Fiscal Year 2023-24 (FY24) Budget Public Engagement Report

The North Carolina Fiscal Control Act sets a baseline for public engagement in local government budgets - namely, one public hearing held between presentation of the proposed budget and adoption by City Council. While comment during a public hearing can certainly sway final decisions by the elected body, a common complaint from communities across the state is that asking for feedback, moments before budget adoption, doesn't feel like meaningful input or engagement with their local government's budget process.

Hearing these sentiments from Asheville residents, staff have tried other ways to educate and engage the public earlier in the budget process. For the FY24 budget process, two engagement strategies were added to the budget calendar - an earlier public comment session and an online priorities survey. This report will summarize how staff approached organizing and publicizing these engagement opportunities, the feedback received, and how this information has and will continue to impact the FY24 budget development process.

Methods - What we did

Two avenues of communication and engagement were added to the FY24 budget process. First, a public comment session was held during the City Council meeting on February 28, 2023. Second, a budget priorities survey was conducted, mostly online via Public Input, from February 6, 2023 until March 10, 2023 (five weeks). A copy of the survey questions can be found at the end of this report in Appendix A.

To publicize these input opportunities, the following outreach was conducted:

- WRES Interview with Budget Manager Taylor Floyd - January 6, 2023
- Flyers hand delivered to libraries
- Flyers in English and Spanish shared with all Rec Center Supervisors
- Printable surveys in English and Spanish at Rec Centers
- Digital slide in English and Spanish on Rec Center display screens with QR Code to survey
- PublicInput Contact Lists: Organizations with connections to BIPOC, Youth, Seniors, People with Disabilities, LGBTQ+, Houseless, Business
- PublicInput Contact Lists: Individuals self identified as BIPOC, Youth, Seniors, People with Disabilities, LGBTQ+, Houseless, Business
- Press Release
- February 23 City Council Agenda Briefing meeting
- City Website - including headline banner
- City Social Media - posted in English and Spanish
- Emails to Neighborhood leaders and a couple of residential building managers
- Neighborhood News E-Newsletter
- Equity & Inclusion E-Newsletter
- CoA E-Newsletter

- Parks & Recreation Social Media
- Shared with Board & Commission Chairs
- Area business contacts: Chamber of Commerce, Downtown Association, Mountain BizWorks, Go Local Asheville, Explore Asheville, AIR, YMI Cultural Center, West Asheville Business Association & the River Arts Business District Association.

The following groups also ran advertisements or shared the information with their members on our behalf:

- Shiloh Community Association
- WECAN
- Kenilworth Residents Association
- La Noticia
- Mountain Xpress
- Asheville on Bikes
- Ashvegas
- Asheville FM
- iHeart Radio
- Explore Asheville Convention and Visitors Bureau

In order to help ensure inclusive access to these engagement opportunities, publicity materials (flyers, press releases, social media posts, etc.) were made available in English and Spanish. The survey was available online in English, Spanish, Russian, and Ukrainian, and in print in English and Spanish. Additionally, following feedback from GAP AVL, the survey period was extended by one week (from four weeks to five).

Results - What we heard

Public Comment

At the February 28, 2023 City Council meeting, 10 individuals provided public comment on the budget. Their comments focused on the following themes:

- Public Safety (6 comments)
- Transit (2 comments)

Additionally, one comment each included the following topics: litter clean-up, street lighting, homeless services, McCormick Field, veteran's support, living wage, affordable housing, water infrastructure, and sustainability.

No demographic information is collected from speakers, so we are unable to comment on the representativeness of these responses.

Survey

After first filtering responses to those with a zip code within the City of Asheville, our FY24 Budget Priorities Survey included 2253 valid respondents. A breakdown by zip code is below:

Zip Code	Respondents	Percent
28804	933	41.4%
28806	462	20.5%
28801	347	15.4%
28803	312	13.8%
28805	80	3.6%
28715	53	2.4%
28704	47	2.1%
28732	14	0.6%
28802	2	0.1%
28814	2	0.1%
28815	1	0.0%
Total	**2253**	**100%**

As is standard practice, other demographic questions were optional. Of 2,253 total respondents, 673, or 29.9%, responded to the demographic questions. This is a lower than ideal percentage to gauge the representativeness of responses, but is in line with other City of Asheville survey efforts.

