality of life positively, while 20 percent said the quality of life was *Fair* and 5 percent said their city's quality of life is *Poor*.

This represents a very positive conclusion that should be taken into account when considering the following results of the survey – **even though there are always ways for Bellingham to improve and grow, residents clearly appreciate and value it as a place to live**. Additionally, the thought and time that many respondents put into their open-end responses demonstrate that residents of Bellingham truly care about their city's future.



Summary of Notable Trends

Homelessness

The issue of homelessness is heavily present throughout survey responses. **Respondents rank *Homelessness* as the most important challenge facing Bellingham.** Additionally, hundreds of responses to open-end questions discuss the challenge of homelessness in Bellingham in depth. A few notable trends from these results include:

- **57 percent of respondents list that *Homelessness* is either the #1 or #2 top challenge facing Bellingham.** This is down from 61 percent in the 2018 study.
- Those who responded that the City's efforts to prevent crime and protect the community were either *Fair* or *Poor* elaborate that "**Homelessness**" contributed significantly to that rating. Many of these responses connect homelessness to other community concerns, including but not limited to topics such as:
 - Property crimes
 - Drug abuse
 - Downtown safety
 - Park/trail safety
 - Mental health
 - Social services
 - Loitering
- When asked what positive changes respondents would make as a City leader, **homelessness is the second most mentioned topic.** People also offer their ideas for solutions related to homelessness, including but not limited to topics such as:
 - Affordability
 - Improved public healthcare, including mental health
 - Job creation
 - Community involvement, especially with social issues and policies

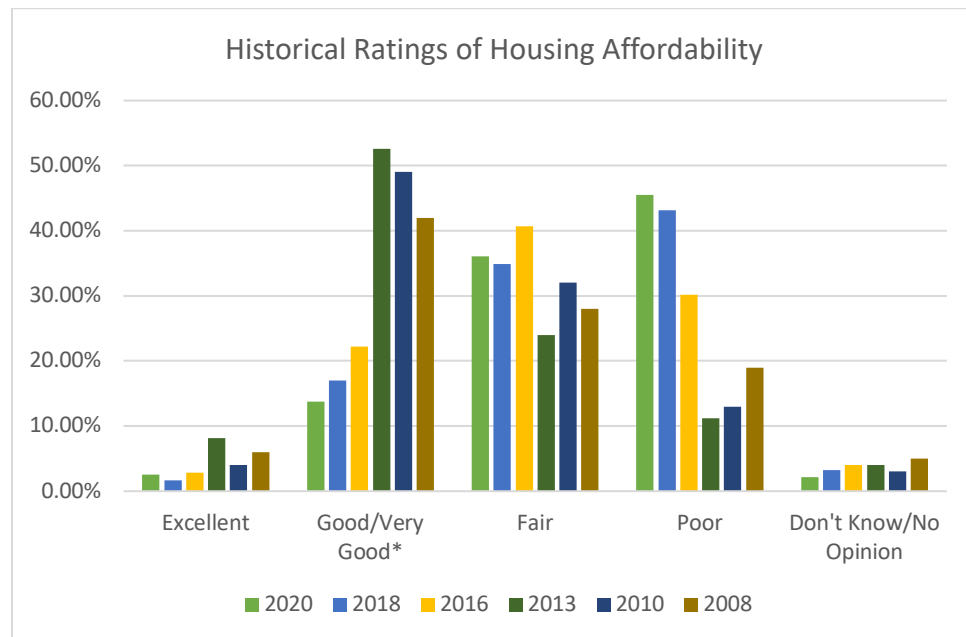
Housing Affordability

Housing affordability is rated as the **second most important challenge facing Bellingham** – 54 percent of respondents listed it as either the #1 or #2 most important challenge facing our city. This is up from 52 percent in 2018.

The current **ratings of housing affordability have dropped significantly since 2013.**

- Positive housing affordability ratings (*Excellent, Good, or Very Good**) have decreased to 16 percent (2020) from 19 percent (2018), 25 percent (2016), and 61 percent (2013) in prior years.
- Negative housing affordability ratings (*Fair or Poor*) have increased to 82 percent (2020), from 78 percent (2018), 71 percent (2016), and 35 percent (2013).

