

THE NCSTM
The National Citizen SurveyTM

Albert Lea, MN
Community Livability Report

2018



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About

The National Citizen Survey™ (The NCS) report is about the “livability” of Albert Lea. The phrase “livable community” is used here to evoke a place that is not simply habitable, but that is desirable. It is not only where people do live, but where they want to live.

Great communities are partnerships of the government, private sector, community-based organizations and residents, all geographically connected. The NCS captures residents’ opinions within the three pillars of a community (Community Characteristics, Governance and Participation) across eight central facets of community (Safety, Mobility, Natural Environment, Built Environment, Economy, Recreation and Wellness, Education and Enrichment and Community Engagement).

The Community Livability Report provides the opinions of a representative sample of 494 residents of the City of Albert Lea. The margin of error around any reported percentage is 4% for all respondents. The full description of methods used to garner these opinions can be found in the *Technical Appendices* provided under separate cover.



Quality of Life in Albert Lea

About 6 in 10 residents rated the quality of life in Albert Lea as excellent or good. This rating was lower than the national benchmark (see Appendix B of the *Technical Appendices* provided under separate cover).



Shown below are the eight facets of community. The color of each community facet summarizes how residents rated it across the three sections of the survey that represent the pillars of a community – Community Characteristics, Governance and Participation. When most ratings across the three pillars were higher than the benchmark, the color for that facet is the darkest shade; when most ratings were lower than the benchmark, the color is the lightest shade. A mix of ratings (higher and lower than the benchmark) results in a color between the extremes.

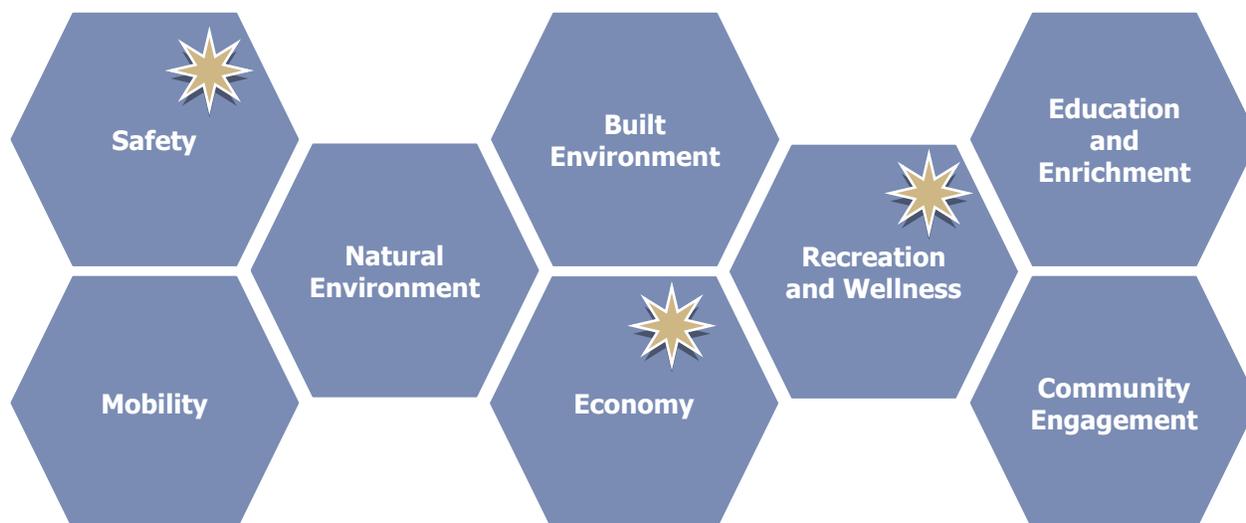
In addition to a summary of ratings, the image below includes one or more stars to indicate which community facets were the most important focus areas for the community. As in 2015, residents identified Economy as a priority for the Albert Lea community in the coming two years; respondents also identified Recreation and Wellness and Safety as top focus areas. Ratings for all facets were positive and similar to national comparisons. This overview of the key aspects of community quality provides a quick summary of where residents see exceptionally strong performance and where performance offers the greatest opportunity for improvement. Linking quality to importance offers community members and leaders a view into the characteristics of the community that matter most and that seem to be working best.

Details that support these findings are contained in the remainder of this Livability Report, starting with the ratings for Community Characteristics, Governance and Participation and ending with results for Albert Lea's unique questions.

Legend

- Higher than national benchmark
- Similar to national benchmark
- Lower than national benchmark

- * Most important



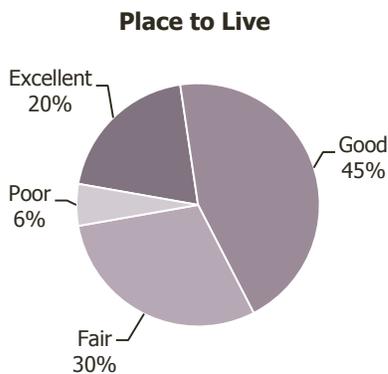
Community Characteristics

What makes a community livable, attractive and a place where people want to be?

Overall quality of community life represents the natural ambience, services and amenities that make for an attractive community. How residents rate their overall quality of life is an indicator of the overall health of a community. In the case of Albert Lea, around two-thirds of residents rated the City as an excellent or good place to live. Respondents' ratings of Albert Lea as a place to live were lower than ratings in other communities across the nation.