Compared to Asheville as a whole, using US Census data, survey respondents:

- Are a similar percent female (55.6% survey vs 52.2% population), but lower percent male (41% survey vs 47.8% population).
- Include more people age 35-75 and fewer people under 35.
- Are more white, a similar proportion Native, and less Black, Hispanic, and Asian than Asheville's population.
- Are more likely to be married and less likely to be single or divorced.
- Have significantly higher education levels - 85.0% of respondents have a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 30.4% of the population.

Complete respondent demographics can be found in Appendix B.

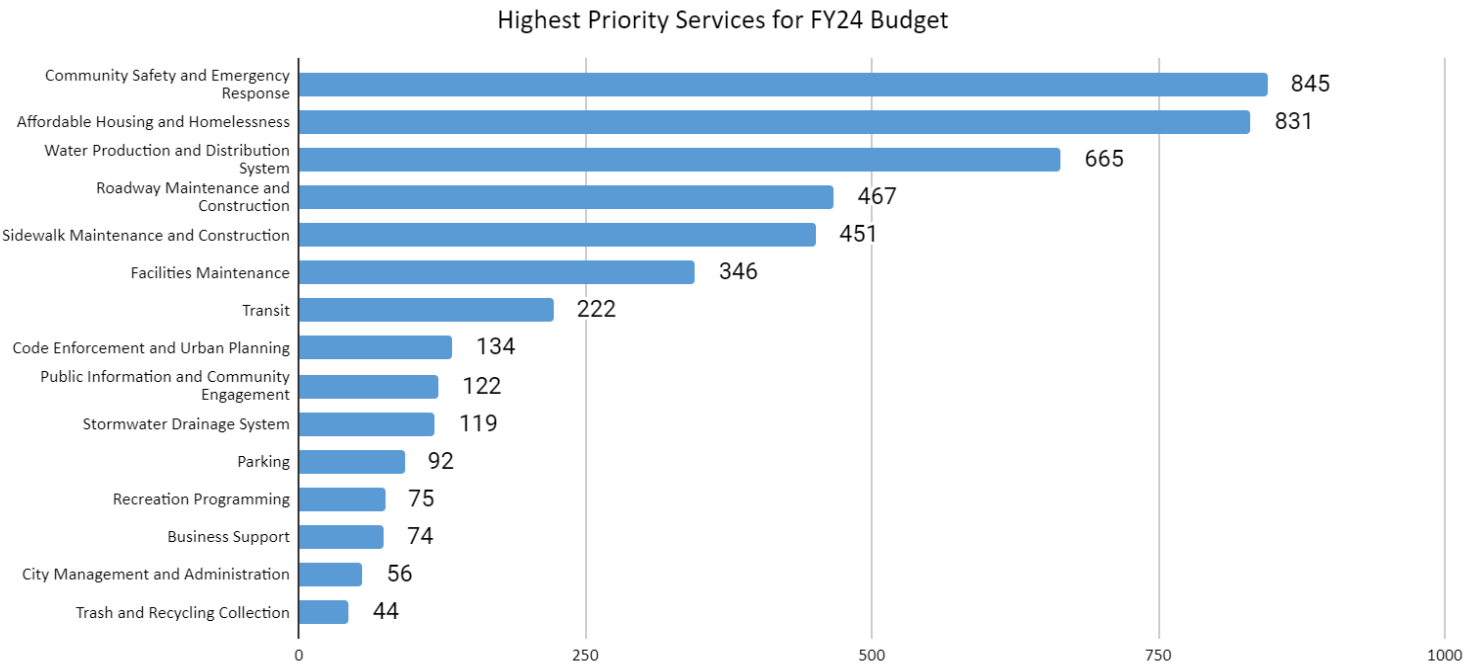
The first set of questions asked respondents to indicate which services they felt either needed more investment, had about the right amount of investment, or needed less investment. Then, of those services they felt needed more investment, respondents were asked which three they felt were the highest priority for the City to address in the FY24 budget.

Of 15 City services, a majority of respondents felt Water Production and Distribution (60.7%) and Community Safety and Emergency Response (55.7%) needed greater investment.

Additionally, more than 40% of respondents felt the following services also warrant more investment:

- Affordable Housing and Homelessness (47.7%)
- Sidewalk Maintenance and Construction (47.4%)
- Roadway Maintenance and Construction (46.6%)
- Facility Maintenance (including buildings, parks, etc.) (43.3%)

The graph below shows how respondents ranked their top three FY24 priorities. Community Safety and Emergency Response, and Affordable Housing and Homeless are clear priorities for a majority of respondents.