The decline in housing affordability is reflected throughout the state. In Washington State, median sales price rose to \$433,400 in the Second Quarter of 2020, a 5.6 percent increase from a year before. In Whatcom County, median sales price sits at \$428,900, a 5.2 percent increase from the previous year according to the Runstad Center for Real Estate Studies at the University of Washington.



*It should be noted that this year's survey only has four rating options: *Excellent, Good, Fair, and Poor*. Surveys prior to 2016 had five options: *Excellent, Very good, Good, Fair, and Poor*. Historical analysis combines previous ratings of *Very good* and *Good* into one category. Explanations of historical analysis observe the trends in the total of all positive responses (*Excellent, Good, or Very good**), and the total of all negative responses (*Fair or Poor*).

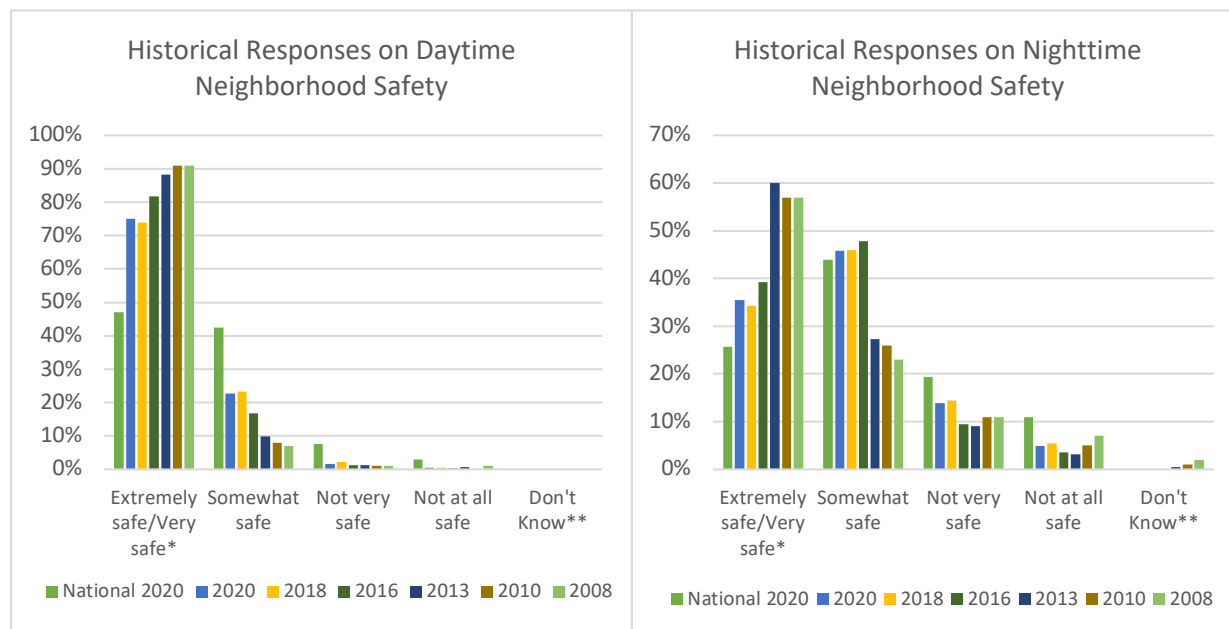
Neighborhood Safety

Neighborhood Safety is rated as the **fifth most important challenge facing Bellingham and the Peer Cities** – 14 percent of Bellingham respondents listed it as either the #1 or #2 most important challenge facing our city compared to 20 percent of the national sample. Among Bellingham respondents, the *Neighborhood Safety* dropped from the third most important challenge in 2018 to the fifth in 2020, with a 6-percentage point drop in those ranking it #1 or #2 – the result of *Economic Development* maintaining its rank as the fourth most important challenge and the inclusion of *Equity and Social Justice* (third most important) in this survey.