In addition to rating the City as a place to live, respondents rated several aspects of community quality including Albert Lea as a place to raise children and to retire, their neighborhood as a place to live, the overall image or reputation of Albert Lea and its overall appearance. Ratings for most of these aspects were similar to the national benchmark, with positive ratings from at least 6 in 10 residents. Evaluations for the city as a place to raise children and the overall image of the community were lower than other communities; however, more respondents gave positive reviews to the overall image and overall appearance of Albert Lea in 2018 compared to 2015 (see the *Trends over Time* report for more details).

Delving deeper into Community Characteristics, survey respondents rated over 40 features of the community within the eight facets of Community Livability. Overall, residents' ratings for Community Characteristics varied and tended to be similar to or lower than comparison communities.



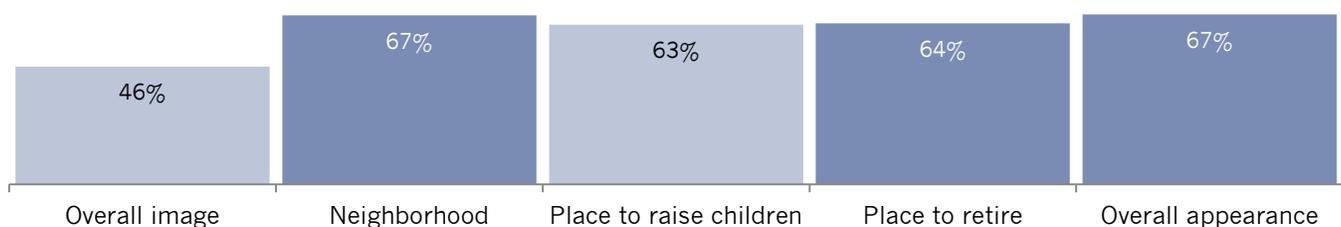
A majority of respondents gave excellent or good scores to each aspect of Safety, Natural Environment and Education and Enrichment. Evaluations of Mobility were especially strong; at least two-thirds of residents awarded high marks to most aspects, exceeding national averages for paths and walking trails, ease of travel by most modes (walking, biking and by car), public parking and traffic flow. Further, scores for traffic flow and ease of travel by bicycle and public transportation improved since 2015.

Ratings for other facets were more mixed; several Economy and Recreation and Wellness-related characteristics were positively reviewed by less than half of residents and lagged behind national comparisons. Additionally, assessments for various health services (e.g., health care, mental health care and preventive health services) decreased since 2015, while residents felt more positively about fitness and recreational opportunities. Moreover, respondents gave higher ratings to employment opportunities, the vibrancy of the downtown/commercial area and Albert Lea as a place to work in 2018.

Percent rating positively (e.g., excellent/good)

Comparison to national benchmark

■ Higher ■ Similar ■ Lower



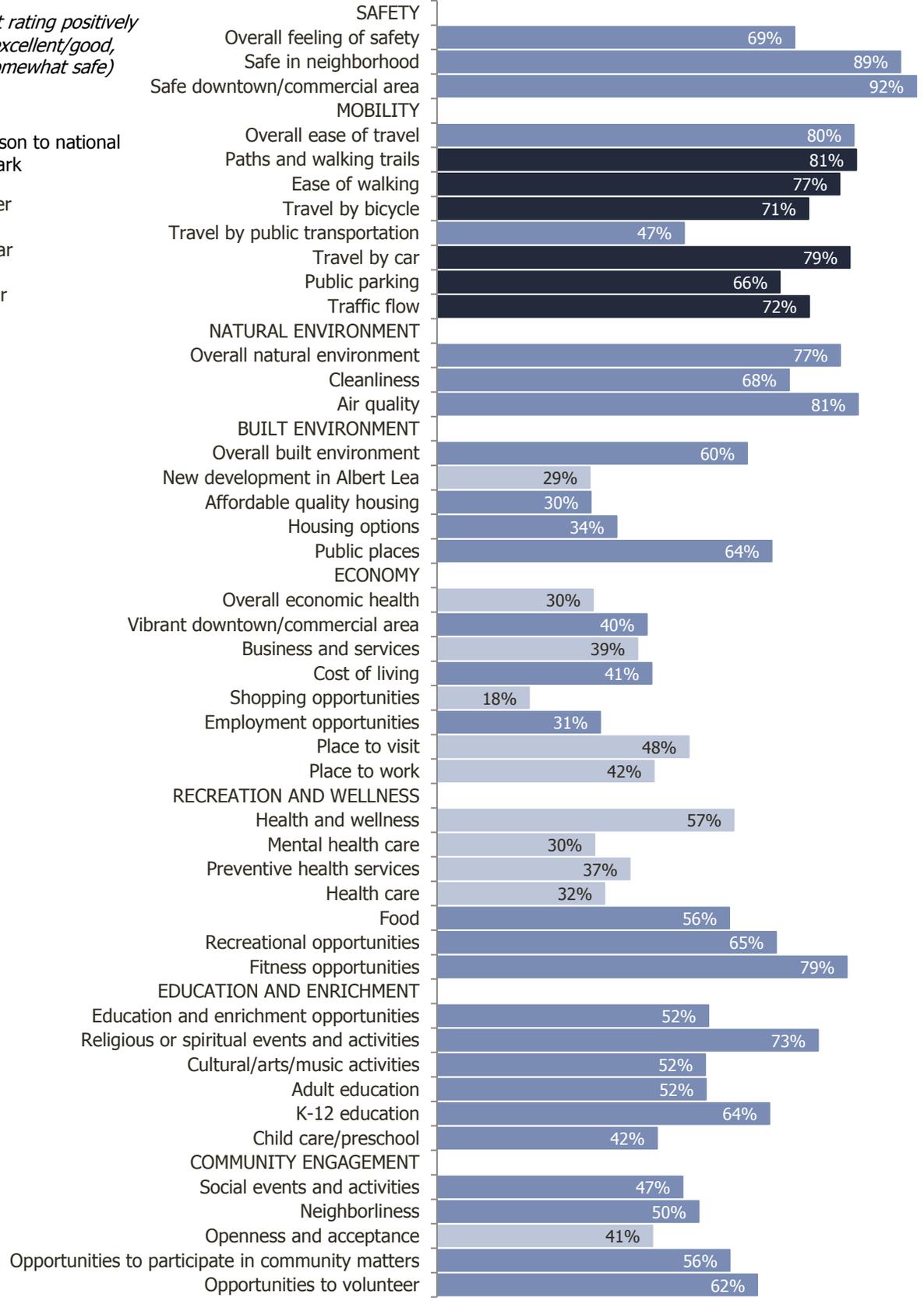
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Figure 1: Aspects of Community Characteristics