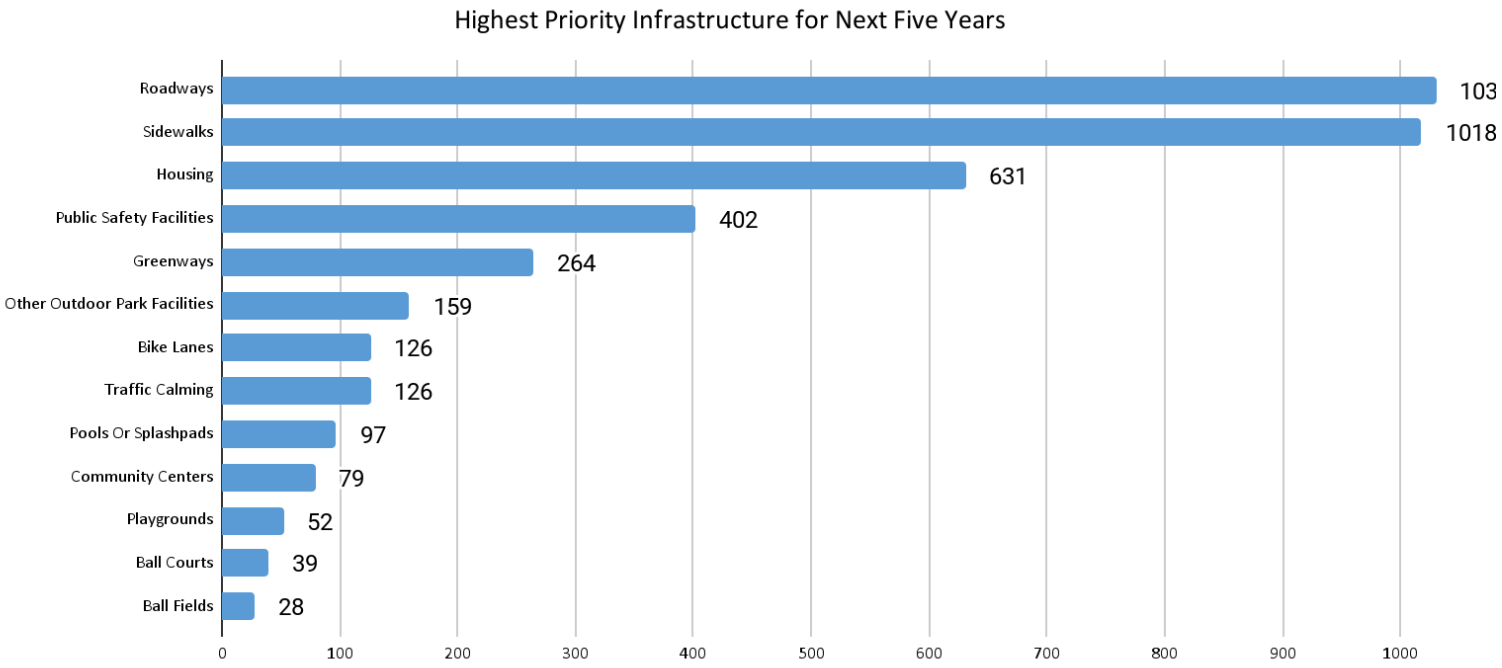


The next set of questions asked respondents about their priorities for capital investment in various types of physical infrastructure over the next five years. Similar to the previous section, the first question asked respondents to rank various physical infrastructure as a high priority for investment, a low priority for investment, or not a priority for investment over the next five years. The second question asked them to choose which two of their high priority items are the most important for the City to address in the next five years.

The following categories of capital investment were most consistently ranked as a high priority for the next five years:

- Sidewalks (including crosswalks, curb cuts, pedestrian signals, etc.) (65.7%)
- Roadways (streets, bridges, etc.) (64.7%)

The graph below shows which types of infrastructure tended to rank as most important to address in the next five years. Roadways and Sidewalks are clear priorities for a majority of respondents, with Housing (incentives for affordable housing projects, loans to developers/homeowners, etc.) also ranking high.



