



ROOM A | 130 6TH STREET WEST
COLUMBIA FALLS, MT 59912

PHONE (406) 892-4391
FAX (406) 892-4413

AGENDA

JOINT CITY COUNCIL AND PLANNING COMMISSION WORKSHOP

MONDAY, JANUARY 26, 2026 6 PM

COUNCIL CHAMBERS CITY HALL

CALL TO ORDER AND ROLL CALL

NEW BUSINESS:

1. Presentation by Cushing Terrell of Survey Results and Existing Conditions

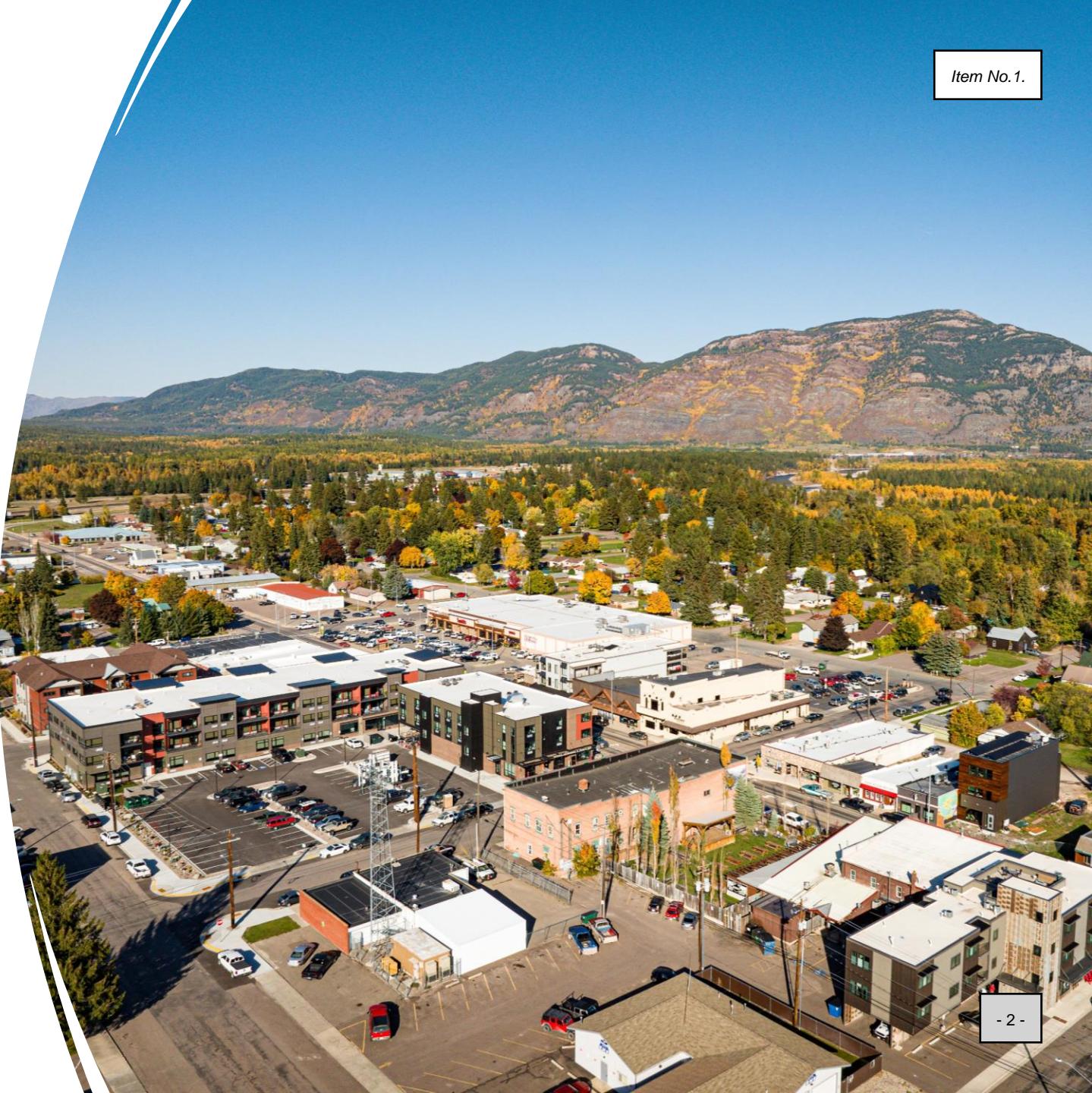
VISITOR OR PUBLIC COMMENT

ADJOURNMENT

Columbia Falls Land Use Plan

Survey Results & Existing
Conditions

January 26, 2026



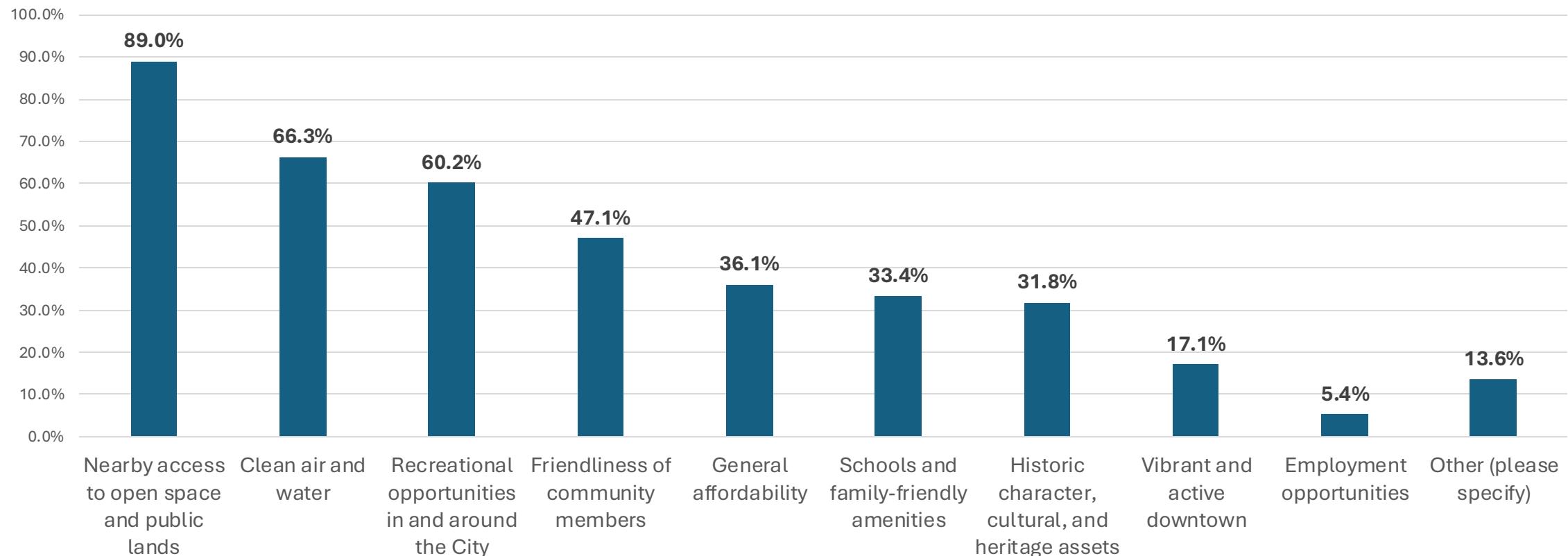
Survey Results



- 374 respondents
- Some questions will add up over 100%
 - “Select all that apply”
 - Open ended
- 14 questions
 - 3 demographic
 - Tenure, location, and age subsets produced very similar results