*Percent rating positively
(e.g., excellent/good,
very/somewhat safe)*

Comparison to national
benchmark

- Higher
- Similar
- Lower



Governance

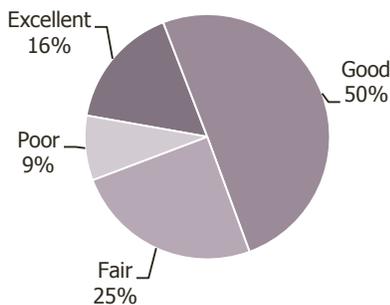
How well does the government of Albert Lea meet the needs and expectations of its residents?

The overall quality of the services provided by Albert Lea as well as the manner in which these services are provided is a key component of how residents rate their quality of life. About two-thirds of participants gave excellent or good marks to the overall services provided by the City. Ratings for City services were similar to national averages, while services provided by the Federal Government were assessed higher than in other municipalities.

Survey respondents also rated various aspects of Albert Lea’s leadership and governance. About one-third or more of survey participants favorably rated most of these aspects and each was rated either similar to or lower than national comparisons. Respondents’ evaluations for most government performance indicators increased since the last survey iteration, including the overall direction of the City, welcoming citizen involvement, acting in the best interest of Albert Lea and being honest. About three-quarters awarded excellent or good scores to the customer service provided by Albert Lea employees, which was a rating similar to communities nationwide.

Respondents evaluated over 30 individual services and amenities available in Albert Lea. Generally, at least half of services and amenities provided by the City were favorably rated by survey participants. Services evaluated positively by at least 8 in 10 residents included fire, police, garbage collection, recycling, power utility, City parks and public libraries; all of these services were all on par with comparison communities.

Overall Quality of City Services

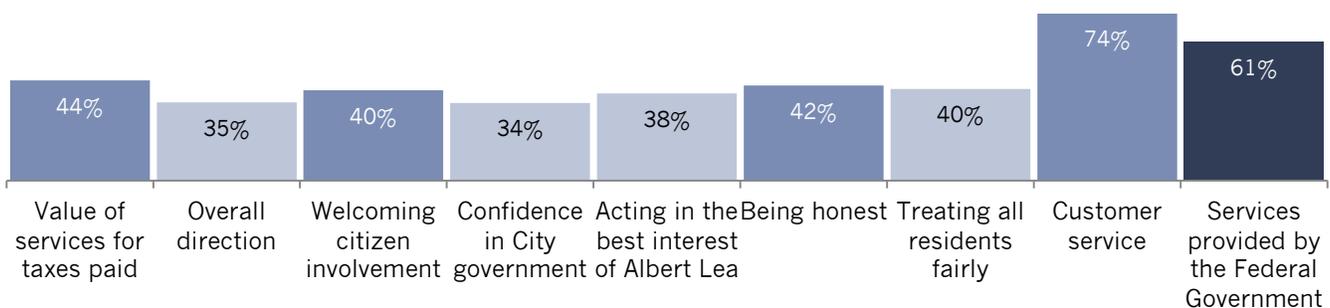


Participants’ assessments for most other aspects of Governance were similar to comparison communities, though several ratings lagged behind the national averages: street repair, code enforcement, economic development and health services were awarded excellent or good scores by one-third or fewer. Additionally, ambulance/EMS and health services reviews declined over time. On the other hand, a number of services were lauded by an increasing number of residents in 2018, such as street repair, sidewalk maintenance, traffic signal timing, power and utility billing, economic development and special events.

Percent rating positively (e.g., excellent/good)