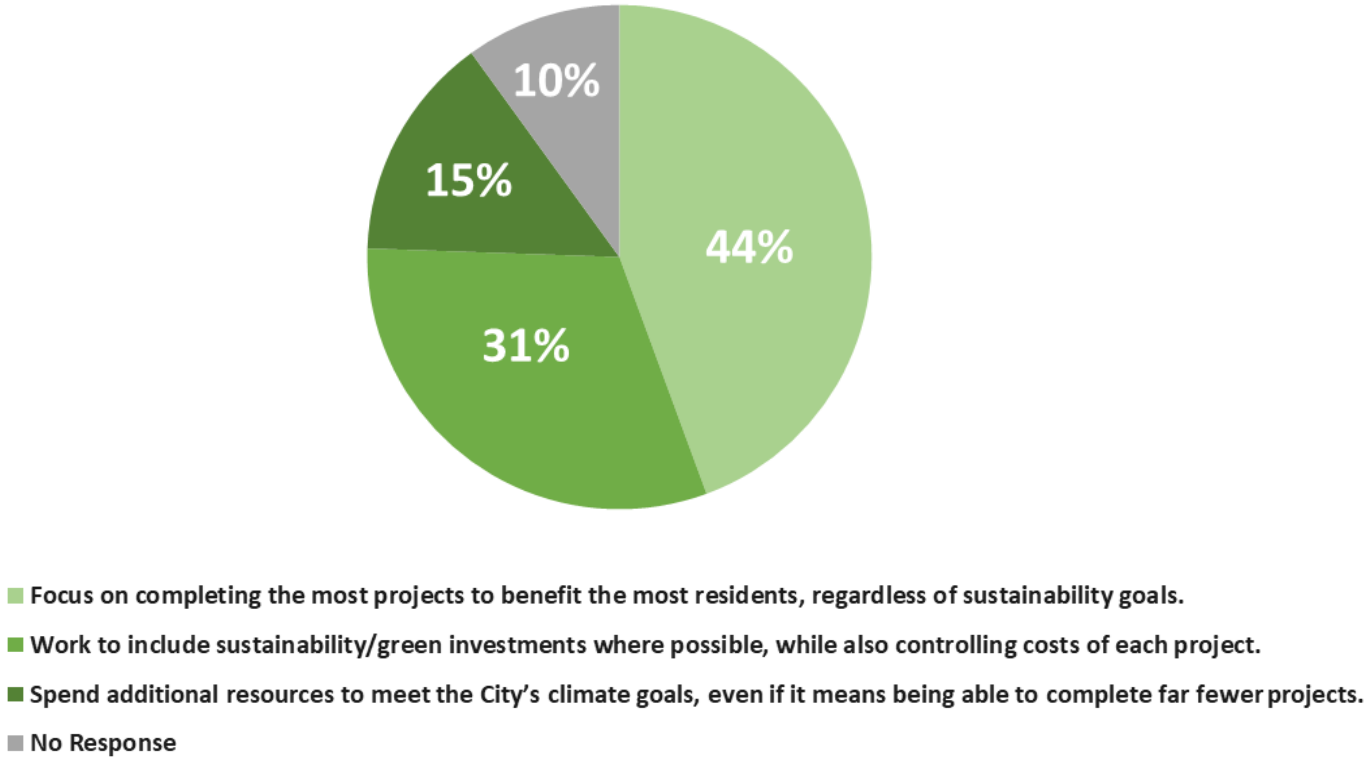
The final question asked respondents to weigh in on potential tradeoffs between financial efficiency and the City's sustainability goals. Full question text is below:

> The City has committed to reducing carbon and prioritizing energy efficiency when making investments in City infrastructure. Often, more energy efficient or greener infrastructure is much more costly. In your opinion, when there is a conflict between cost and sustainability, how would you like the City to prioritize between them?

a. **Spend additional resources to meet the City's climate goals, even if it means being able to complete far fewer projects.** For example, when a natural gas heating system at a fire station fails look at the overall condition of the facility and retrofit it with feasible improvements that may include energy efficient upgrades of heating system and building envelope, onsite renewable energy and backup storage to reduce carbon footprint, even if it requires shifting funding from other priorities and delaying other projects.
b. **Work to include sustainability/green investments where possible, while also controlling costs of each project.** For example, when a natural gas heating system fails at a fire station, replace it with the most energy efficient heating system within the available budget.

c. **Focus on completing the most projects to benefit the most residents, regardless of sustainability goals.** For example, when a natural gas heating system at a fire station fails, repair/replace equipment in the most cost effective way, regardless of energy efficiency.

The pie chart below shows the responses. Staff will continue to work with Council and the community to ensure the City is meeting its climate commitments in the most fiscally responsible way.