Survey Results Q1

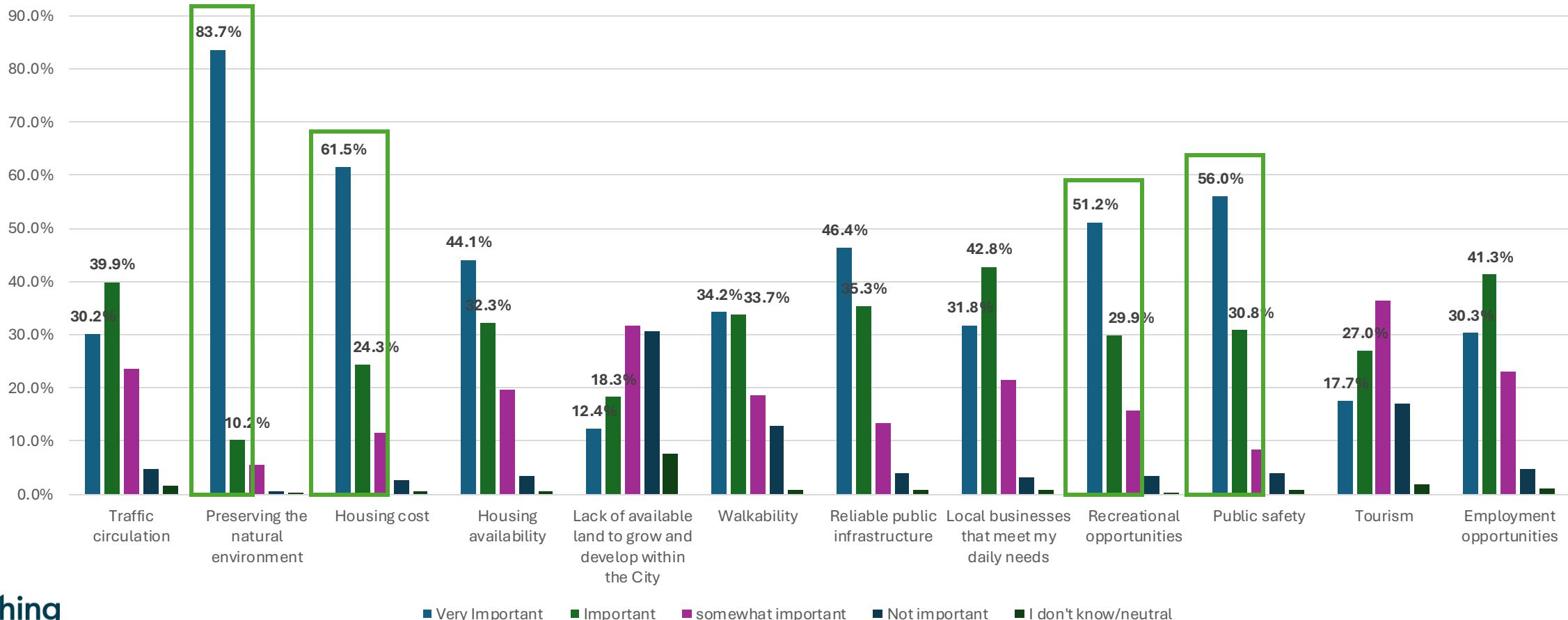
What do you consider to be the top four greatest assets of Columbia Falls? *Please select your top four.*



Survey Results Q2

Item No. 1.

Please rank the importance of the following issues when considering the future of Columbia Falls.



Survey Results Q3

What three words would you like to describe Columbia Falls in 20 years? *Open-ended.*

affordability great services recreation safe vibrant town community small affordable friendly

atmosphere wild city close-knit opportunities progressive clean river

tourism environmental charming downtown outdoor families focused natural locals vibe access

kind identity pedestrian bikeable public home quaint family

living different businesses bikeable public

conservation busy charm preserved inviting rural

small-town family-oriented housing sustainable quiet thriving growth working

gateway bike healthy

strong uncrowded cohesive afford

accessibility planned people livable beautiful

environmentally life outdoorsy

water

recreate collar inclusive active

locals

blue local diverse infrastructure

open growing responsible

family-friendly green happy

welcoming crowded beauty

character

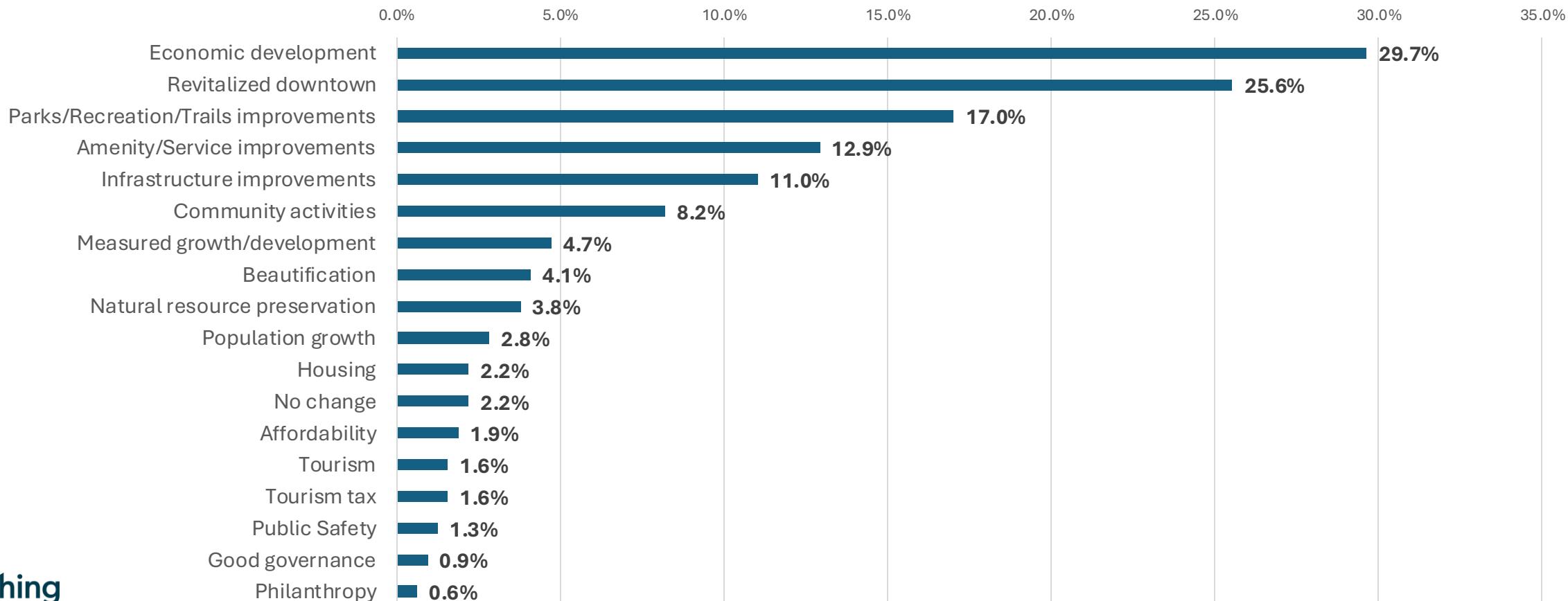
fun authentic community-oriented

environment culture

connected

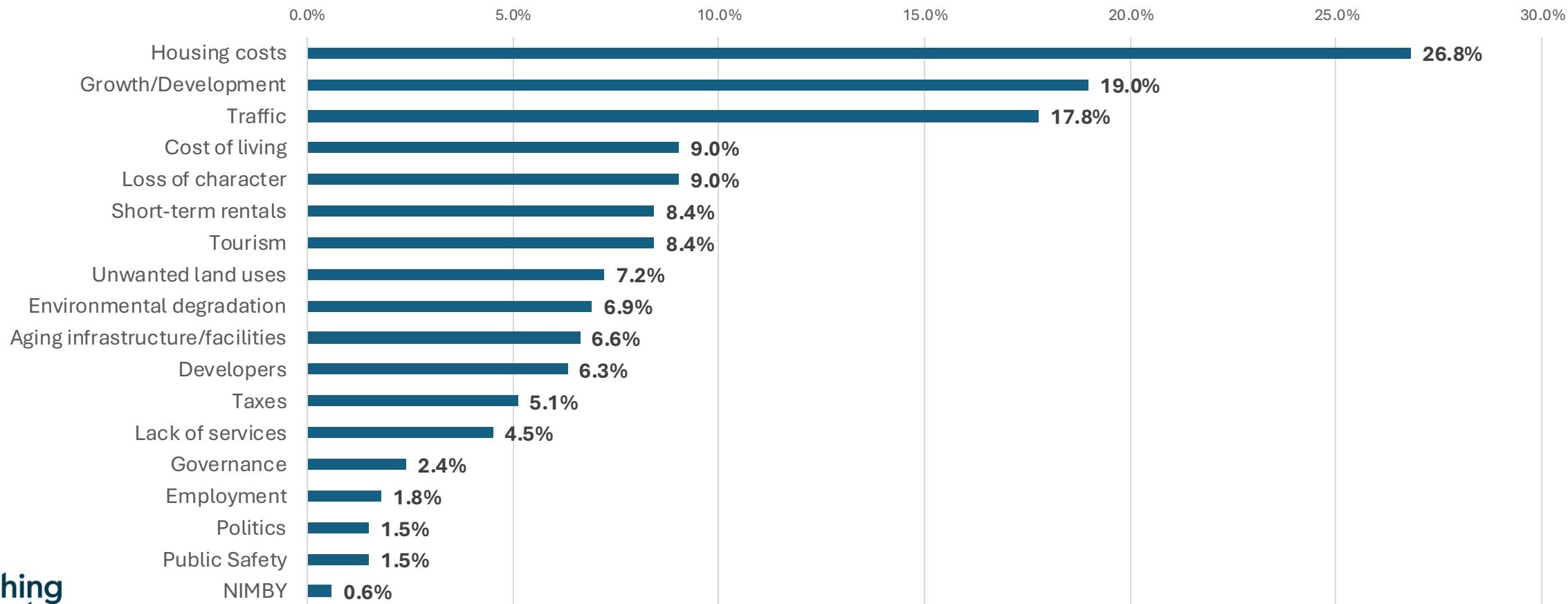
Survey Results Q4A

What changes in Columbia Falls – positive – have you noticed over the past ten years? *Open-ended.*



