

Community Survey Results Update of the Comprehensive Plan Brunswick, Maine

Introduction

As part of the process of updating the Town's Comprehensive Plan, the Comprehensive Plan Update Committee felt that it was important to provide the citizens of our community with a variety of opportunities to have their views considered. One method used to gather this input was through a mail survey of a sample of the Town's households. This report presents the results of the community survey.

The community survey provides a snapshot of the opinions of residents at a point in time. No effort was made in the questionnaire to "educate" the respondents to the issues facing our community nor the possible merits of various approaches for addressing these issues. Therefore, the responses represent the current opinions and perceptions of the respondents without additional information.

The results of the survey need to be interpreted and used in this context. In some cases, respondents may have had considerable knowledge about the subject of a question as a result of recent public discussions while, in other cases, respondents may have had little or no prior familiarity with the topic. This disparity needs to be considered in interpreting the results.

In particular, the survey shows that where the town has discussed capital or other municipal needs, respondents are generally supportive of addressing those needs. However, where needs have not been presented to the public or widely discussed, support for addressing those needs appears to be lacking.

Methodology

The Comprehensive Plan Update Committee identified the topics to be covered in the survey. Market Decisions then worked with the committee to develop the questionnaire that was used in the survey.

The Comprehensive Plan Update Committee decided that a mail survey of a sample of Brunswick households provided the best balance between the reliability of the results and the cost of doing the survey. Market Decisions collected the data via multi stage mailings of a survey booklet and computerized scanning of survey results.

Market Decisions mailed the survey booklet to a sample of Brunswick households. A list of all Brunswick residential addresses was obtained from a commercial mail firm. Market Decisions randomly selected 1500 addresses from this list to receive survey mailings. Each address was first mailed a package consisting of a survey booklet with an introductory letter, instructions and a business reply envelope. One week after the initial mailing, a postcard reminder was sent to all addresses. Two weeks after the initial mailing, a second survey package with all elements of the first package was sent to all addresses that had not yet returned a survey.

Market Decisions scanned all survey data was using in-house scanners and the data was automatically tabulated. Any surveys that had multiple responses to questions or had unclear markings had responses visually validated. Since all surveys were marked with unique codes, only one response per residence was tabulated.

In total, 116 surveys of the original 1,500 were returned due to bad addresses. This resulted in a usable sample of 1,384 households. Of these, 523 households returned questionnaires with responses, resulting in an overall response rate for the survey of 38%. Response rates for similar surveys conducted by Market Decisions in other Maine communities have ranged from 25% to 36%.

The results presented in this report have been weighted to reflect the actual distribution of Brunswick residents with respect to their age, education, and annual household income. Other differences between the population and the characteristics of those who returned surveys were not significantly different.

The weights were calculated by dividing the percentage of the actual Brunswick population (based on the 2000 US Census) in a given group by the percentage of the sample belonging to the same group. Because percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number, they do not always sum exactly to 100%.

The overall precision (sampling error) of the weighted results is plus or minus 4.3%. Therefore we can say with 95% confidence that the answers from the entire population would be within plus or minus 4.3% of the survey results. A 95% confidence level means that if the survey were repeated, the results would be within the margin of error 95% of the time.

Executive Summary

The Update Committee focused the community survey on a number of major topics that are being addressed in the Update of the Comprehensive Plan. These included the rate of growth in the community, the desired pattern of future residential and economic development and possible ways for achieving it, affordable housing, open space, public facilities, and the school system. The following section provides an overview of the

results. The final section of the report provides the detailed, weighted responses for each question.

1. Rate of Growth

A sizable group of respondents feel that the community is growing too fast from a residential perspective (see Question 2) while a slightly smaller group feels that the rate of residential growth is about right. About 45% felt residential development is too fast, 40% felt it is about right, and 15% felt residential growth was too slow.

In contrast, respondents felt that commercial and industrial growth and development has been somewhat too slow (see Question 9). About 38% felt commercial and industrial development was too slow, 44% felt it is about right, and 18% felt it was too fast.

2. Pattern of Development

More than half of the respondents (53%) indicated support for the Town's policy of encouraging growth in "growth areas" and discouraging growth in "rural areas" (see Question 3). About 25% of respondents opposed this policy while 22% were neutral, neither supporting nor opposing the policy.