For Bellingham, 2020 respondents had similar feelings of safety to 2018 respondents. **National respondents, on the other hand, were far more likely to feel unsafe** walking alone in their neighborhood at night or during the day when compared to Bellingham respondents.

Notable **demographic differences** in responses concerning nighttime neighborhood safety include:

- Among Bellingham respondents, women feel less safe than men when walking alone in their neighborhoods at night. Only 26 percent of women feel *Extremely safe* walking alone in their neighborhoods at night compared to 44 percent of men.
- Among national respondents, women feel less safe than men when walking alone in their neighborhoods at night. Only 17 percent of women feel *Extremely safe* walking alone in their neighborhoods at night compared to 41 percent of men.



* This year the survey only offered four levels of safety as options: *Extremely safe*, *Somewhat safe*, *Not very safe*, and *Not at all safe*. Surveys prior to 2016 included a fifth option of *Very safe*, which has been included with the *Extremely safe* section in our historical analysis figures.

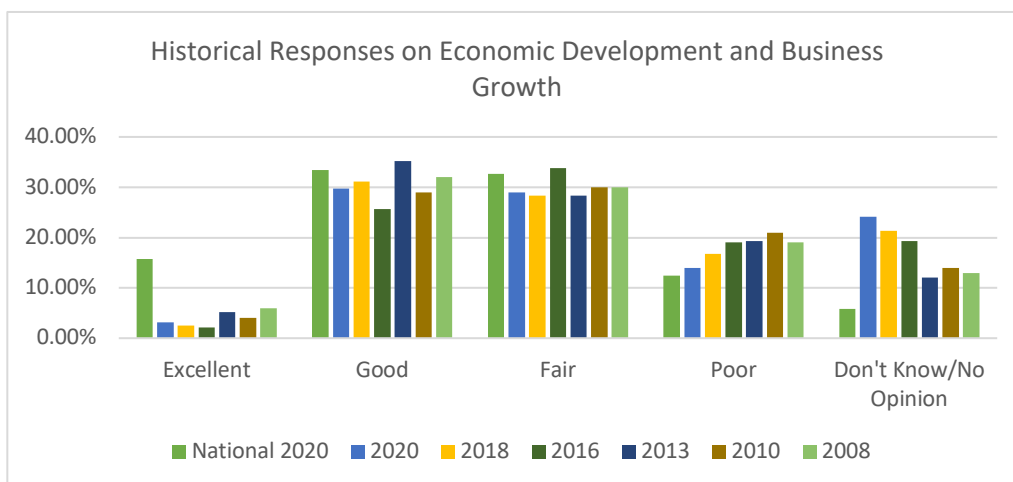
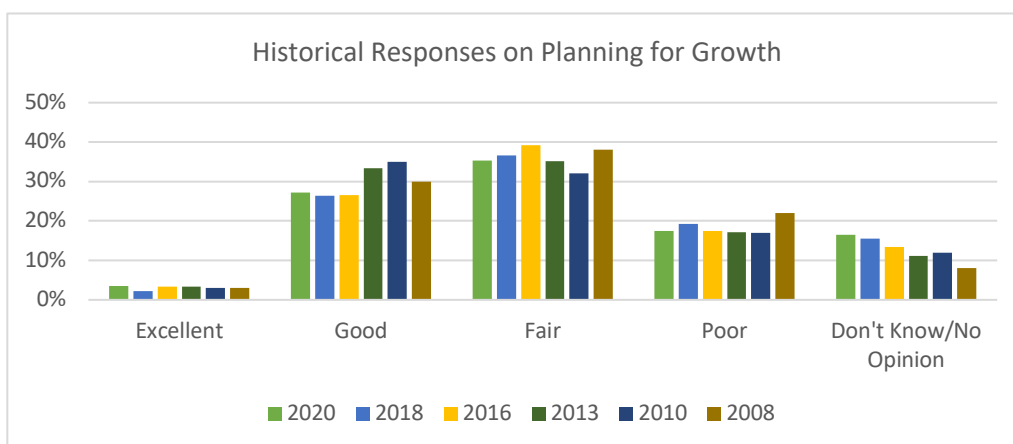
** The 2013, 2010 and 2008 Survey also offered a *Don't Know* option.