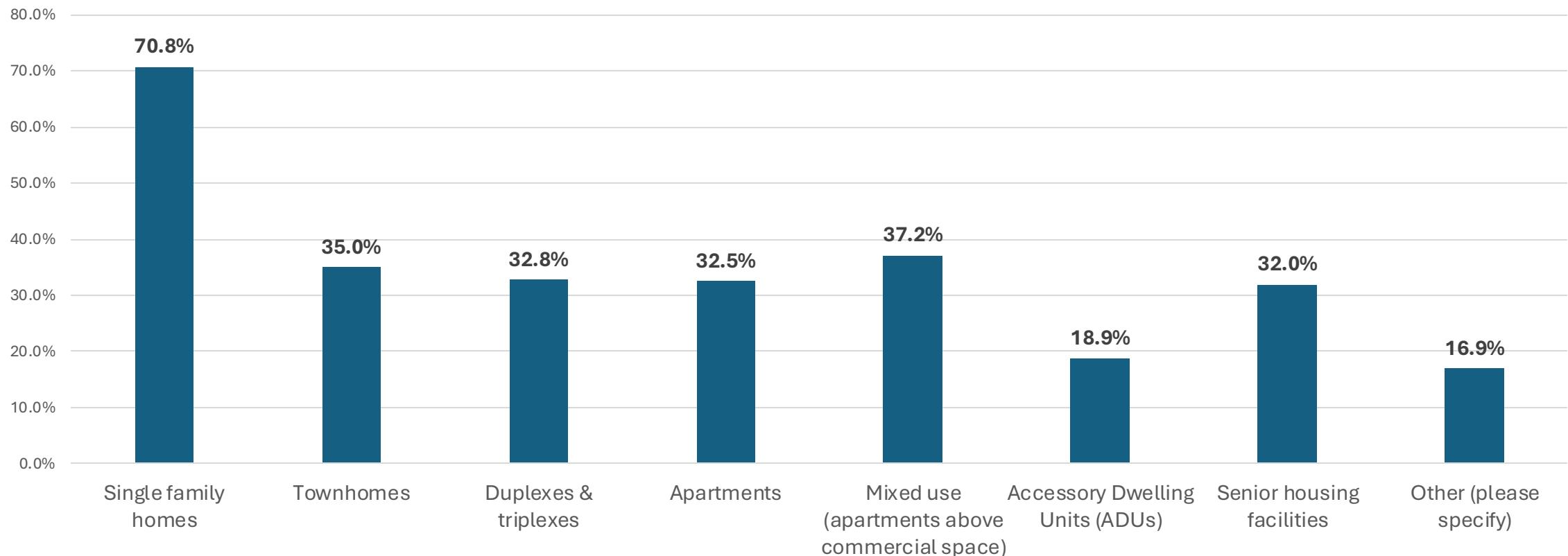
Survey Results Q4B

What changes in Columbia Falls – negative – have you noticed over the past ten years? *Open-ended.*



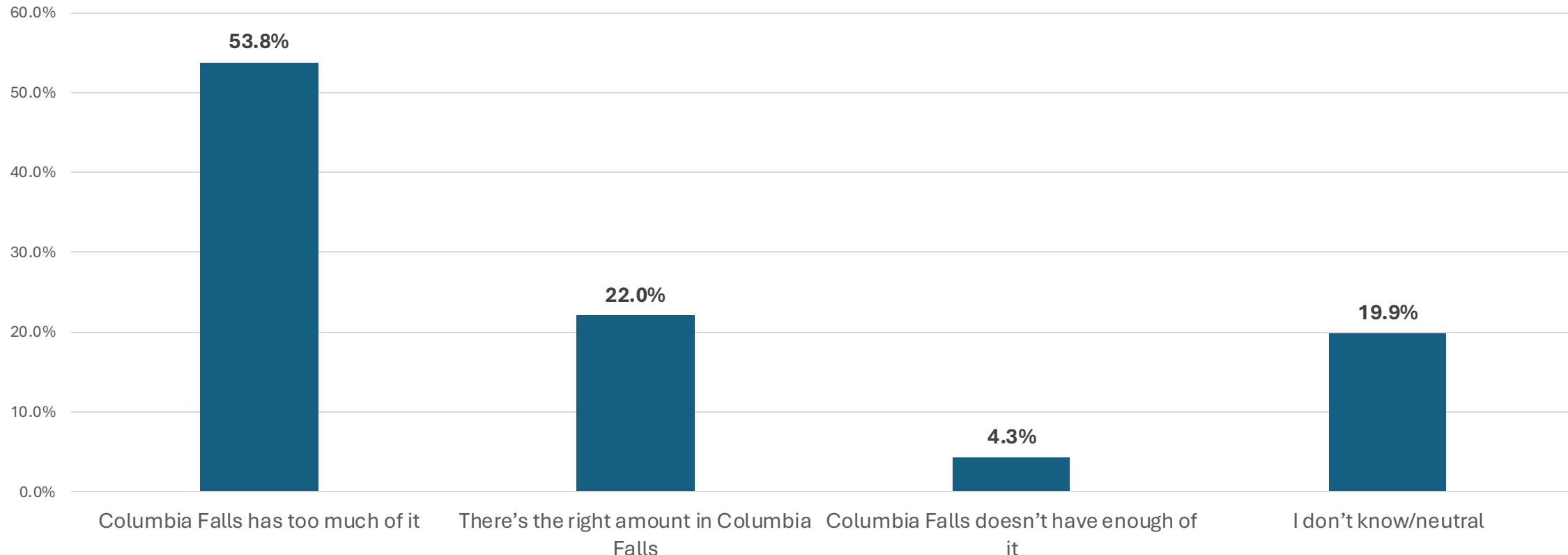
Survey Results Q5

What type of housing options would you like to see more of in Columbia Falls? *Select all that apply.*



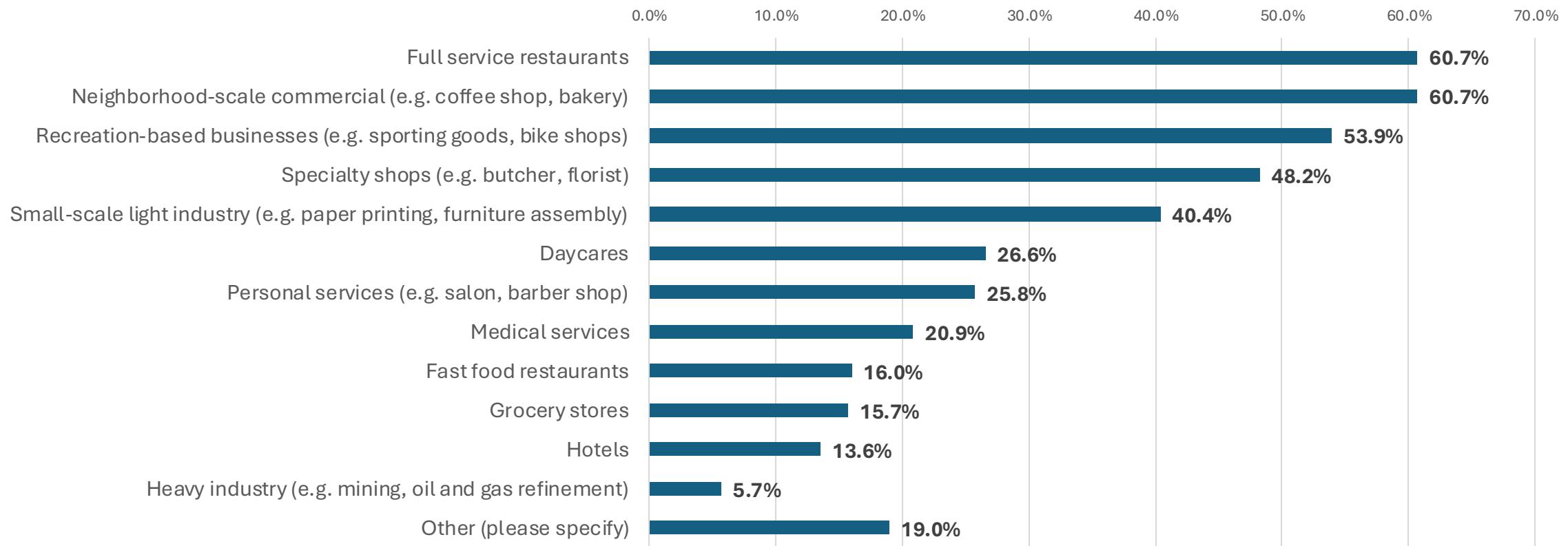
Survey Results Q6

How do you feel about short-term rental housing?