The survey also allowed free-response comments. Of 2,253 responses, 324 (14.4%) included comments. Major themes from these comments aligned with general survey responses. They focused on the need to invest more in public safety, major infrastructure (water, roads and sidewalks in particular), and addressing affordable housing and homelessness.

Next Steps - What we will do

A number of items are under consideration in the FY24 budget that align with these community priorities. First, comments and survey responses both highlighted a desire to see the City invest more in public safety, especially police recruitment and retention. Some items under consideration in the FY24 budget that align with this priority include:

- A higher pay increase for sworn police.
- Changes to on-call and shift differential pay for all City employees.
- New, more comfortable uniforms for police officers.

A second community priority is investment in the water production and distribution system, with an emphasis on preventative maintenance and avoiding major failures. The FY24 budget responds to this community priority by prioritizing funds from a proposed rate increase to cover:

- additional preventative maintenance by adding a new crew focused on leak response;
- increasing night-shift coverage at water treatment plants;
- new billing and communication staff, to enhance customer relations;
- and improve capital planning and implementation by adding engineering capacity.

Finally, public comments and survey responses asked the City to prioritize core infrastructure for the next five years of capital investment, with an emphasis on roads, sidewalks, and housing. The FY24 budget addresses this by continuing investment in existing initiatives, including:

- annual funding for road resurfacing, sidewalk maintenance & construction, and the Housing Trust Fund;
- completing the ongoing reorganization of Community and Economic Development department to expand and strengthen the Affordable Housing and Homeless Services programs;
- and addressing opioid response by continuing planning for the use of opioid settlement funds and piloting a community response unit.

As we continue through the FY24 budget process, staff will review our recommendations and communicate to Council and the community how they align with the priorities expressed during these public engagement efforts. Feedback regarding capital investment may also be used to help plan for a future bond referendum.

Appendix A: Survey

Thank you for participating in our FY24 (July 2023-June 2024) City of Asheville Budget Priorities survey. Your responses will be shared with staff and Council to help inform development of the FY24 budget. We appreciate your time and insight.

1. What is your zipcode where you live?

2. Below is a list of City services. Which do you think the City should prioritize for additional investments and which should the City consider investing in less? Investment could be staff or financial resources.

City Service	**1 - Service needs much less investment**	**2 - Service needs somewhat less investment**	**3 - Service investment is at the right amount**	**4 - Service needs some additional investment**	**5 - Service needs much more investment**
Community safety and emergency response					
Public information and community engagement					
Facilities maintenance (including buildings, parks, etc.)					
Water production and distribution system					
Affordable housing and homelessness					
Trash & recycling collection					
Stormwater drainage system					
Sidewalk maintenance and construction					
Transit					
Roadway maintenance and construction					
Business support					
Code enforcement and urban planning					
Parking					

Recreation programming					
City management and administration					

3. Of the services you ranked 4 or 5 above, which are the three most important for the City to address in the FY24 budget? (could be short free response or a checklist of the whole service list above, limited to three selections)

4. Thinking about your neighborhood or the areas of Asheville that you frequent, what types of physical infrastructure should the City prioritize in the next 5 years?

Infrastructure Type	**1 - Not a priority for next 5 years**	**2 - Low priority for the next 5 years**	**3 - High priority for the next 5 years**
Playgrounds			
Ball courts (tennis, pickleball, basketball, etc.)			
Ball fields (baseball, soccer, etc.)			
Other outdoor park facilities (greenspace, community gardens, etc.)			
Community centers (new or major renovations)			
Pools or Splashpads			
Public safety facilities (Fire stations, Police districts, etc.)			
Housing (incentives for affordable housing projects, loans to developers/homeowners, etc.)			
Roadways (streets, bridges, etc.)			
Sidewalks (including crosswalks, curb cuts, pedestrian signals, etc.)			

Traffic calming (speed humps/cushions, roundabouts, medians, etc.)			
Greenways			
Bike lanes			