Growth and Economic Development

Economic development is notably rated as the **fourth most important challenge facing Bellingham** – 14 percent of respondents listed it as either the #1 or #2 challenge facing our city, down from 19 percent in 2018. The national sample ranked economic development third, with 19 percent ranking it #1 or #2.

Historically, there has been a negative trend concerning respondents' views of the job the City is doing to plan for future growth overall. 2020 marks an **increase to 2016 levels of approval regarding the City's efforts planning for growth**. This survey, 30 percent of respondents rate the City's efforts planning for growth as *Excellent* (3 percent), or *Good* (27 percent), up from the 29 percent positive rate in 2018, similar to the 30 percent positive response rate in 2016, and down from 36 percent in 2013, 38 percent in 2010, and 33 percent in 2008.

Additionally, many Bellingham respondents think there is **room to grow when it comes to the City's efforts encouraging economic development and business growth**. Just over 3 percent rate the City's efforts in this area as *Excellent*, 30 percent rate *Good*, 29 percent rate *Fair*, and 14 percent believe the City's efforts are *Poor*. 24 percent answered *Don't Know/No Opinion* (a sharp increase from previous years). Among national respondents, rates of *Don't Know/No opinion* were far lower (6 percent) and those who did have an opinion generally viewed their city's efforts more positively than the Bellingham respondents.



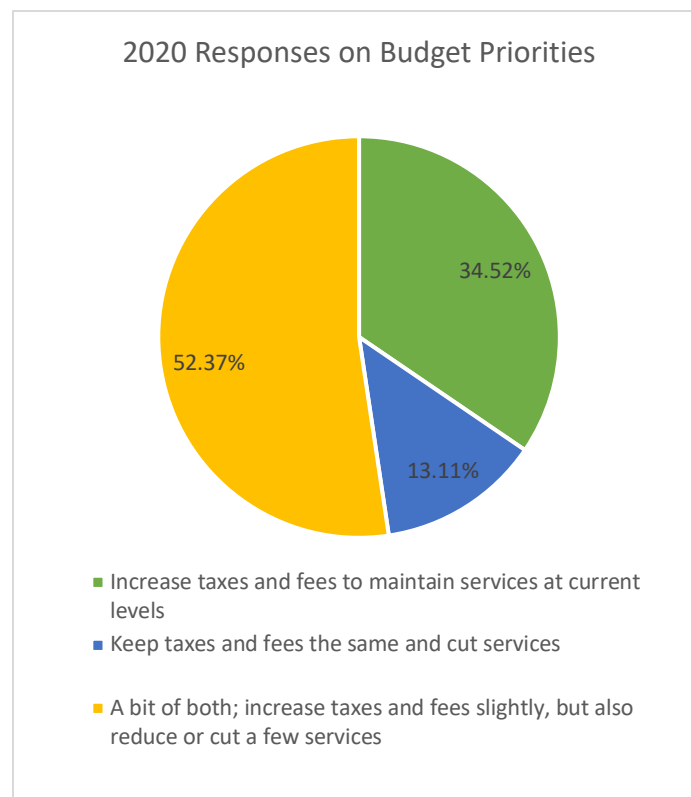
Budget Preferences

A common trend in responses to questions about the City budget is that **respondents would rather increase taxes and fees than cut services**.

Concerning overall budget priorities, more than half (52 percent) of respondents would prefer a *combination* of increasing taxes/fees and reducing services. 34 percent would prefer to *increase taxes/fees* and keep services at current levels, and 13 percent would prefer to *reduce services* and keep taxes/fees the same.

In a following question, respondents rank services (that rely on taxpayer dollars) based on budget priority. It is worth noting that *Preventing Crime* was frequently cited as a #1 priority as well as a #11 (lowest) priority.