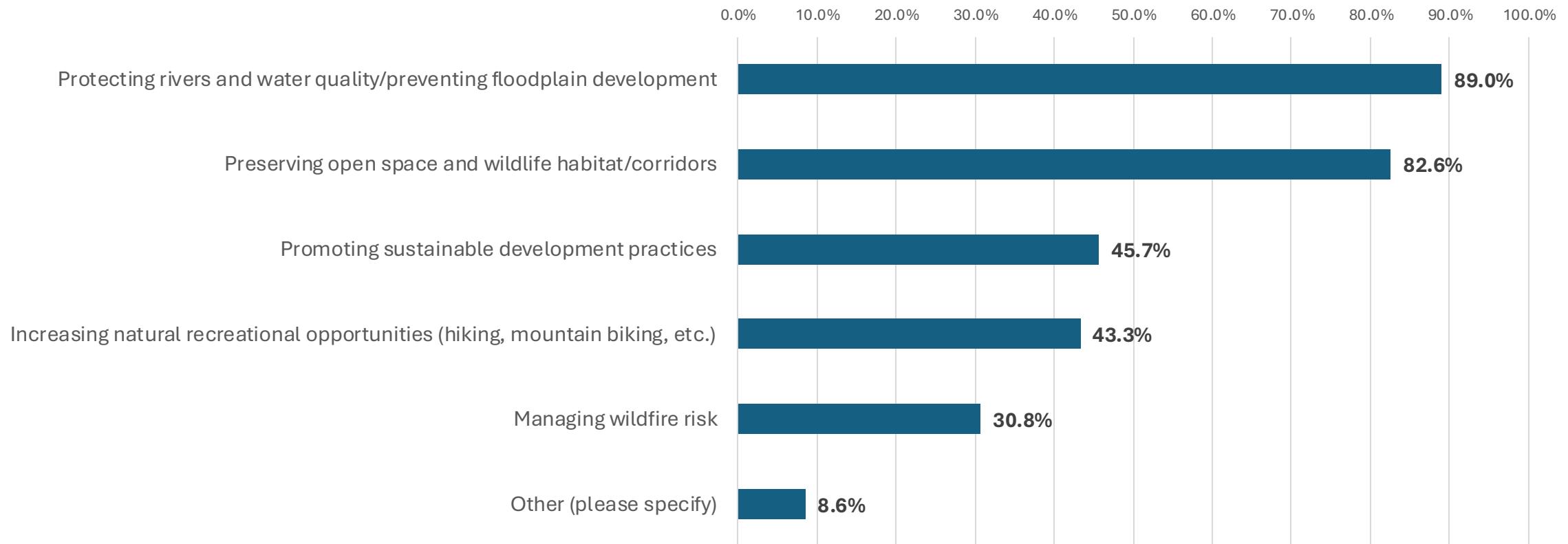
Survey Results Q7

What types of businesses would you like to see more of in Columbia Falls? *Select all that apply.*



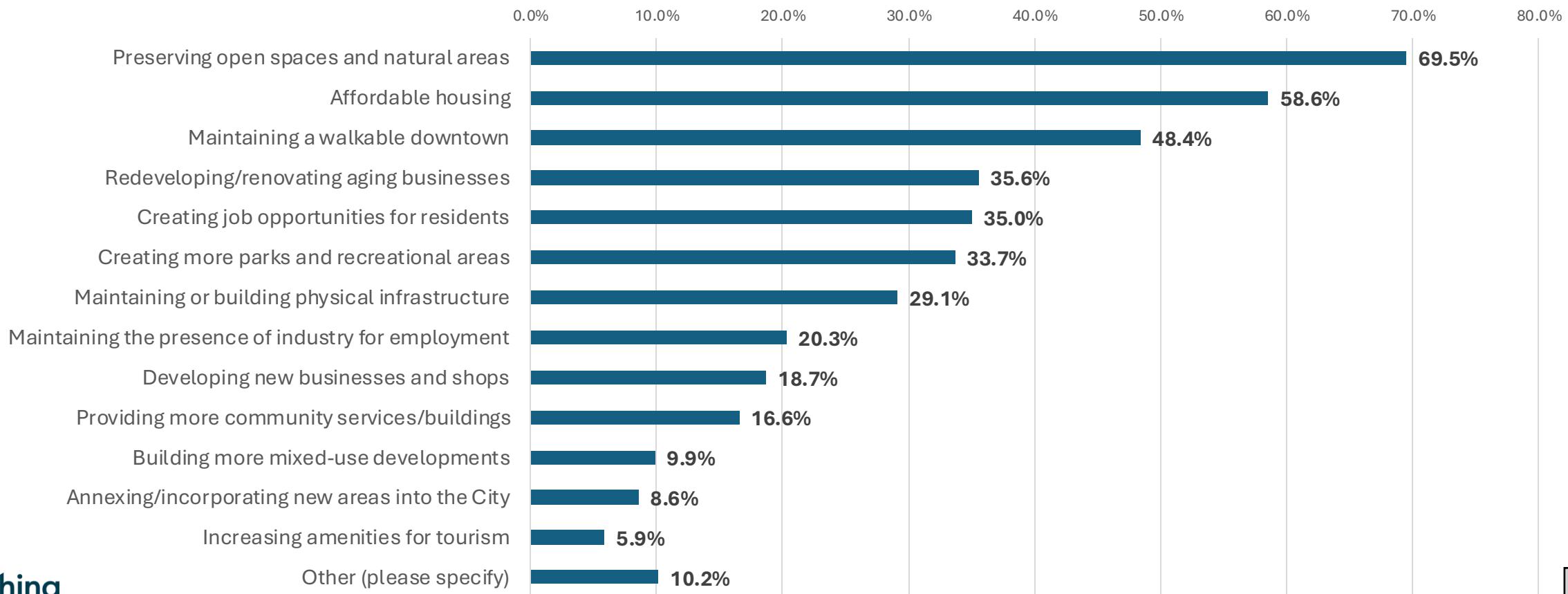
Survey Results Q8

What environmental issues should be prioritized in the Land Use Plan? *Please select your top three.*



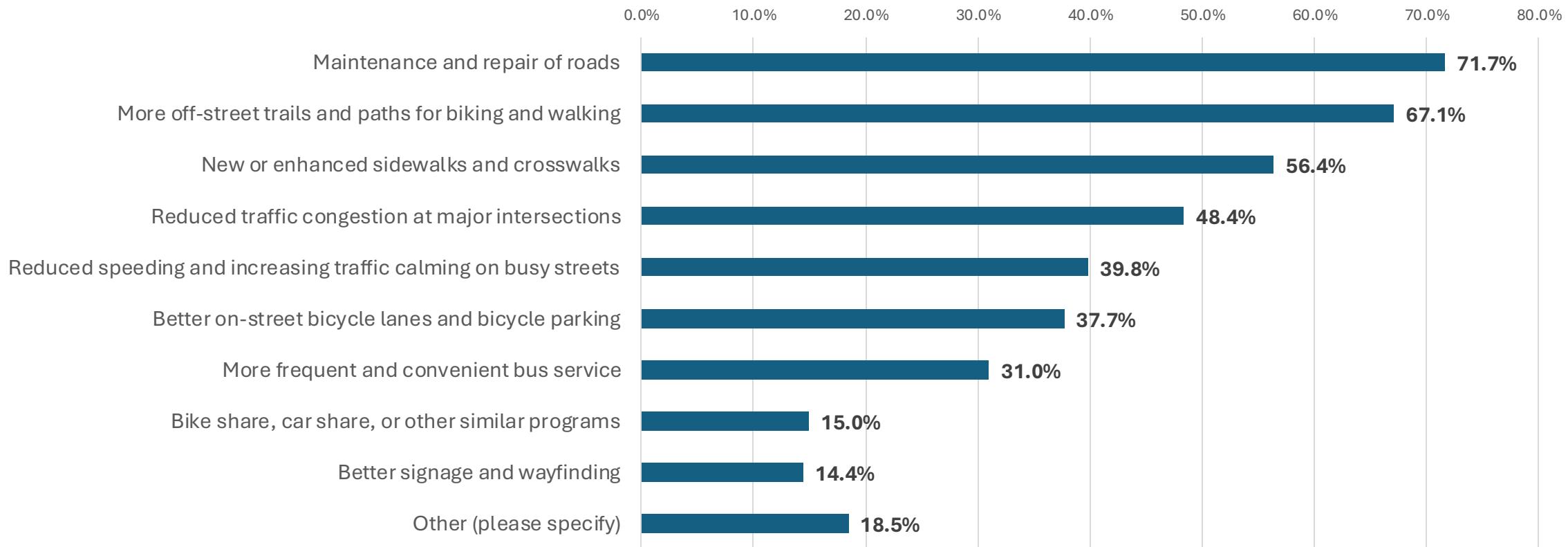
Survey Results Q9

What should be the primary focus of land use in Columbia Falls when thinking about the future? *Please select your top four.*



Survey Results Q10

What are the top transportation and mobility priorities Columbia Falls should focus on? *Please select your top four.*



Survey Results Q11

Is there anything else you'd like to let us know about life in Columbia Falls, now or in the future? *Open-ended.*

“I believe Columbia Falls needs to become a densely populated, locally oriented city with the logging industry practice developed with sustainability, regeneration, and balanced use of land and economic exports...”

“As an older adult, having access to small local businesses and services is increasingly important to me.”