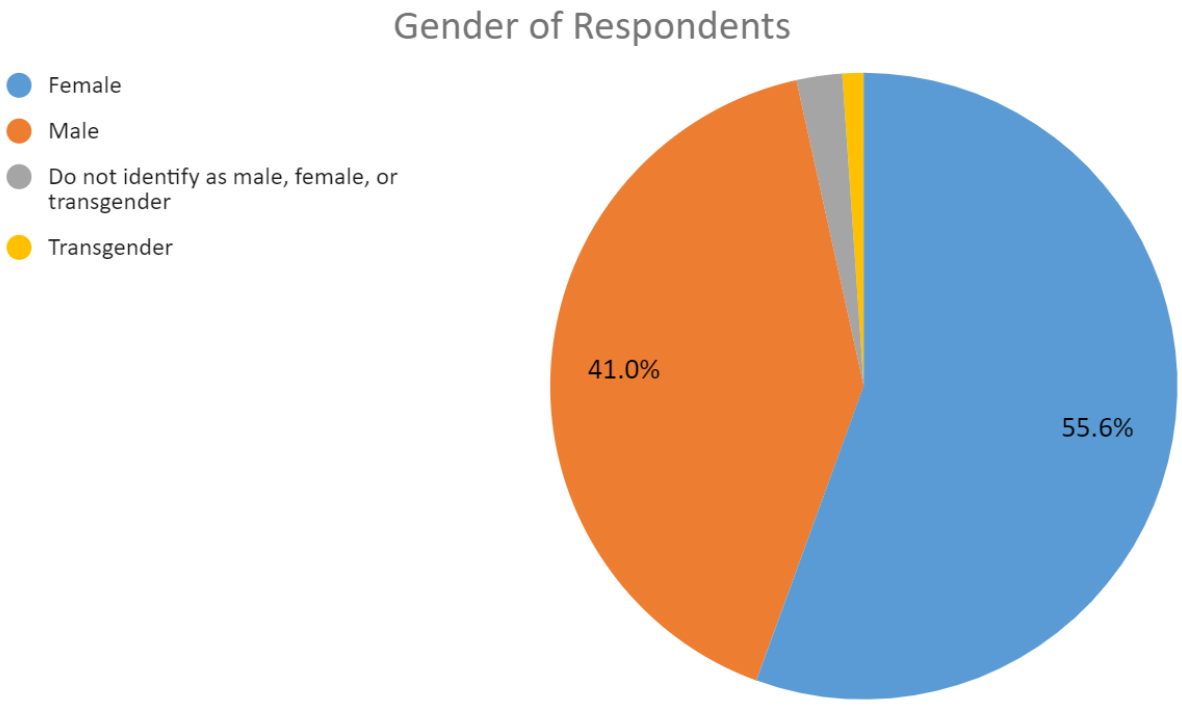
5. Of the items you ranked 3 above, which two are the most important for the City to address in the next five years? (could be short free response or limited check box)

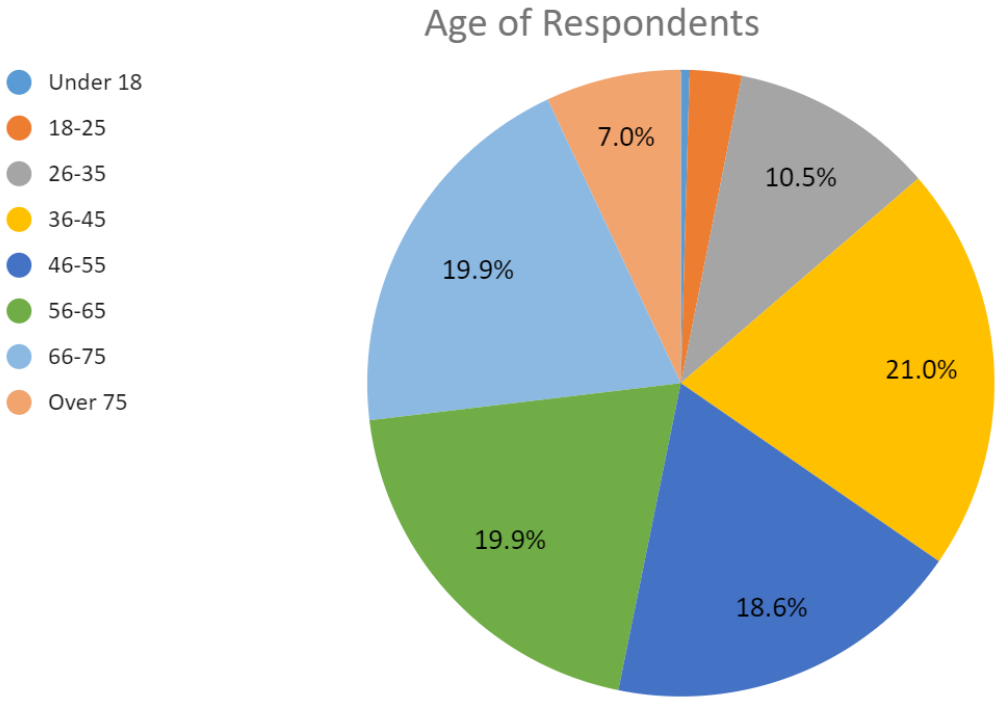
6. The City has committed to reducing carbon and prioritizing energy efficiency when making investments in City infrastructure. Often, more energy efficient or greener infrastructure is much more costly. In your opinion, when there is a conflict between cost and sustainability, how would you like the City to prioritize between them?

