

2014

Town of St. Albans

Planning Department

ST. ALBANS TOWN COMMUNITY PLANNING SURVEY

The Community Planning Survey was carried out by the St. Albans Town Planning Department in order to gather resident input to improve communication, increase participation and prioritize land use issues in the Town. This report includes the Survey results as well as recommendations for future action.

Methodology

The Planning Department carried out a Town Community Planning Survey in March 2014. The Survey, funded by the Municipal Planning Grant for the Town Zoning Bylaws and Subdivision Regulations Comprehensive rewrite, included questions about demographics, communication, participation, land use and development, and infrastructure.

The survey included twenty-nine questions: 11 multiple choice, 4 open ended, 5 agree-disagree scales, 2 ranking questions, and 7 scale from 0 (not important) to 10 (very important). The Town evaluated answers based on the percentage of the total respondents who chose that answer for multiple choice and ranking answers. For responses to the 0-10 scale responses, answers were considered as follows: 0-1 (not important), 2-3 (not very important), 4-6 (somewhat important) 7-8 (important), 9-10 (very important).

Demographics

The Survey was distributed on Town Meeting Day, March 4, 2014 at Collins Perley Recreation Center. Residents could opt to take the survey electronically or on paper. On March 5, 2014 a link to the survey was also distributed through Front Porch Forum. The Town of St. Albans webpage also carried a link to the survey from March 5 – March 21, 2014.

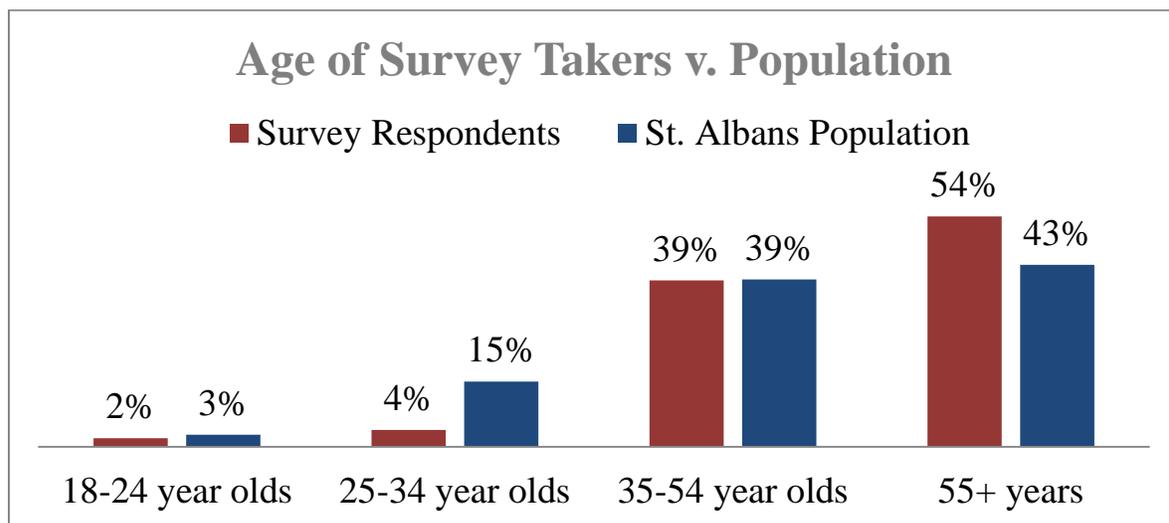
The Town received 150 responses, 50 online and 100 paper responses. Nearly all (143) were filled out at Collins Perley Recreation Center on Town Meeting Day. The respondents represent approximately 13% of all residents who showed up to vote. This is a strong response rate, most surveys receive less than 4-5% response.

The average survey respondent age skewed older than the St. Albans population which may be a reflection of the voting demographic in off year elections—the average age of voters in these elections skews older as well. While those aged 35-54 are well represented, those 18-34 are underrepresented and those over 55 years are overrepresented.