- **High priority services** include *Emergency Response Services* (30 percent rated #1), *Environmental Protection* (22 percent rated #1), and *Crime Prevention* (21 percent rated #1).
- **Low priority services** include *Culture and arts experiences* (22 percent rated last), *Recreational programs* (18 percent rated last), *Pedestrian/bicyclist safety* (14 percent rated last), and *Crime Prevention* (13 percent rated last).

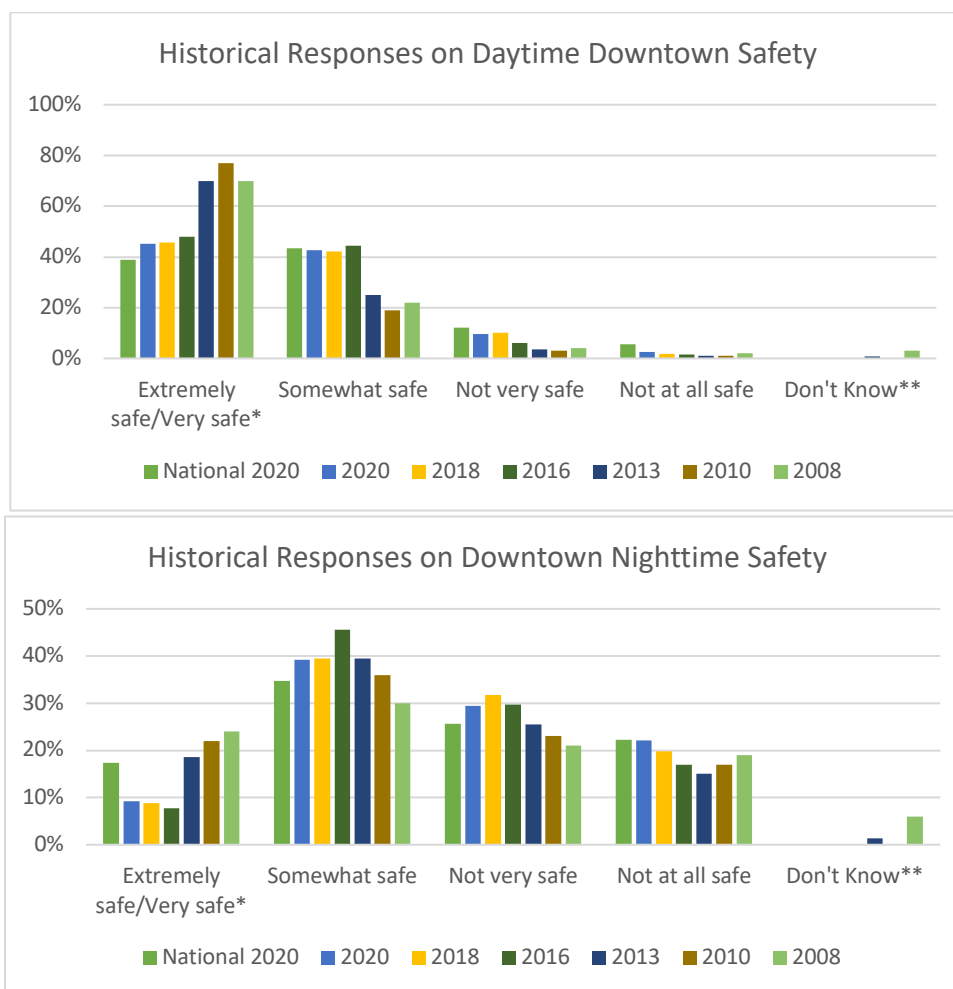


Feelings of Safety Downtown

Bellingham respondents report feeling **less safe downtown during the day and night** than in any previous survey. In comparison, the national respondents were *more likely* than Bellingham respondents to feel *unsafe during the day* and *more likely to feel safe at night*.

Notable **demographic differences** in responses concerning nighttime downtown safety include:

- Among Bellingham respondents, women feel less safe than men when walking alone downtown at night. When walking alone downtown at night, 56 percent of men feel safe downtown (*Extremely safe* or *Somewhat safe*) as opposed to 41 percent of women.
- Similarly, among national respondents, women feel less safe than men when walking alone downtown at night. When walking alone downtown at night, 69 percent of men feel safe downtown (*Extremely safe* or *Somewhat safe*) as opposed to 42 percent of women.