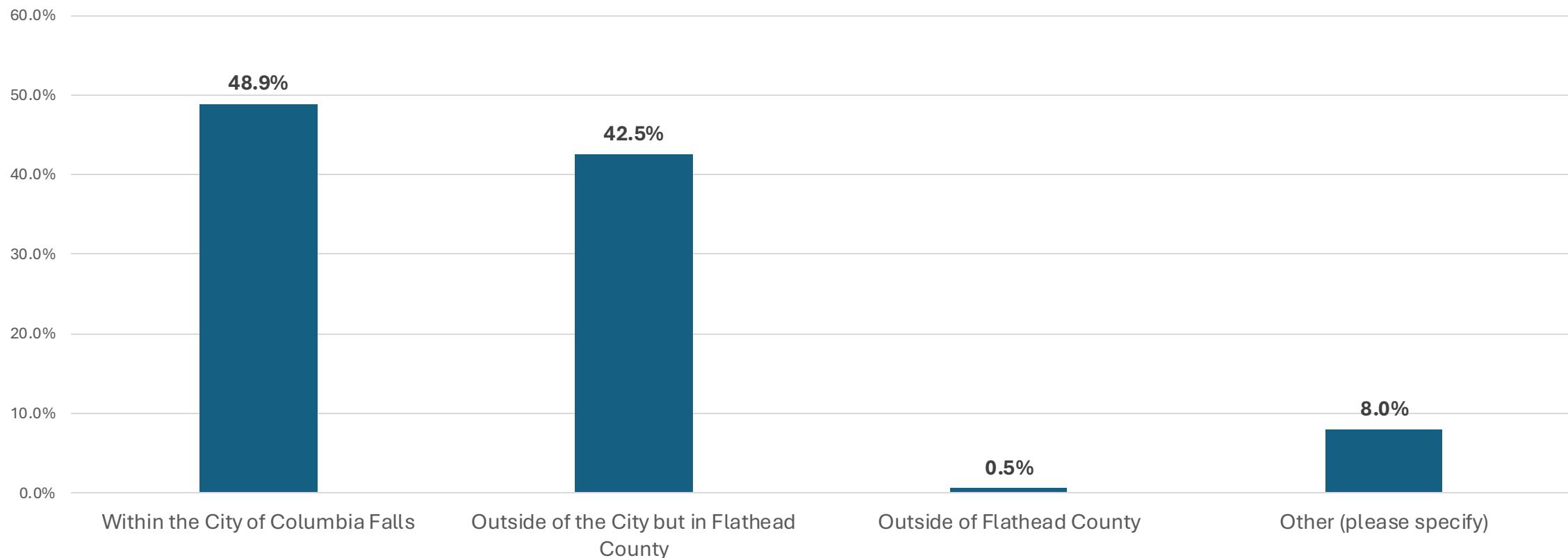
“I want to see support for a friendly connected community that prioritizes a clean environment, educated youth and a safe walk/bikeable community.”

Keep us rooted in our heritage but bring us into the 21st century.

“My biggest concern for Columbia Falls is that we will gentrify the same Whitefish has and push local businesses and residents out.”

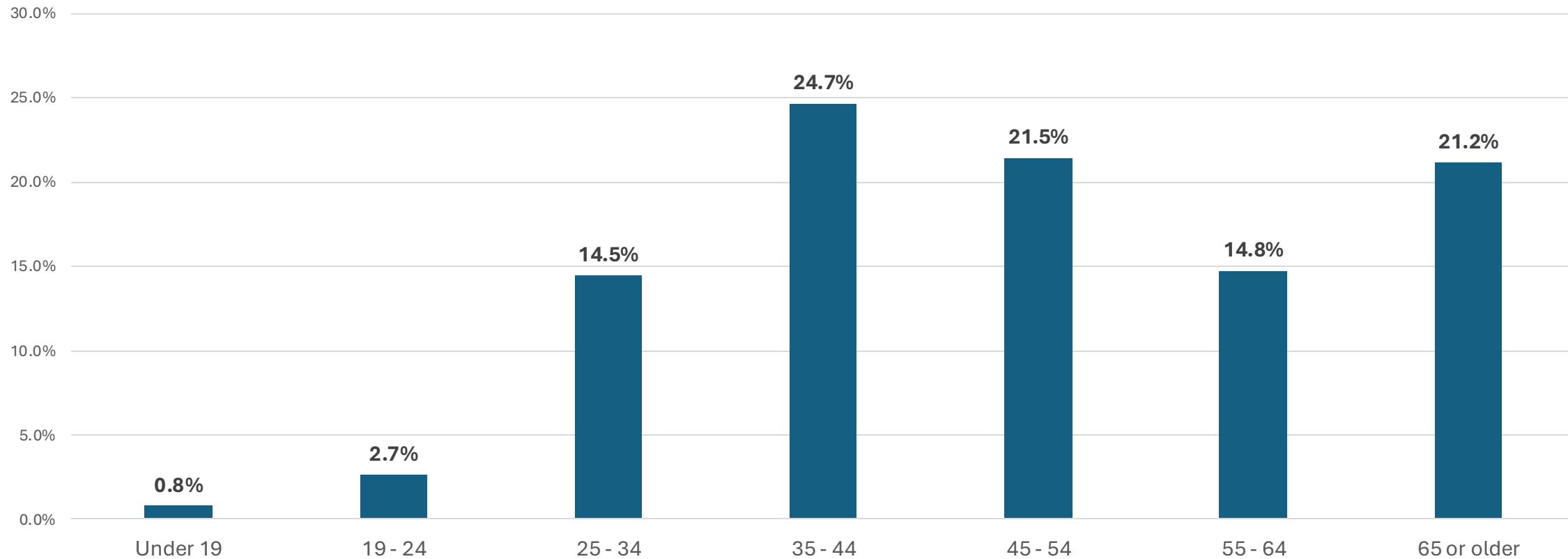
Survey Results Q12

Where do you live?



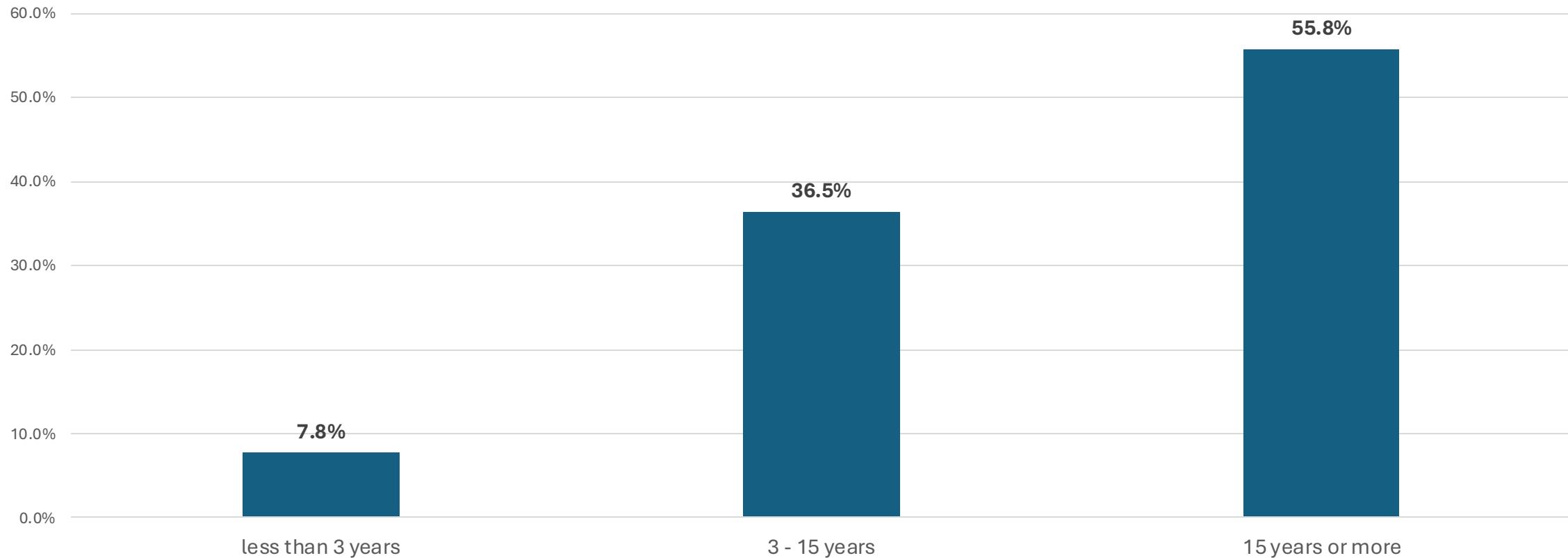
Survey Results Q13

What is your age?



Survey Results Q14

How long have you lived in (or around) Columbia Falls?