    a. **Spend additional resources to meet the City's climate goals, even if it means being able to complete far fewer projects.** For example, when a natural gas heating system at a fire station fails look at the overall condition of the facility and retrofit it with feasible improvements that may include energy efficient upgrades of heating system and building envelope, onsite renewable energy and backup storage to reduce carbon footprint, even if it requires shifting funding from other priorities and delaying other projects.
    b. **Work to include sustainability/green investments where possible, while also controlling costs of each project.** For example, when a natural gas heating system fails at a fire station, replace it with the most energy efficient heating system within the available budget.
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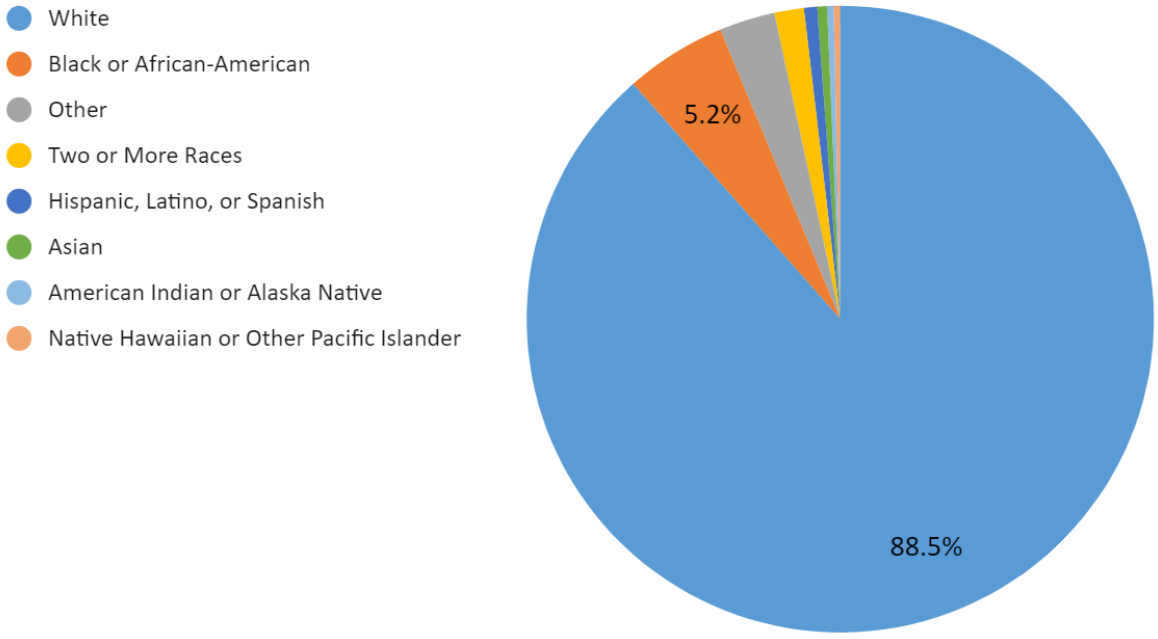
7. Please provide any comments about the questions above, or other feedback about the FY24 budget. (long free response)