Comparison to national benchmark

■ Higher ■ Similar ■ Lower



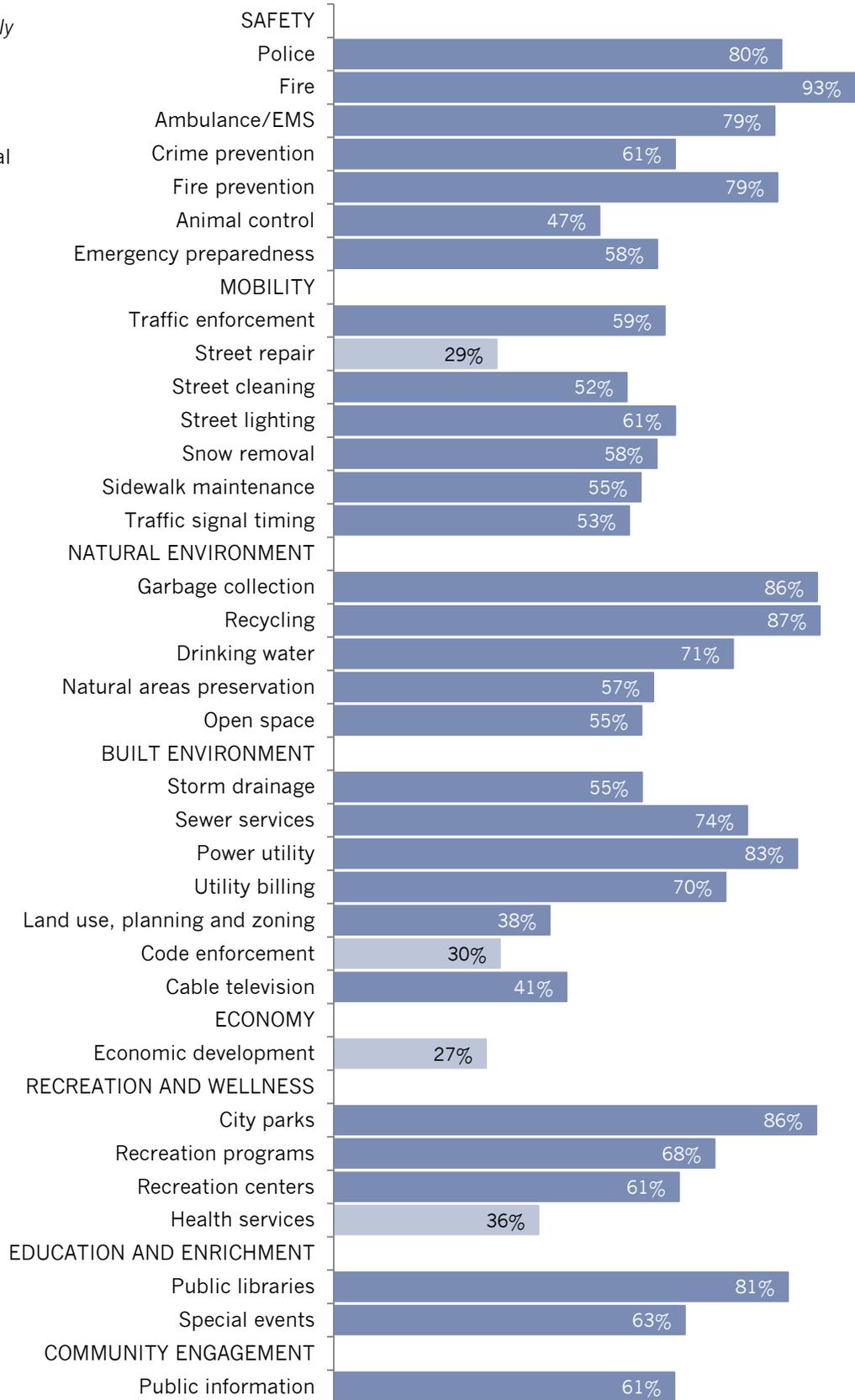
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Figure 2: Aspects of Governance

Percent rating positively
(e.g., excellent/good)

Comparison to national
benchmark

- Higher
- Similar
- Lower



Participation

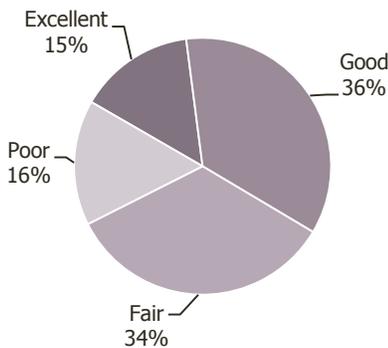
Are the residents of Albert Lea connected to the community and each other?

An engaged community harnesses its most valuable resource, its residents. The connections and trust among residents, government, businesses and other organizations help to create a sense of community, a shared sense of membership, belonging and history. Similar to other communities in the U.S., about half of respondents gave excellent or good scores to the sense of community in Albert Lea. Around two-thirds of residents would recommend living in the city to someone who asked (which was lower than the national average) and about 8 in 10 planned to remain in the community for the next five years.

The survey included over 30 activities and behaviors for which respondents indicated how often they participated in or performed each, if at all. Residents' rates of Participation tended to be on par with national averages with some exceptions. While most respondents engaged in neighborly activities (talked or did a favor for a neighbor), read or watched the local news (which increased over time) and voted in local elections at rates similar to national averages, they used public transportation and participated in physical activity at rates lower than seen elsewhere. Albert Lea residents were also less optimistic about their personal economic outlook and observed code violations at higher rates than residents nationwide.

Survey participants' rates of recycling, working in the community and participating in religious or spiritual activities outpaced national averages. In 2018, resident attendance at City-sponsored events increased since 2015, but reported lower rates of attending local public meetings and participating in clubs compared to 2015 levels.