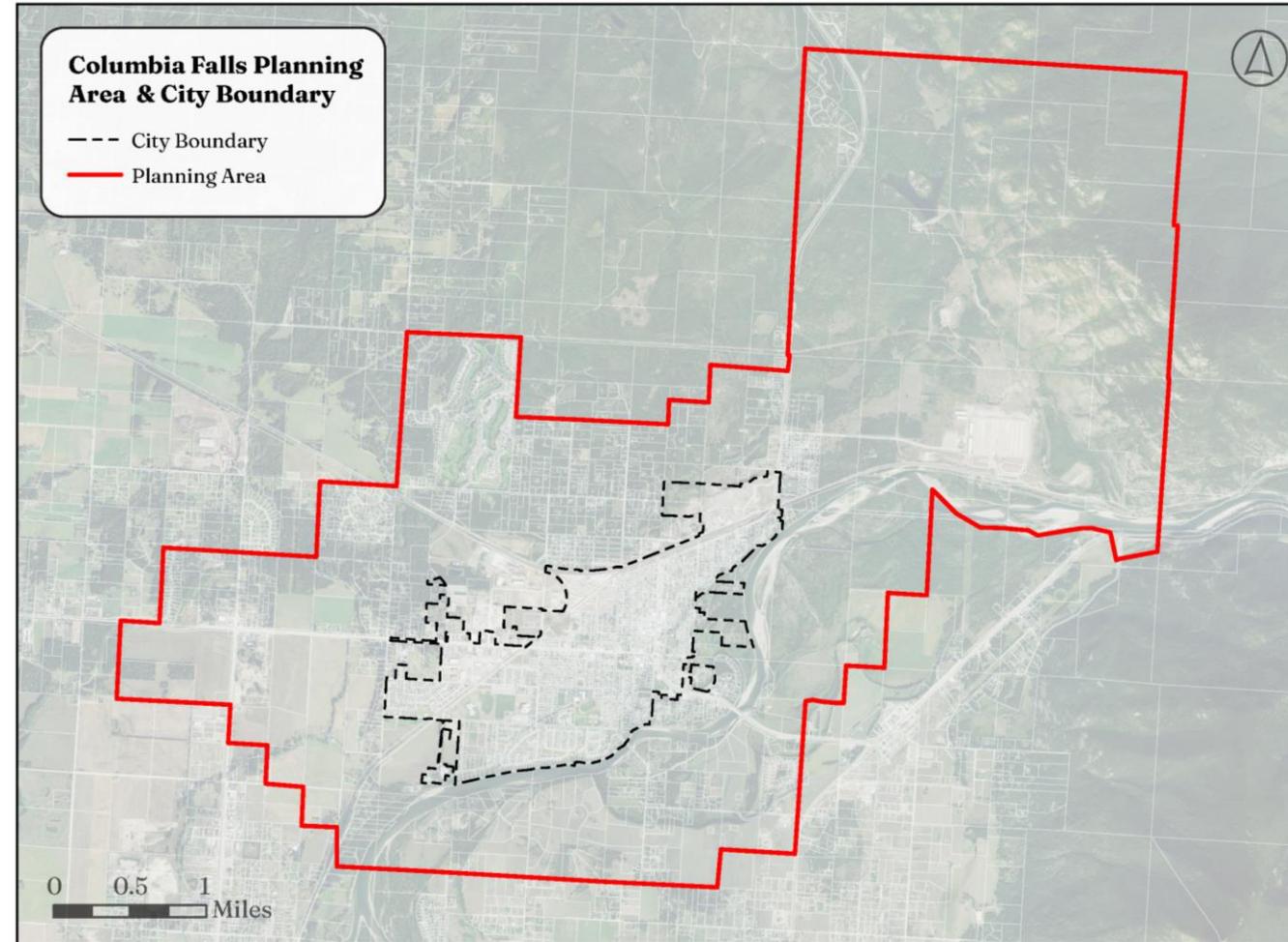


Existing Conditions



- Data Sources
- Recent Planning Documents

Columbia Falls Planning Area



Existing Conditions

Natural Resources



Protecting water is essential

A vast network of surface water flows through the Planning Area, including the Flathead River.



Natural features limit development

While the Flathead River's 100 year floodplain only accounts for 5% of land area in the Planning Area, hillsides and soils like gravelly loam restrict building.



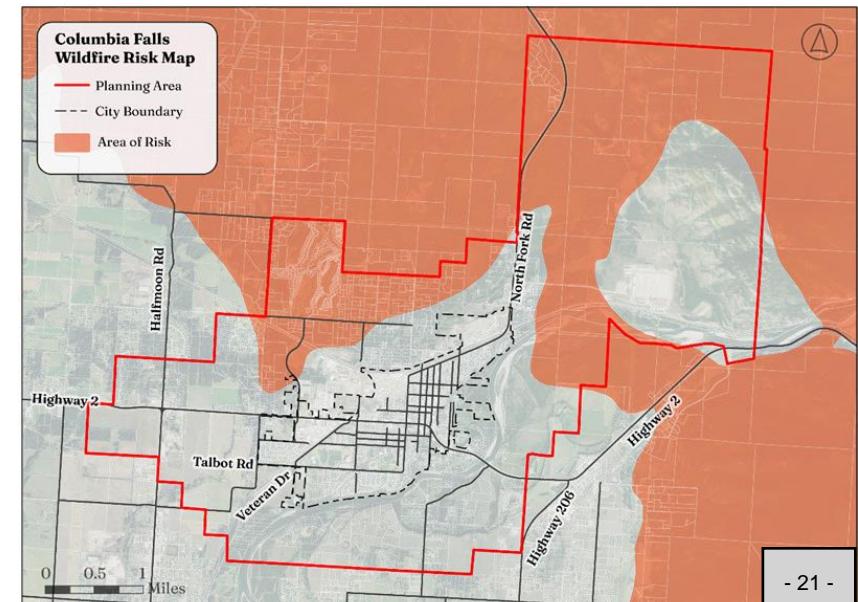
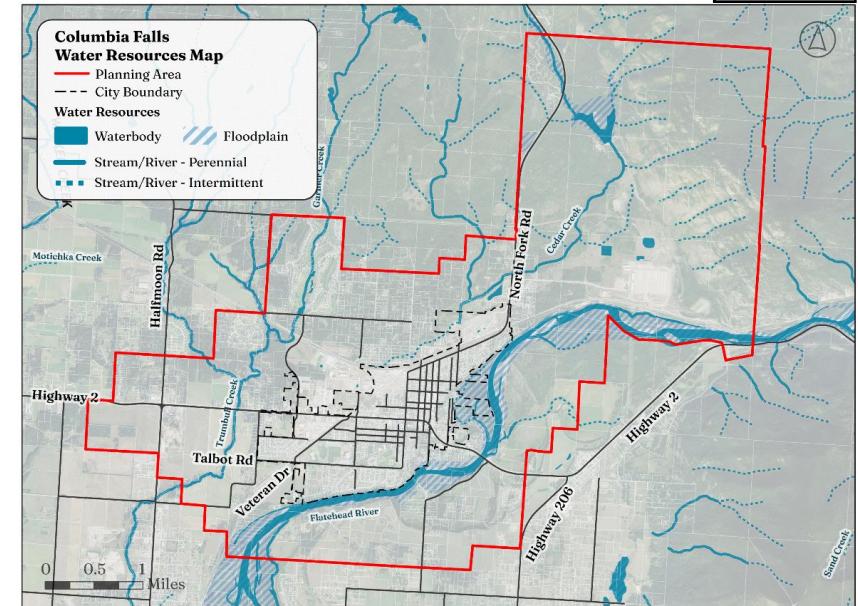
Wildfire and erosion are real risks

Nearby fire-prone areas and hillside development increase risk; nearly 3 million acres of Montana forests burned 2010–2020.



Wildlife areas are an asset

Bad Rock Canyon Wildlife Area (772 acres) protects elk, moose, grizzly bears, and bull trout; northern forests support recreation, conservation.



Existing Conditions

Land Use & Growth



Limited developable land inside the City

With most land already built out, future growth will rely on infill development, redevelopment of underutilized parcels, and annexation at the city's edges.



Existing regulations limit density and housing choice

Minimum lot sizes, height limits, parking requirements, and conditional approval for multifamily housing constrain higher-density, mixed-use, and affordable housing development.