Appendix B: Survey Demographics

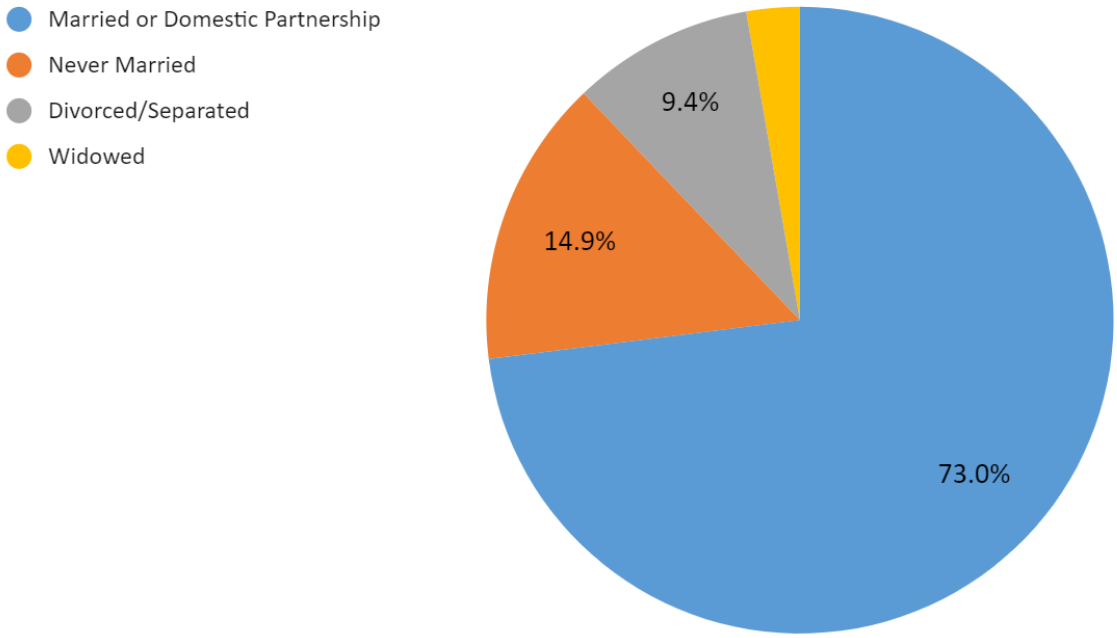


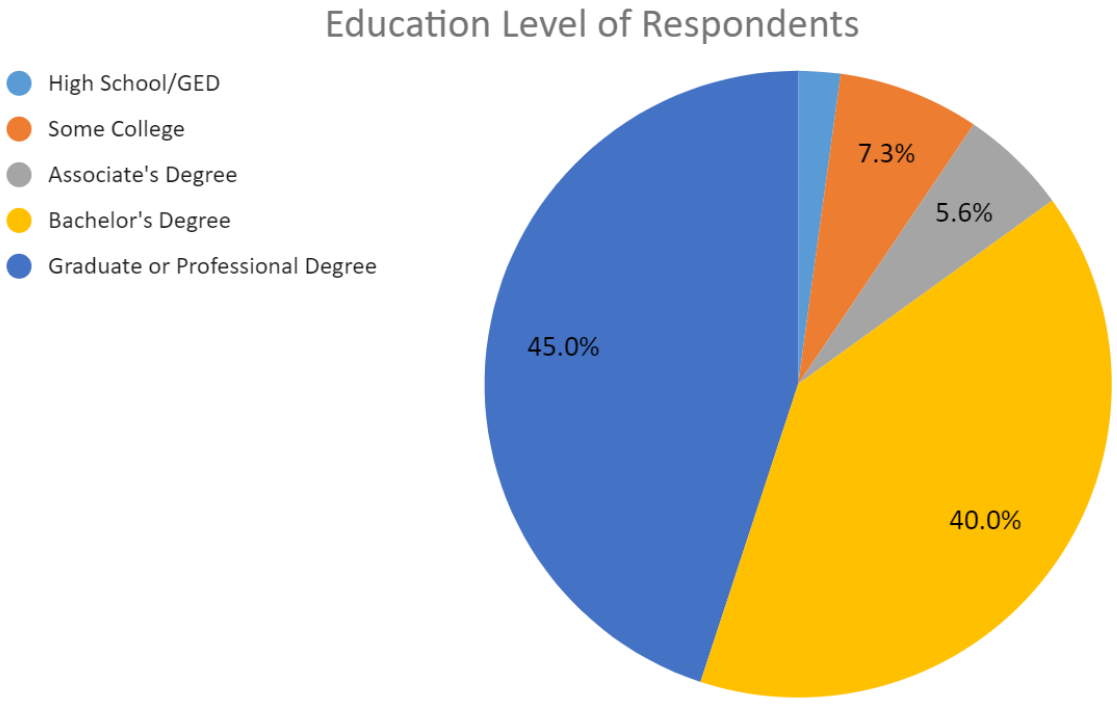


Race of Respondents



Marital Status of Respondents




Education Level of Respondents
High School/GED
Some College
Associate's Degree
Bachelor's Degree
Graduate or Professional Degree
7.3%
5.6%
45.0%
40.0%