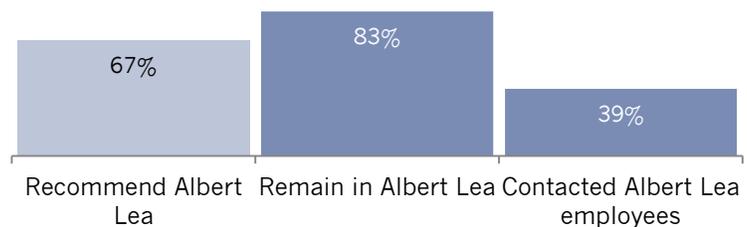
Sense of Community



*Percent rating positively
(e.g., very/somewhat likely,
yes)*

Comparison to national benchmark

■ Higher ■ Similar ■ Lower



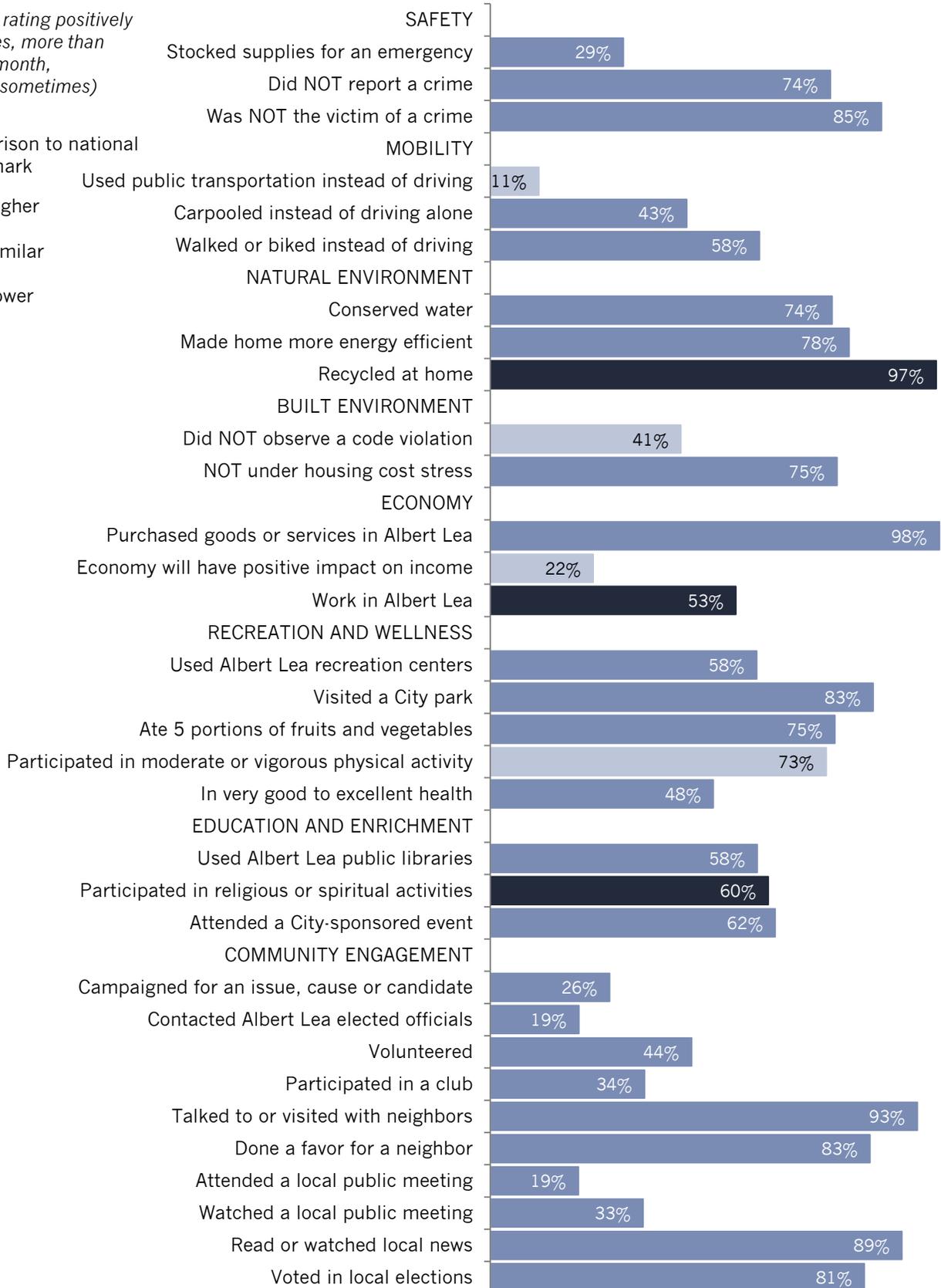
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Figure 3: Aspects of Participation

Percent rating positively
(e.g., yes, more than
once a month,
always/sometimes)

Comparison to national
benchmark

- Higher
- Similar
- Lower

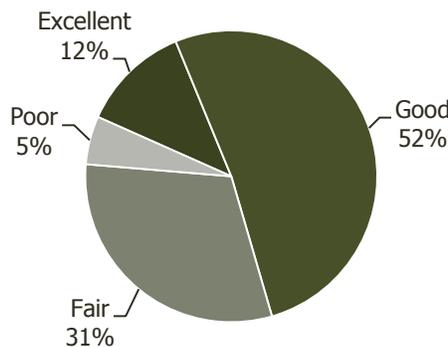


Special Topics

The City of Albert Lea included several questions of special interest on The NCS. City leadership sought resident feedback regarding Freeborn County services, sources of information about the City, support for a new community center and improvement efforts, city priorities and satisfaction with the number of city amenities in Albert Lea.