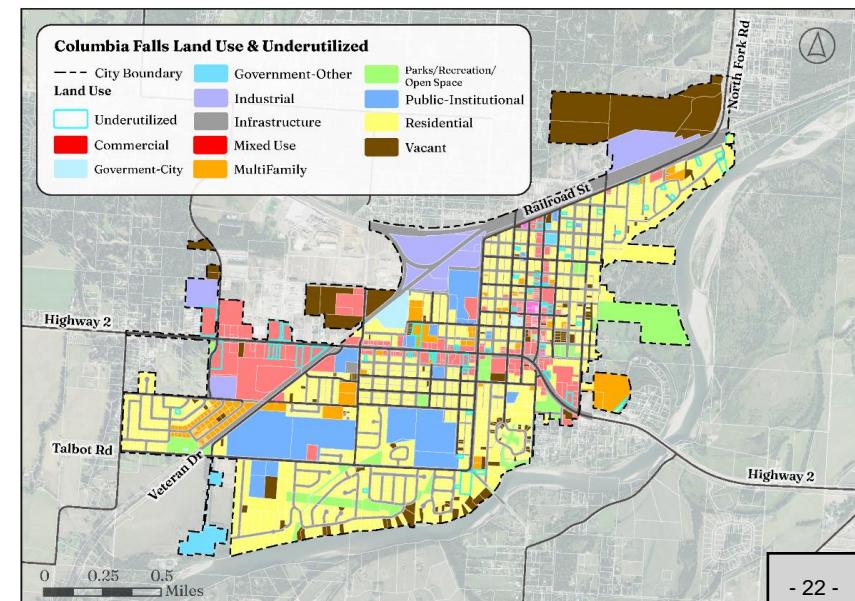
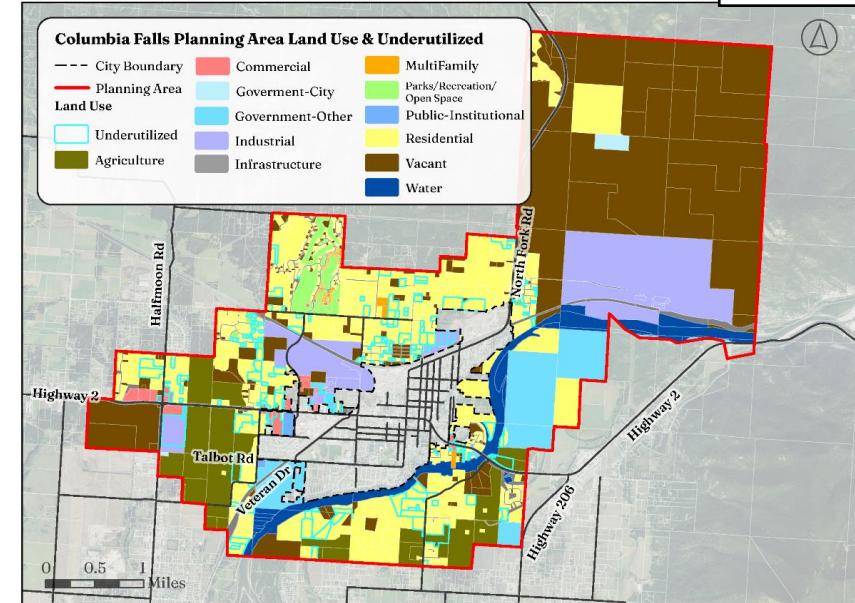
Strong redevelopment potential exists

11% of land within the City and 35% of land in the Planning Area is vacant. Vacant and underutilized parcels within the City and Planning Area provide opportunities to accommodate growth more efficiently than continued low-density expansion.



Projected population growth requires policy updates

Anticipated growth through 2045 will increase pressure on land and infrastructure, making updates to zoning, parking, height standards, and affordable housing incentives essential for sustainable development.



Existing Conditions

People & Community Services



Shifting demographics and housing needs

Columbia Falls is seeing growth in working-age residents alongside an aging population, while families with children are declining faster than the county—highlighting the need for affordable family housing and senior housing options.



Infrastructure capacity has near-term constraints

Water and sewer systems are generally reliable but face capacity, pressure, fire flow, and aging infrastructure issues; additional investment will be needed to support future growth within city limits.



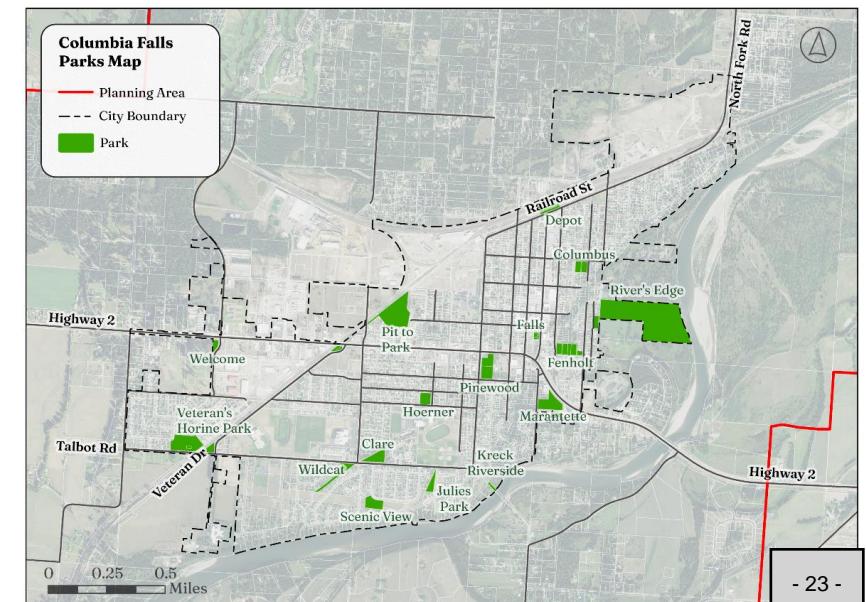
Public safety and services are adequate but strained outside the city

City police and fire services are well organized, but rural growth is stressing response times, underscoring the importance of coordination, staffing, and infrastructure planning in the broader planning area.



Strong community amenities support quality of life

Parks, schools, libraries, healthcare, and senior services provide a solid foundation, but aging facilities (notably the high school) and childcare and workforce connections remain key long-term priorities.



Existing Conditions

Urban Design / Historic & Cultural Facilities



Downtown momentum with redevelopment potential

Nucleus Avenue has experienced revitalization, but underutilized buildings remain and present opportunities for mixed-use redevelopment, affordable housing, and small business growth.



Walkable, well-designed town center

The traditional grid layout supports walkability and should be reinforced with pedestrian-friendly design, bike infrastructure, public spaces, and updated design standards that reflect Columbia Falls' identity.



Historic and cultural assets strengthen community identity

Historic buildings, the Veterans' Home, the Historical Society museum, and cultural facilities like the amphitheater and library contribute to a strong sense of place and support heritage tourism.



Gateway location drives land use strategy

As a gateway to Glacier National Park, Columbia Falls should emphasize eco-friendly development, recreation- and tourism-oriented businesses, clear industrial-residential buffers, and visitor services that complement local needs.



Existing Conditions

Housing



Slow but growing housing supply

Columbia Falls has ~2,600 housing units (mostly single-family) which has grown 30% since 2010, but demand outpaces supply, especially for affordable units.



Affordability challenges

Home prices and rents have risen significantly and rapidly (median home price \$575K, rents up 9.2% per year), leaving 32% of households cost-burdened, particularly renters and lower-income families.



Shortage of income-restricted & family rentals

Only 92 income-restricted units exist, mostly for seniors or disabled residents; few affordable 2-3 bedroom units are available for families.

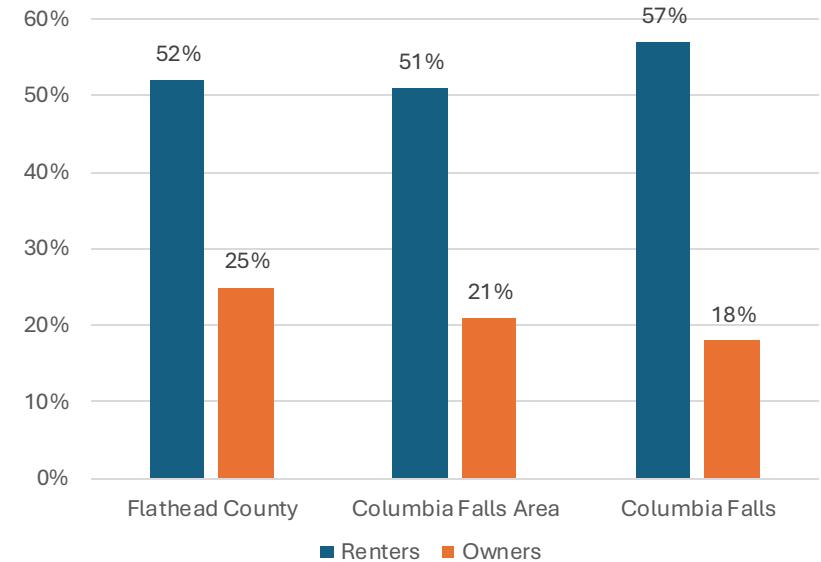


Future needs & policy implications

Over the next decade, 445-650 new units are needed in the city, with 60% needed at below-market pricing; supporting diverse housing types and regulating short-term rentals is critical.

Cost Burdened Residents

Item No. 1.



Existing Conditions

Economics & Labor Force



Wages are not keeping up with cost of living

Most service jobs pay \$10–\$20/hour; even education and healthcare jobs average \$44K/year, which is well below the local cost of living.