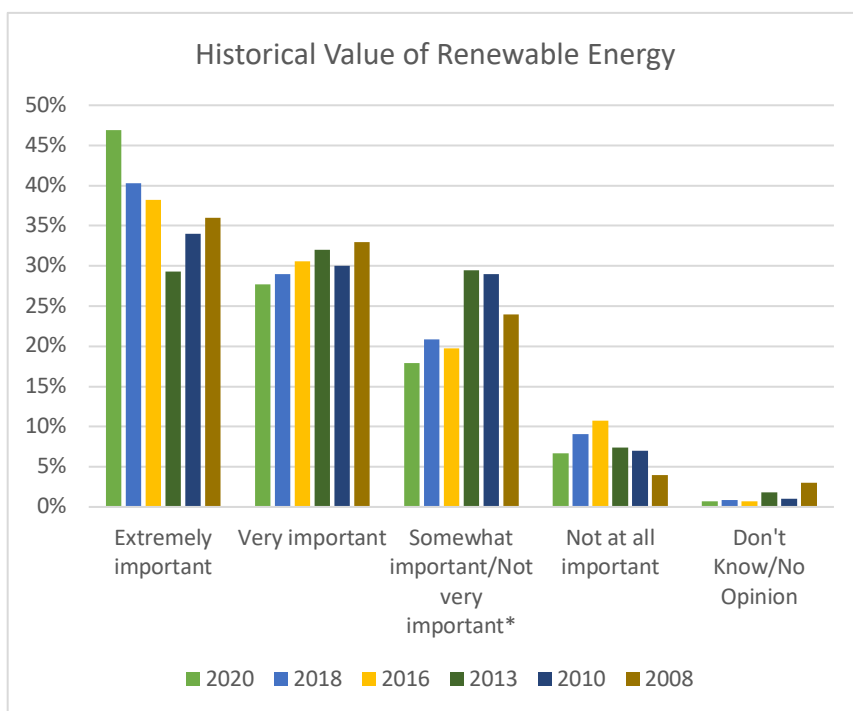
* Since 2016, the survey includes only four levels of safety as options: *Extremely safe*, *Somewhat safe*, *Not very safe*, and *Not at all safe*. Previous surveys included a fifth option of *Very safe*, which has been included with the *Extremely safe* section in our historical analysis figures. The 2013 and 2008 Survey also offered a *Don't Know* option.

Renewable Energy

Promoting the use of renewable energy (such as green and solar power) is viewed by current respondents as more important than in any other survey year.

75 percent of respondents think it is *Extremely* (47 percent) or *Very* (28 percent) *important* for the City to promote the use renewable energy, such as green and solar power.