3. Support for Residential Growth Management Actions

The survey asked respondents to indicate their support or opposition for a range of possible activities that could be used to manage how Brunswick grows and develops residentially (see Question 5). The highest levels of support were for the options that limit the number of new units that can be built either anywhere in town (59%) or in the rural area (58%). Just over half of the respondents supported providing financial incentives for the extension of sewer and water service (53%), allowing townhouses to be built in growth areas now limited to single-family homes (51%), and allowing property owners in the growth area to build more units in return for preserving natural areas (51%). About 43% of respondents supported the concept of requiring developers to build at least a certain minimum number of units on a property. Only a third of respondents supported allowing owners within the growth area to develop a higher density than currently allowed by the zoning.

4. Affordable Housing

Four out of every five respondents (80%) agreed with the statement that "There is a lack of housing in Brunswick that lower and middle income families can afford" (see Question 6). In terms of priorities among age groups for providing affordable housing, all groups were rated similarly (see Question 8) with over 80% of respondents supporting providing adequate affordable housing for all ages (82%), young families (84%), and elderly households (88%).

When asked about the Town's role with respect to providing affordable housing, just over half (51%) of respondents felt that the town should support affordable housing but should not spend local tax money on it (see Question 7). About 20% felt the Town should not be involved in the issue while almost 30% felt that the Town should support affordable housing by using local tax money.

5. Commercial and Economic Development

The survey asked respondents to indicate their support or opposition for various policies dealing with how Brunswick grows and develops from an economic perspective (see Question 10). The highest level of support was for the option that called for support for efforts to maintain the economic vitality of downtown (85%) followed by supporting a wider diversity of activity at Cook's Corner (64%). Over half (55%) supported limiting retail growth to existing commercial areas. Opinion about providing financial assistance for extending water and sewer service had 44% supporting and 32% opposing.

When asked about what types of businesses should be able to locate in a new business park if one were developed (see Question 12), more than half (54%) of the respondents selected the option that limited occupancy to businesses that create quality jobs. About a quarter (24%) felt any business should be allowed to move into the park while 14% supported limiting occupancy to businesses that pay significant taxes.

6. Support for Economic Development Activities

The survey asked respondents to indicate their support or opposition for a range of possible activities that could be used to encourage economic growth (see Question 11). The highest levels of support were for the options supporting farming (73%) and natural resource based businesses (73%). Over 2/3's (69%) supported the construction of a "perimeter road" at Cook's Corner. The remaining possible actions (developing an incubator building, providing tax rebates for start-ups, building a parking garage downtown, and developing a new business park) were supported by 43% to 47% of respondents.

7. Open Space Preservation

Between two-thirds and three-quarters of respondents supported various options for preserving additional natural and scenic areas and trails in both rural and growth areas (see Question 13). At the same time, there were low levels of support for most options suggested for doing this. While over half (53%) supported expanded property tax rebates for the protection of these areas, support for other actions was lower – 35% for requiring property owners to set aside part of their land as open space if they develop it, 28% for buying development rights from rural land owners, 26% for acquiring the land with property taxes, and 23% for regulation.

8. Consolidated Services

Just over half of respondents supported consolidating or coordinating services or facilities with other communities to reduce costs.

9. Facility Priorities

Respondents were asked to rank the relative priority of a number of possible new or improved facilities (see Question 16). Renovation of the Central Fire Station and construction of a fire sub-station at Cook's Corner received the highest priority. Expansion of police facilities and improved sidewalks were the next highest priorities followed by building a new elementary school and developing a multipurpose community/recreation center. Other possible projects including a recreation area in East Brunswick, expanded bicycle facilities, developing a business park, creating a "Land for Brunswick's Future" fund, building a parking garage, and developing playing fields ranked lower. Modernizing Town Hall was the lowest priority project.

10. Schools

Only 24% of respondents have children attending Brunswick schools (see Question 19). Most respondents gave the school system a grade of 3 or 4 on a scale of 1 to 5 where 5 is excellent on the quality of school facilities and quality of school programming and offerings (see Question 18). About one in five respondents gave the system an excellent rating on these factors. Almost a half of the respondents with children in Brunswick schools said they were very satisfied with the overall quality of their child's educational experience while an additional 32% indicated they were somewhat satisfied. Over one in five indicated a level of dissatisfaction with the experience.