

Citizen Survey Results

MEMO TO: East Brookfield Master Plan Committee
FROM: Stephen Wallace, CMRPC
DATE: May 17, 2005
SUBJECT: Analysis of citizen survey results

I've taken some time to analyze the tabulated survey numbers and provide some interpretation as to what they might possibly tell us. The good news is that the survey results and the comments heard at the 3/23 public forum are very much in line with each other.

Question #1: How would you rate East Brookfield as.....

...a place to live.

For the first three blocks of questions, I've subtracted all blank responses and those indicating no opinion, so that what we are left with are the people who wanted to respond to the questions. In terms of rating East Brookfield as a place to live, 90% rated the Town as excellent or good, while only 10% rated the Town as fair to poor. This tells us that nine out of ten survey respondents like living in East Brookfield (no surprise).

...a place to raise children.

This question saw 87% of respondents rating the Town as an excellent or good place to raise children, while 13% rated the Town as a fair to poor place to raise children; again, no surprises here.

....a place to do business.

This question saw only 41% of respondents rating the Town as an excellent or good place to do business, while 59% rated the Town as a fair to poor place to do business. This should raise a red flag that business environment in East Brookfield is weak and needs improvement. This is not surprising when one considers that East Brookfield will derive 92% of its tax base from residential property taxes and only 6.4% from business and industry property taxes (the remaining 1.6% is made up from personal property taxes). Towns that derive more than 90% of its tax base from residential property taxes is indicative of being a bedroom community. Clearly, the Master Plan's Economic Development chapter will need to include some strategies for improving East Brookfield's business climate.

...as a place to retire.

This question saw 64% of respondents rating the Town as an excellent or good place to retire, while 36% rated the Town as a fair to poor place to retire. This was surprising as I thought the percentage of excellent-to-good responses would be higher. What would make 36% of respondents rate the Town as fair-to-poor in this regard? Is it the property tax burden, high cost of housing, lack of municipal services? I'm not sure I have enough information to make an interpretation here.

Question #2: Rate the Following Town Services.

Library

Roughly 60% of survey respondents rated the library as excellent or good while 40% rated it as fair to poor. This is surprising as libraries usually fair very well when rated as part of Master Plan surveys. What would account for this? Is it the facility itself, its location, or limited hours? Feel free to hazard a guess here.

Planning & Zoning

Roughly 67% of survey respondents rated this service as excellent or good while 33% rated it as fair to poor. This is within the typical range for planning when rated as part of Master Plan surveys. As a Board that occasionally has to say “no”, it would be surprising if it received a higher rating.

Public Health

Roughly 69% of survey respondents rated this service as excellent or good while 31% rated it as fair to poor, a typical response rate for this service.

Protection of Water Resources

Roughly 77% of survey respondents rated this service as excellent or good while 23% rated it as fair to poor. The high excellent/good response rate is surprising when one considers that some of East Brookfield’s ponds and rivers have significant and long-standing water quality issues.

Parks & Recreation

Roughly 45% of survey respondents rated this service as excellent or good while 55% rated it as fair to poor. This was one of only two municipal services where more respondents rated it fair/poor than excellent/good. It was mentioned at the public forum that East Brookfield has a healthy amount of recreation facilities and is not in dire need of new ones. This poor rating for East Brookfield’s parks and recreation indicates that the quality of its recreation resources is not very high and is in need of improvement.

Police Protection

Roughly 87% of survey respondents rated this service as excellent or good while 13% rated it as fair to poor. This is a typical Master Plan survey response rate. I would be surprised if the Police Department did not score as high as it did.

Street Maintenance

Roughly 81% of survey respondents rated this service as excellent or good while 19% rated it as fair to poor. This is a surprise as highway maintenance usually scores much lower when rated as part of Master Plan citizen surveys. This is indicative of a very effective Public Works Department, at least in terms of highway maintenance.

Fire Protection

Roughly 91% of survey respondents rated this service as excellent or good while 9% rated it as fair to poor. This is a typical Master Plan survey response rate. I would be surprised if the Fire Department did not score as high as it did.

Ambulance & EMT Service

Roughly 88% of survey respondents rated this service as excellent or good while 12% rated it as fair to poor. This is a typical Master Plan survey response rate for such services.

Trash & Recycling

Roughly 79% of survey respondents rated this service as excellent or good while 21% rated it as fair to poor. This is a very good response rate for this service and reflects well on the Town's current trash disposal system.

Education

Roughly 85% of survey respondents rated this service as excellent or good while 15% rated it as fair to poor. This is a typical Master Plan survey response rate for education.