Worker shortages are a growing problem

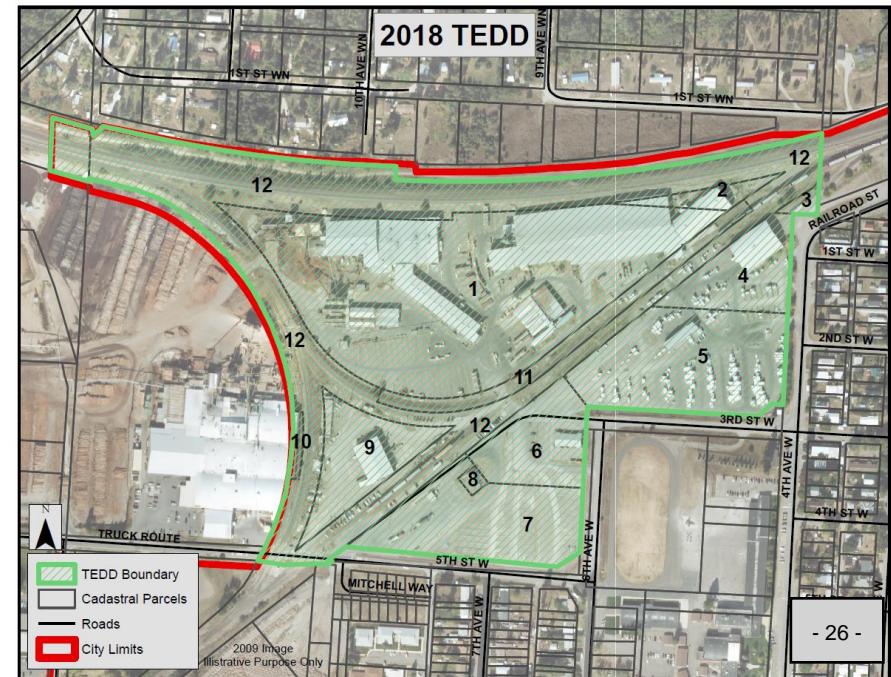
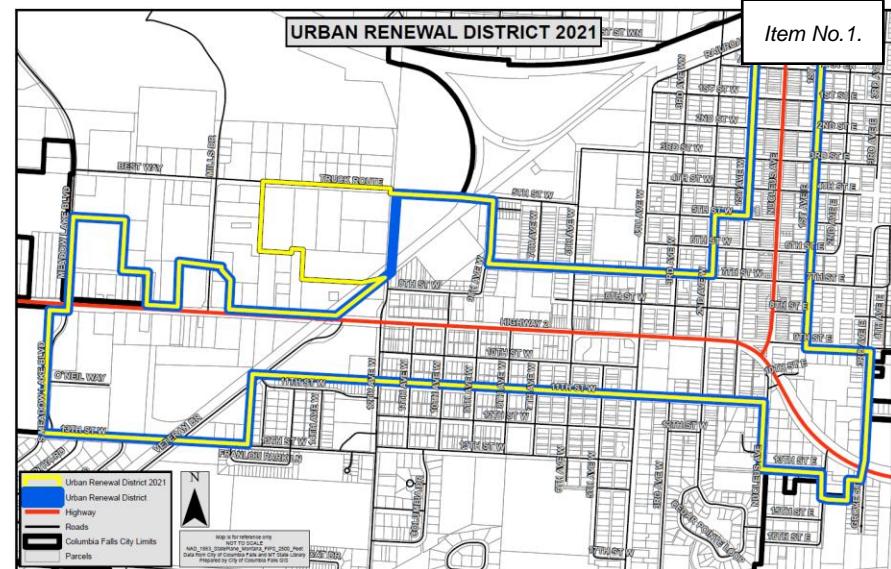
Worker shortages are rising - about 8% of jobs (~460) were unfilled in late 2024, with 74% of employers reporting hiring and retention challenges, underscoring the need for affordable local housing.

Commuting is all too common

Over half of employees commute into Columbia Falls, mainly from Kalispell or other Flathead County areas. Many would live locally if housing were affordable.

Targeted development is key

Urban Renewal and TEDD initiatives aim to attract higher-paying jobs and improve infrastructure, including industrial and manufacturing opportunities, while supporting the local workforce and lodging needs.



Existing Conditions

Transportation



Traffic congestion is a growing challenge

US Highway 2, the Truck Route, and key intersections experience heavy commuter, truck, and tourist traffic, creating chokepoints that impact mobility and safety.



Driving alone dominates commuting

Nearly 89% of workers drive alone, reflecting limited local transit options and fragmented pedestrian/bike infrastructure, reinforcing a car-dependent culture.



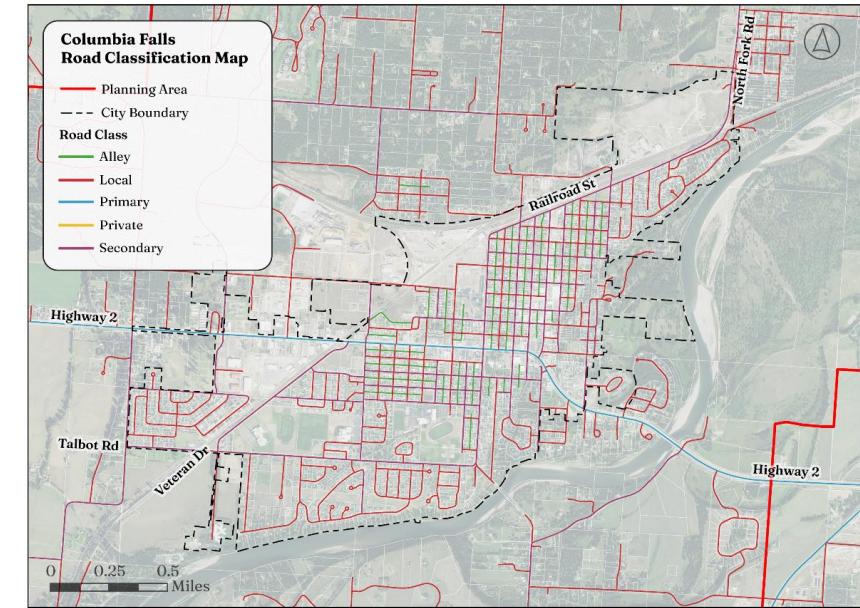
Pedestrian and bicycle connectivity is limited but improving

Projects since 2023 are expanding sidewalks and multi-use paths, linking schools, neighborhoods, and downtown, but barriers like highways and rail lines still restrict safe movement.

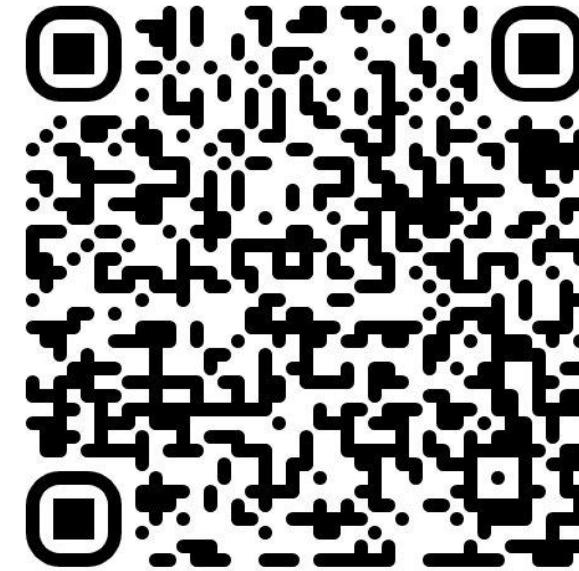


Regional transportation access drives economic opportunity

Rail, highways, and Glacier Park International Airport connect Columbia Falls to broader markets, tourism, and workforce mobility, while infrastructure upgrades like a BNSF quiet zone and airport expansion will shape land use and economic opportunity.



Full Existing Conditions Report



[https://columbia-falls-land-use-plan-
ctagroup.hub.arcgis.com/](https://columbia-falls-land-use-plan-ctagroup.hub.arcgis.com/)

Dear Mayor, City Councilors, and members of the Planning Commission,

When I read the recent article in the Flathead Beacon that highlighted the Planning Commission's prioritization of infill development, specifically multi-family housing, townhomes, and attached units, I was pleasantly surprised.

As I've written to you before, I don't think the framing of growth in Columbia Falls needs to be outward expansion. Infill and incremental growth should not be equated with "slow" or "no" growth. Rather, it should be seen as low-hanging fruit and pragmatic.

As City Council and the Planning Commission continue to work through the Growth Policy and the the accompanying zoning, I would encourage you consider the following:

1. Allow the next level of development in each zone by right. In CR5, for example, you can build two dwellings per lot. Increase that to 3 or 4. No neighborhood should experience rapid change, and no neighborhood should be exempt from change.
2. Eliminate minimum lot size requirements in existing neighborhoods. This allows for more efficient land use by removing artificial barriers that limit the number of homes that can be built.
3. Legalize starter homes in all residential zones, such as making "cluster development" by right.
4. Repeal parking mandates and allow property owners to decide how much parking is needed for their project.

By setting the conditions to allow for diverse housing types, I believe there will be a democratization of development across our community. We won't need to rely on a large scale developer to build large scale developments because our neighbors will have the ability to take matters much more easily into their own hands.

I look forward to continuing to hear how the Council and the Planning Commision will work to implement and prioritize in-fill development. I hope to attend more meetings in person to share my support and ideas face-to-face, though 6-7pm is in the throes of dinner and bedtime for my kids. For now, thank you for taking the time to read my comments.

Best,

Daniel Sidder

529 11th St W