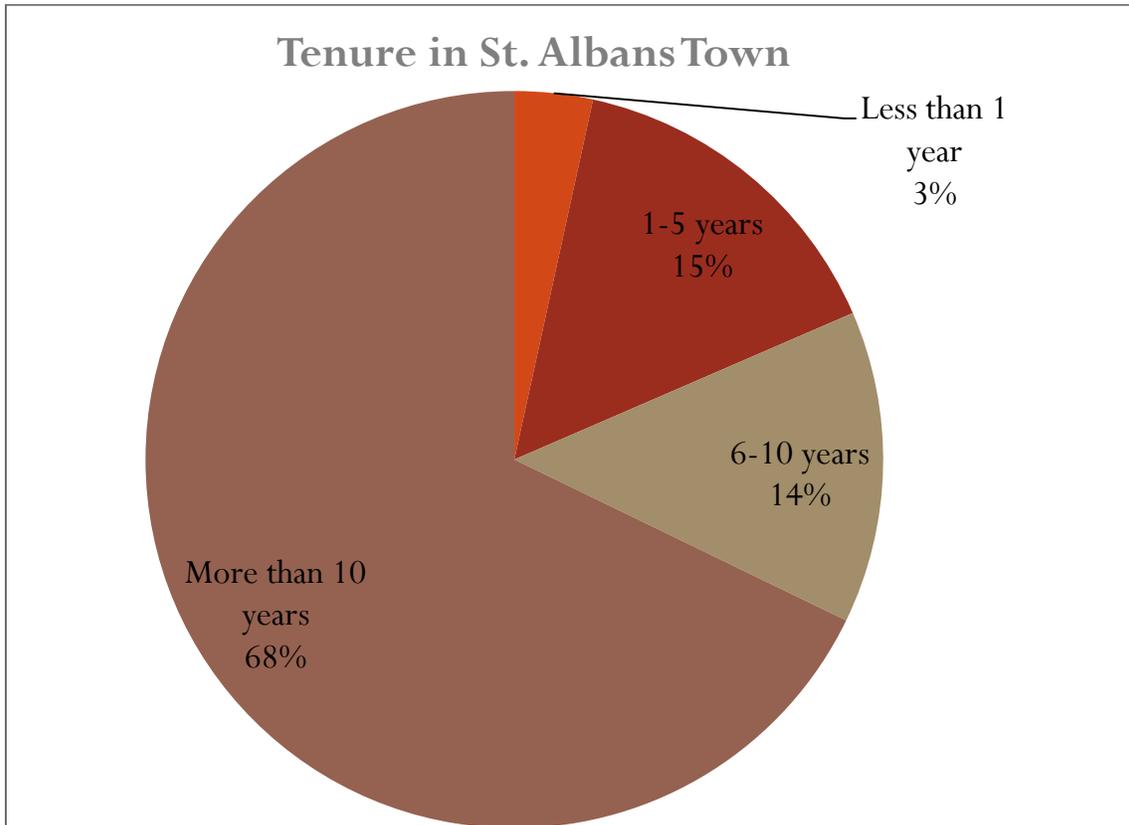
Excluding minors, the St. Albans Town population is 2% 18-24 year-olds, 15% 25-34 year-olds, 39% 35-54 year-olds, and 43% 55 years and older.

At A Glance: Who took the Survey

- 150 residents took the survey
- 52% female, 48% male respondents
- 68% have lived in Saint Albans for over 10 years
- 54% were over the age of 55 years, while under 3% were younger than 25 years



Most respondents are long-term resident of St. Albans Town.