Drinking Water Quality

Roughly 89% of survey respondents rated this service as excellent or good while 11% rated it as fair to poor. This is a very good rating and reflects well on the Town's Public Works Department.

Senior Services

Roughly 52% of survey respondents rated this service as excellent or good while 48% rated it as fair to poor. This is a lower than average rating for senior services and should raise a red flag for East Brookfield planners. Is it the lack of senior services, the condition of the senior center, the hours of operation? This may necessitate a more in depth discussion with the Town's senior community to get at the root of the problem.

Affordable Housing

Roughly 38% of survey respondents rated this service as excellent or good while 62% rated it as fair to poor. This is only the second municipal service where more respondents rated it fair/poor than excellent/good. Is this a rating on the municipality's effort to provide more affordable housing or a rating of the Town's housing affordability in general? I would say probably the latter.

Traffic – Speed Control

Roughly 63% of survey respondents rated this service as excellent or good while 37% rated it as fair to poor, nothing out of the ordinary here.

Street Lighting

Roughly 62% of survey respondents rated this service as excellent or good while 38% rated it as fair to poor; again, nothing out of the ordinary here.

Question #3: Rate the following Town Assets & Resources.

Town Center & Parking

Only 33% of survey respondents rated this asset as excellent or good while 67% rated it as fair to poor. Clearly, the town center and its parking are items that will need attention in either the Master Plan's Economic Development chapter or its Land Use & Zoning chapter.

School Buildings

Roughly 81% of survey respondents rated this asset as excellent or good while 19% rated it as fair to poor. The high excellent/good response rate was expected, considering the fairly new Elementary School.

Town Hall

The Town Hall received by far the lowest rating of all Town assets. Only 26% of survey respondents rated this asset as excellent or good while 74% rated it as fair to poor. Clearly, citizens think the Town Hall has outlived its usefulness and a new facility is needed. I imagine the municipal departments in the Town Hall will tell you the same thing.

Fire Station

Roughly 65% of survey respondents rated this asset as excellent or good while 35% rated it as fair to poor.

Senior Center Building

Roughly 49% of survey respondents rated this asset as excellent or good while 51% rated it as fair to poor. The condition of the senior center may be a big part of the respondent's discontent with the Town's overall provision of senior services.

Highway Department Building

Roughly 40% of survey respondents rated this asset as excellent or good while 60% rated it as fair to poor. This appears to be another municipal facility that needs replacement and should probably be addressed in the Master Plan's Municipal Facilities & Services chapter.

Parks and Playing Fields

Roughly 47% of survey respondents rated this asset as excellent or good while 53% rated it as fair to poor. Apparently, more survey respondents than not believe the Town's parks and playing fields are not what they could be and are in need of improvement.

Rural Character – Small Town Living

Roughly 76% of survey respondents rated this asset as excellent or good while 24% rated it as fair to poor. This response rate should be expected of a rural community like East Brookfield.

Open Lands & Wildlife Habitat

Roughly 72% of survey respondents rated this asset as excellent or good while 28% rated it as fair to poor. Again, this response rate should be expected of a rural community with an abundance of open lands and wildlife habitat like East Brookfield.

Lake Lashaway

Roughly 61% of survey respondents rated this asset as excellent or good while 39% rated it as fair to poor. Usually ponds and lakes score quite high as community assets in Master Plan citizen surveys. The fact that close to forty percent of respondents rated the Lake as fair/poor indicates that citizens have some concerns for the Lake, whether they be water quality issues, use of the Lake, or the amount of development around the Lake.

Quaboag Pond

Roughly 46% of survey respondents rated this asset as excellent or good while 54% rated it as fair to poor. Again, the survey respondents clearly have some concerns about the Pond. The Committee should discuss the nature of these concerns.

Quacumquasit (south) Pond

Roughly 70% of survey respondents rated this asset as excellent or good while 30% rated it as fair to poor. This water resource received the highest excellent/good rating of the three water resources rated. Committee members: why do you think this is?

Question #4: Indicate whether or not you agree or disagree with the following statements:

We should create bylaws that encourage traditional village development and buildings.

Roughly 61% of survey respondents strongly agreed or somewhat agreed with this action item, while only 13% strongly disagreed or somewhat disagreed. This indicates strong support for traditional village development.

We should create zoning to encourage mixed use, primarily downtown.

Roughly 72% of survey respondents strongly agreed or somewhat agreed with this action item, while only 9% strongly disagreed or somewhat disagreed. This indicates strong support for mixed-use zoning and development in the town center area. This will have implications for infrastructure improvements in this area.

We should utilize cluster housing development so as to preserve more open space.