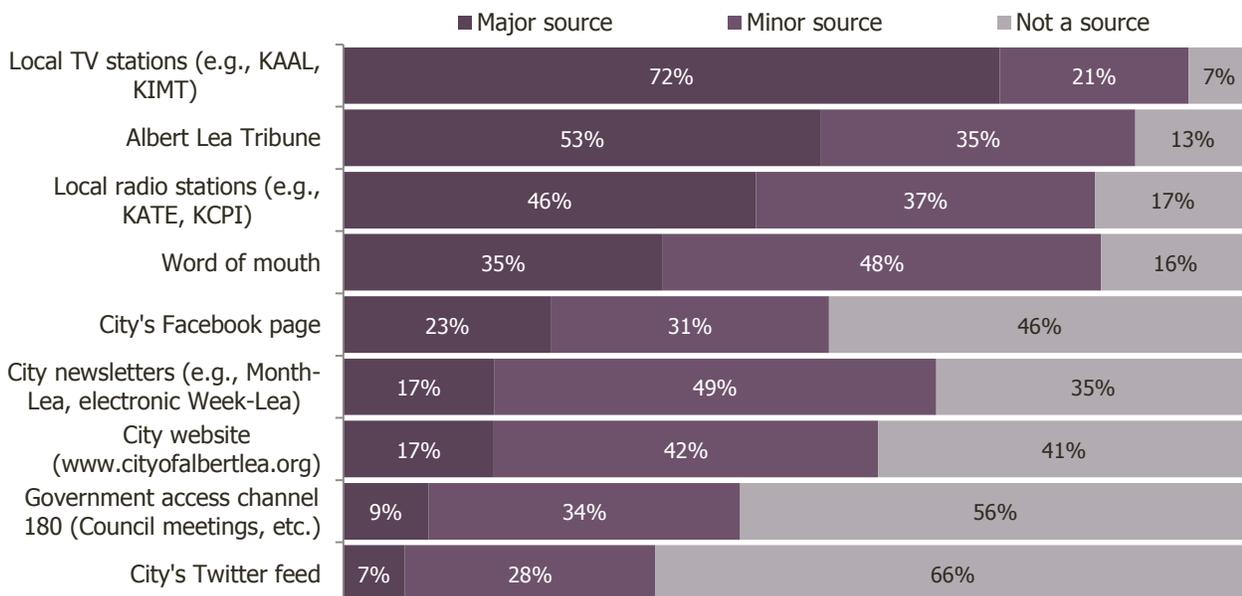
About 6 in 10 residents thought highly of the services provided by Freeborn County, which was on par with services provided by Albert Lea and the Federal Government (see page 5). Less than 1 in 10 rated County services as poor.

Figure 4: Quality of Freeborn County Services
Overall, how would you rate the quality of the services provided by each of the following?



Residents were most likely to use local TV stations as a major source of information about the City of Albert Lea, with only 7% of respondents reporting they didn't use TV news as a source. At least 8 in 10 survey participants use the *Albert Lea Tribune*, local radio stations and word-of-mouth as at least a minor source. Residents were least likely to utilize the government access channel or the City's Twitter feed.

Figure 5: Sources of Information
Please indicate how much of a source, if at all, you consider each of the following to be for obtaining news and information about the City of Albert Lea:

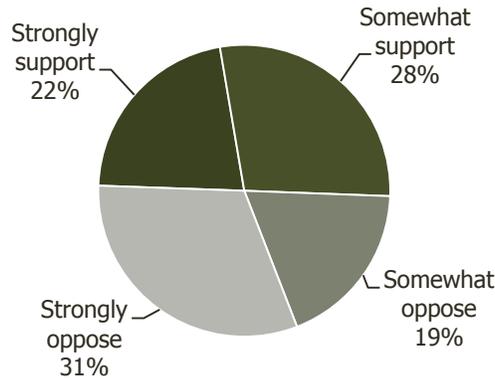


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The City asked residents if they would support using a property tax increase to fund the construction of a new community center in Albert Lea. Support and opposition were split for the measure, with about 2 in 10 respondents strongly supporting and around 3 in 10 strongly opposed building a center. More residents somewhat supported a new community center than somewhat opposed it (28% vs. 19%, respectively).

Figure 6: Support for New Community Center Construction

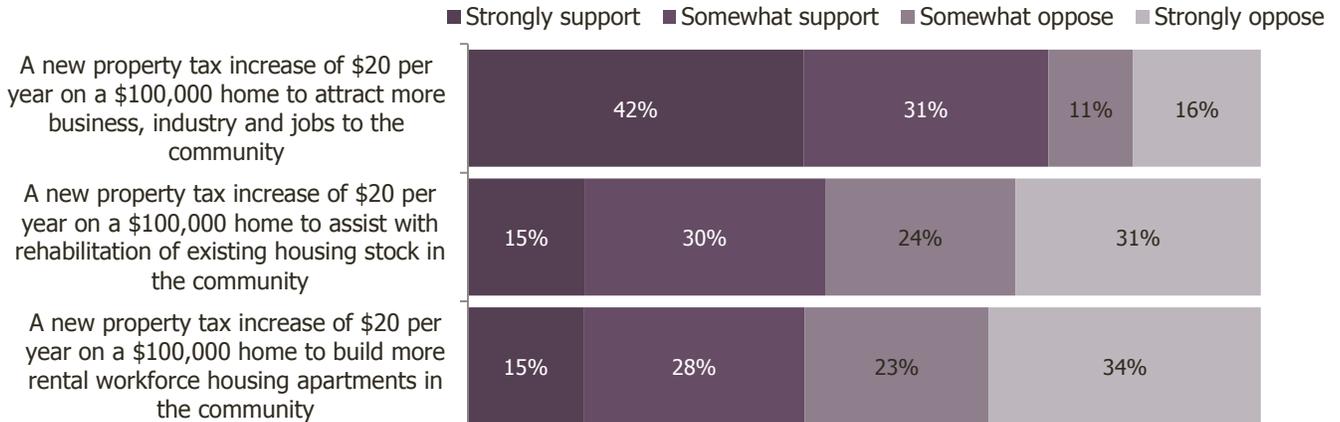
The City could use about one-third of the Blazing Star Landing site to build a new Community Center. To what extent would you support or oppose building this facility if paying for it required a property tax increase of \$50 per year for a home valued at \$100,000?



When asked about City improvement efforts, about 7 in 10 residents supported a property tax increase to attract more business and jobs, while close to 4 in 10 at least somewhat supported a tax increase to assist with existing housing stock and to build more rental workforce housing.