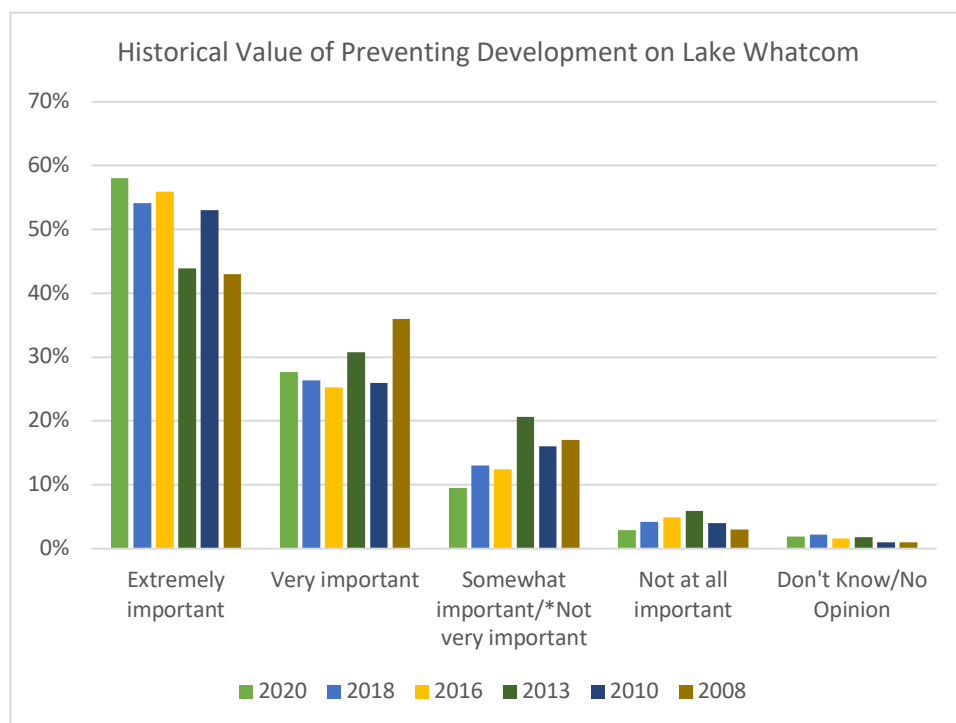
However, 7 percent of respondents consider promoting renewable energy use to be *Not at all important*, which is a continuation of the decrease seen since the 2016 peak of 11 percent.



Lake Whatcom Watershed

Historically, views of the importance of preventing development on Lake Whatcom have varied – this survey, respondents view this environmental action as more important than their 2018 counterparts.

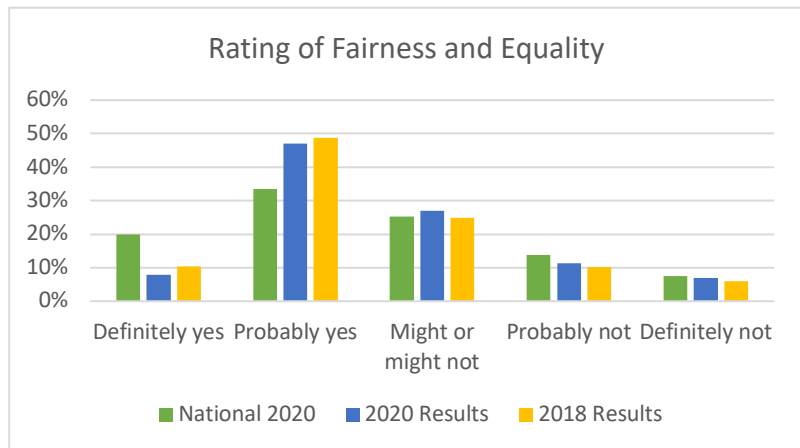
A distinguished majority of respondents (86 percent) think it is *Extremely* or *Very important* for the City to prevent further development in the Lake Whatcom watershed. Only 3 percent of respondents think this action is *Not at all important*.



Equitability of City Resources

The 2020 study was the second to include a section regarding public perception of fairness and equality in the City of Bellingham, as well as the first to include *Equity and Social Justice* on a variety of questions.

Equity and Social Justice was ranked 7th out of 15 things that respondents value about Bellingham. It was also ranked as the 3rd most important challenge (out of 12) facing Bellingham and the 5th most important challenge according to respondents in Peer Cities.



55 percent (down from 59 percent in 2018) of Bellingham respondents think their city *Definitely* or *Probably* treats all residents and visitors equally and fairly compared to 54 percent of national respondents.

However, 18 percent (up from 16 percent in 2018) of Bellingham respondents consider the City's treatment of residents and visitors to *Probably* or *Definitely* not be fair and equal compared to 22 percent of national respondents.

When asked how the City of Bellingham was doing in terms of equitability in different aspects of support and services offered, respondents felt that the City of Bellingham was least equitable with regard to:

- *Housing options and affordability*
- *Racial/Cultural diversity*
- *Racial/Cultural integration*

Respondents felt that the City of Bellingham was most equitable with regard to:

- *Providing physical access to public facilities*
- *Supporting community celebration and events*
- *Providing adequate inclusive services for diverse sexual orientations*