Roughly 67% of survey respondents strongly agreed or somewhat agreed with this action item, while only 16% strongly disagreed or somewhat disagreed. It appears that survey respondents are favorably inclined towards cluster housing. This should provide the Planning Board with the necessary momentum to start working on a cluster housing (or open space subdivision) bylaw.

The Town should support senior housing.

Roughly 81% of survey respondents strongly agreed or somewhat agreed with this action item, while only 7% strongly disagreed or somewhat disagreed. Clearly, the respondents recognize the need for more senior housing in East Brookfield.

Property tax breaks should be provided to seniors.

Roughly 81% of survey respondents strongly agreed or somewhat agreed with this action item, while only 7% strongly disagreed or somewhat disagreed, a strong indication of support for senior citizen property tax breaks.

The Town should support moderate and low-income housing.

Roughly 50% of survey respondents strongly agreed or somewhat agreed with this action item, while 24% strongly disagreed or somewhat disagreed. Without a clear majority supporting the need for low and moderate-income housing, local planners will need to educate the public on the need for affordable housing and what constitutes affordable housing should the Housing Chapter identify this as a pressing community need.

The Town should allow multi-family housing.

Only 37% of survey respondents strongly agreed or somewhat agreed with this action item, while 33% strongly disagreed or somewhat disagreed and 30% were neutral. This indicates a reluctance to allow multi-family housing. However, multi-family housing may be appropriate as part of the mixed-use concept for the Town center area, where there exists the municipal infrastructure necessary to service this type of development.

New housing development in certain areas should be required to set aside open space.

Roughly 58% of survey respondents strongly agreed or somewhat agreed with this action item, while only 12% strongly disagreed or somewhat disagreed. The response rate to this question as well as the response rate to the cluster housing question indicate strong support for setting aside open space as part of new development.

The Town should raise funds and obtain grants to protect open space.

Roughly 69% of survey respondents strongly agreed or somewhat agreed with this action item, while only 8% strongly disagreed or somewhat disagreed. This was essentially a “motherhood and apple pie” question, as who would be against protecting open space and obtaining grants for this purpose. It

would have been interesting to see how the response rate would change if the raising of funds and obtaining grants for open space were split into two questions. It might have made a difference to survey respondents whether or not it was their money used for this purpose or grant money.

The Town should allow common driveways.

Roughly 47% of survey respondents strongly agreed or somewhat agreed with this action item, while 21% strongly disagreed or somewhat disagreed. Without a clear majority supporting this idea, local planners would do well to pursue this item cautiously.

The Town should expand protection of ponds, wetlands, rivers and streams.

Roughly 40% of survey respondents strongly agreed or somewhat agreed with this action item, while 36% strongly disagreed or somewhat disagreed. Without a clear majority supporting this idea, local planners would do well to pursue this item cautiously.

The Town should expand protection of wildlife and open forests.

Roughly 45% of survey respondents strongly agreed or somewhat agreed with this action item, while 24% strongly disagreed or somewhat disagreed. Without a clear majority supporting this idea, local planners would do well to pursue this item cautiously.

The Town should mandate inspections of septic systems adjacent to lakes, rivers and streams.

Roughly 58% of survey respondents strongly agreed or somewhat agreed with this action item, while 12% strongly disagreed or somewhat disagreed. The response rate indicates strong support for mandating inspections of septic systems near water resources. Can your Inspection Department handle this increased demand for inspections? You'll need to answer this question when you get to the Municipal Facilities & Services chapter.

The Town should support the development of new recreation trails for walking and bicycling.

Roughly 74% of survey respondents strongly agreed or somewhat agreed with this action item, while 15% strongly disagreed or somewhat disagreed. There is strong support for this idea and it should probably be included as an objective within your Open Space & Recreation Plan and included in the Plan's Five Year Action Plan.

The Town should work with adjoining towns to implement boat propeller cleaning bylaws so as to avoid the continued introduction of invasive plants into ponds.

Roughly 81% of survey respondents strongly agreed or somewhat agreed with this action item, while only 2% strongly disagreed or somewhat disagreed. There is strong support for this idea and it should probably be included as an objective within your Open Space & Recreation Plan and included in the Plan's Five Year Action Plan.

The Town should eliminate commercial zoning near ponds, wetlands, rivers and streams.

Roughly 49% of survey respondents strongly agreed or somewhat agreed with this action item, while 14% strongly disagreed or somewhat disagreed. Without a clear majority supporting this idea, local planners would do well to pursue this item cautiously. You will be able to delve into this issue in more detail when you get to the Land Use chapter of the Master Plan.