Figure 7: Support for City Improvement Efforts

To what extent do you support or oppose each of the following improvement efforts:



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Nearly all residents felt City leadership should prioritize economic development and job creation and infrastructure improvements and around 9 in 10 said that public safety is a high or medium priority. However, when asked to choose their top priority for Albert Lea, two-thirds of survey participants selected economic development while less than 2 in 10 felt that infrastructure, housing programs and safety should be the City's top focus.

Figure 8: City Priorities

Please indicate how much of a priority, if at all, each of the following should be for City leadership to focus on in the next three years.

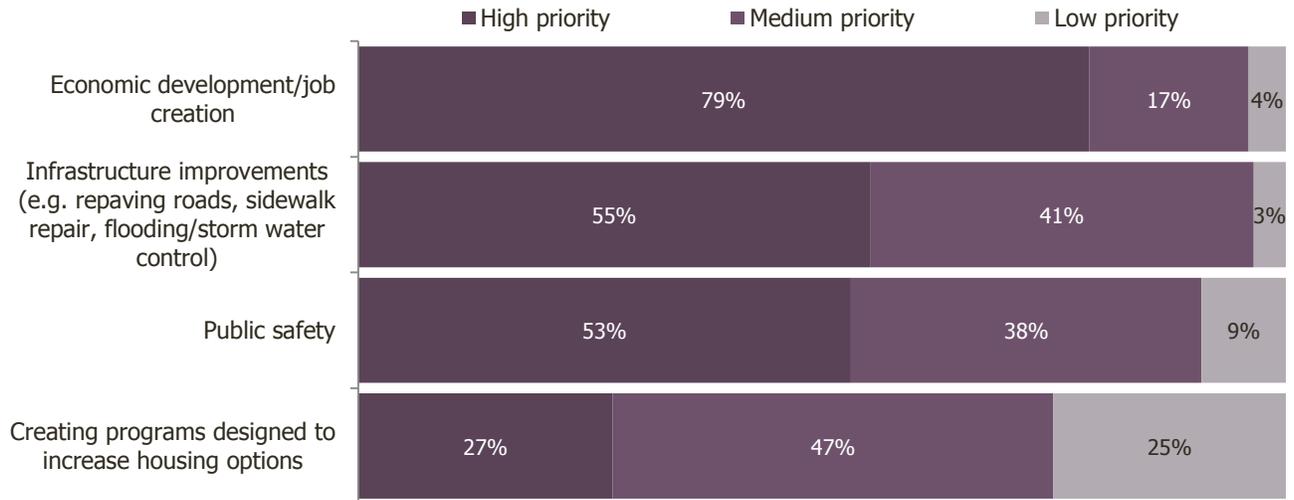
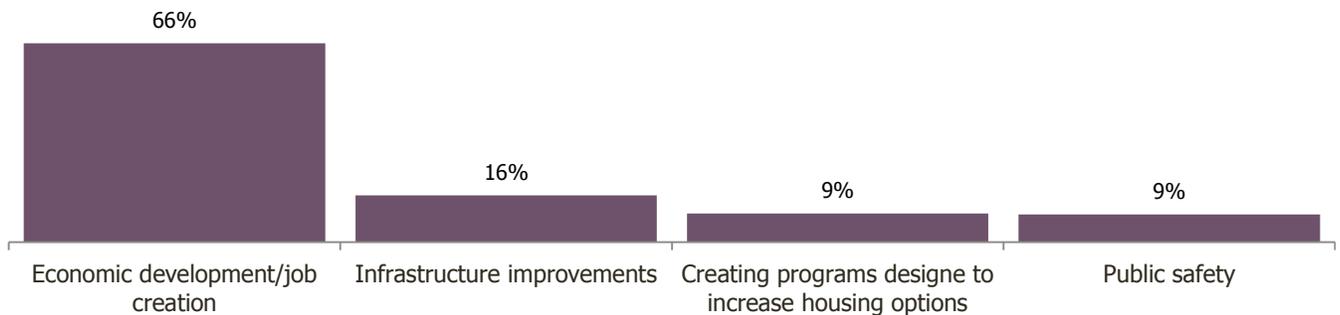


Figure 9: Top Priority

Please select the single top priority you think the City should focus on.

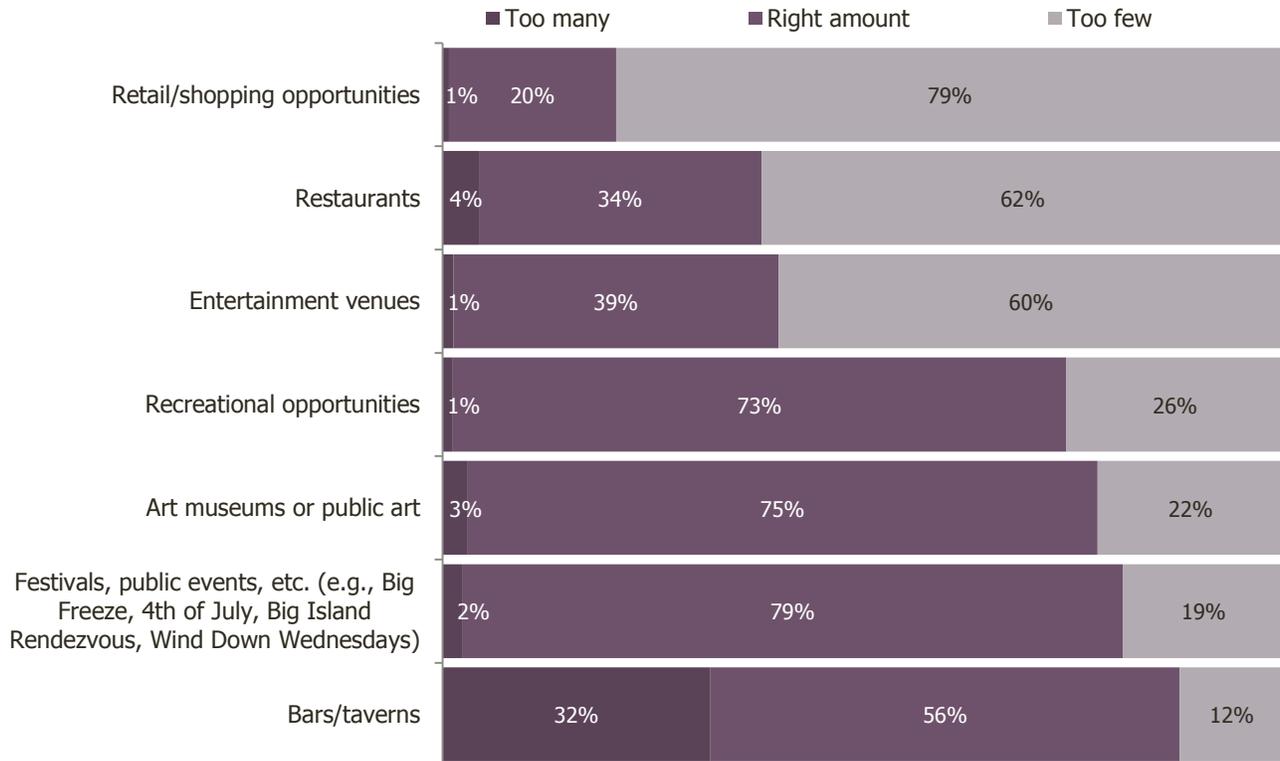


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Very few residents felt that Albert Lea had too many amenities, such as recreational opportunities, art museums or public art and special events or festivals, though about one-third thought there were too many bars and taverns in the city. At least 6 in 10 stated that the community had too few retail/shopping opportunities, restaurants and entertainment venues.

Figure 10: Satisfaction with Quantity of City Amenities

Please indicate whether you feel Albert Lea has too many, the right amount, or too few of each of the following:



Conclusions

There have been small gains in the local economy and it remains an area of opportunity.

Residents rated Economy as a priority for the City in the next two years, and similar to 2015, many ratings within this facet were lower than those observed in other communities. Less than half of respondents gave favorable evaluations to the overall economic health of the city, business and service establishments, shopping opportunities, the City as a place to visit and as a place to work and economic development. Conversely, a number of aspects increased since the last survey iteration. Reviews for employment opportunities, the vibrancy of the downtown/commercial area, Albert Lea as a place to work and economic development all increased in 2018. Further, while residents were less optimistic about the local economy than in previous years, respondents reported higher than average rates of working within the community.

In a show of support, about 7 in 10 residents stated they would strongly or somewhat support a property tax increase to attract businesses, industries and jobs to the community. Additionally, nearly 8 in 10 respondents felt that economic development and job creation was a high priority and another 17% felt this area was a medium priority for City leadership. Compared to infrastructure, safety and housing, residents overwhelmingly selected the economy as the top priority for Albert Lea. Finally, survey participants would welcome more retail and shopping opportunities, restaurants and entertainment venues in the city.

Ease of Mobility contributes to quality of life in Albert Lea.

Across the board, Mobility-related ratings in Albert Lea were high and frequently exceeded ratings in comparison communities. Residents were particularly satisfied with most modes of transportation (travel by walking, bicycle and car), as well as paths and walking trails, public parking and traffic flow. Additionally, more residents awarded high marks to travel by bicycle and public transportation and traffic flow in 2018 compared to 2015. Respondents were also pleased with Mobility services and rated them on par with communities nationwide. The only exception was street repair, which still improved since 2015, along with sidewalk maintenance and traffic signal timing. When asked to evaluate the importance of four potential areas of focus for the City in the next three years, nearly all respondents felt that infrastructure improvements, such as repaving roads, was a high or medium priority.

Ratings for City services and public trust have also improved.

Resident sentiment toward many City services improved since 2015. In addition to multiple ratings increases within the facets of Mobility and Economy, residents were also more likely to give favorable marks to power utility, utility billing and special events. Survey respondents also gave higher ratings in 2018 than in 2015 to almost all aspects of local government performance, such as the overall direction, the value of services for taxes paid and the City welcoming citizen involvement, being honest and acting in the best interest of Albert Lea.

Albert Lea residents are pleased with Recreation and want more attention on Wellness.

Overall, the area of Recreation and Wellness was deemed a top focus area by over 8 in 10 survey participants and ratings for aspects related to topics of Recreation in Albert Lea were on par with peer communities. At least 6 in 10 survey respondents gave excellent or good scores to recreational and fitness opportunities and to recreation programs and recreation centers in Albert Lea. Conversely, only half of residents felt positively about health and wellness and around one-third favorably assessed the availability of health care, mental health care and preventive health services, as well as health care services in the city; each of these aspects lagged behind comparison municipalities. Moreover, all of these items decreased since 2015, with decreases in positive ratings of 8% to 23%. Albert Lea respondents also reported below average rates of engaging in physical activity. Support for a property tax increase to fund the construction of a new community center was lukewarm and split evenly, with more residents strongly opposing than strongly supporting the measure. Therefore, using frequently utilized sources of information, such as local TV and radio stations and the Albert Lea *Tribune* to highlight proposed offerings of the new community center and including some aspects of health care, could serve to boost residents' support.