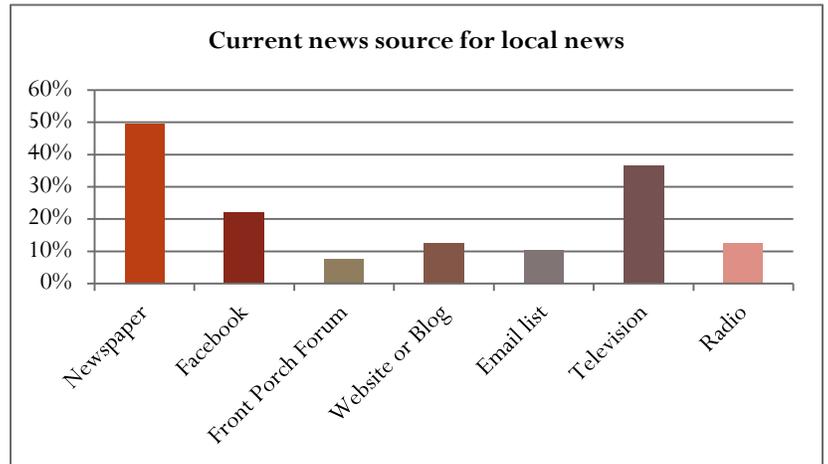


Communications

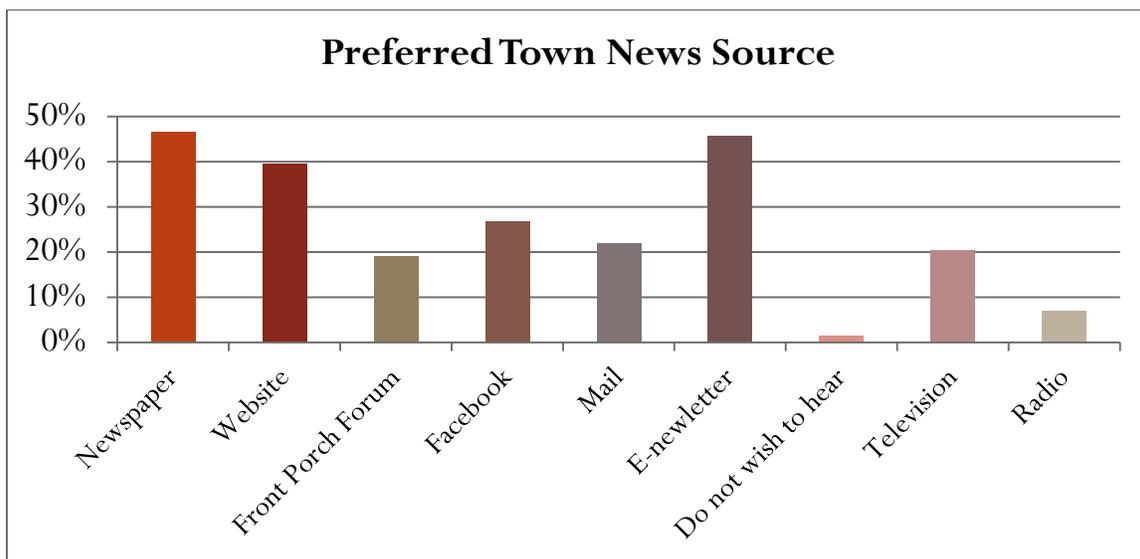
COMMUNICATIONS

Survey respondents currently rely on the following sources for local news and events:

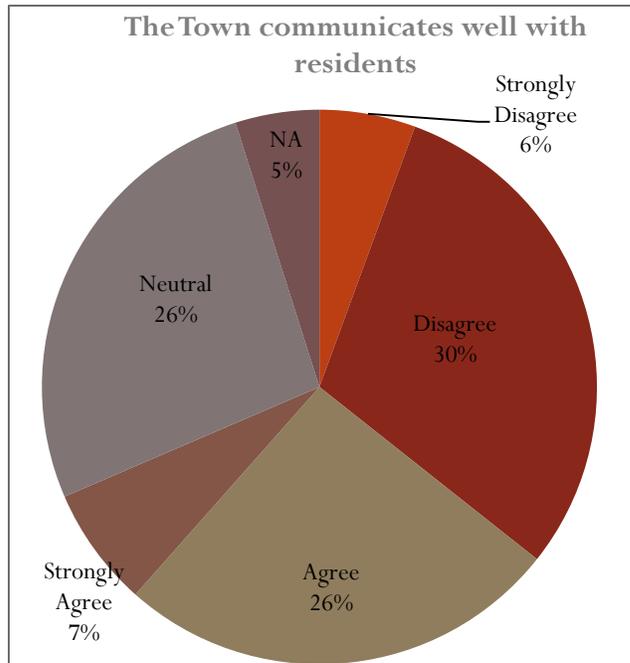
- Newspaper (50%)
- Television (37%)
- Facebook (22%)
- Websites & Blogs (12%)
- Radio (12%)
- Email lists (10%)
- Front Porch Forum (8%)



When asked how they would like to receive information about local news and events from the Town in the future, respondents preferred Newspaper (46%) and E-newsletter (46%) as sources for Town news. The Town website (39%) was a close third, followed by Facebook (27%). Many respondents checked off several mediums suggesting that residents benefit from communications through various sources. Over 85% of the respondents listed Facebook, the Town website or Front Porch Forum as a preferred method to receive news from the Town.



Survey respondents were evenly split in their opinions about how the Town communicates with residents.



While **36% do not believe the Town communicates well** with residents about events, news, and decisions, **33% believe the Town communicates well**, and another **31% have no opinion**.

Survey respondents expressed that they did not know how the town communicates with regional partners and municipalities. Over 50% of survey respondents had no opinion about the Town's regional communications. 29% do not believe the Town communicates well and

just 17% believe the Town communicates well regionally.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Newspaper, specifically the St. Albans Messenger, continues to be an important news source for Town residents. Not only do many residents currently turn to the Messenger, but many report that they would like to continue to turn to the paper for local news and events. Therefore, the Town should continue to communicate through advertisements and posts in the Newspaper. Additionally, the Town could explore **contributing a weekly column, writing official letters to the editor, or informing reporters when the Town is working on a project.**

E-newsletter. The Town could continue to pursue plans to launch an E-newsletter. Forty-five (45) survey respondents provided their email addresses to receive an E-newsletter if created. The E-newsletter allows the Town to cover issues that have not been covered in the Messenger and/or explain complex policies like the Local Options Tax or why the Town hopes to prioritize certain capital improvements like the 207 Loop Road.

Facebook + Website + Front Porch Forum. As has been discussed by the Select Board in the past, the Town could create a facebook page. Additionally, the Town should institute a policy to post notifications and announcements to Facebook and Front Porch Forum whenever something is posted to the Town website.

Digital content is relatively inexpensive to produce; it requires staff time, but forgoes costly shipping, printing, or paid advertisements. Digital content has the added benefit of being easily shared. An E-newsletter can be sent to those who sign-up for our listserve, a link can also be shared on our website and facebook and passed along through friends, reaching a larger audience with different communications preferences.

While digital and social media cannot replace traditional media like the Messenger, it can offer a low-cost complement.

If the Town chooses to pursue digital communication, next steps:

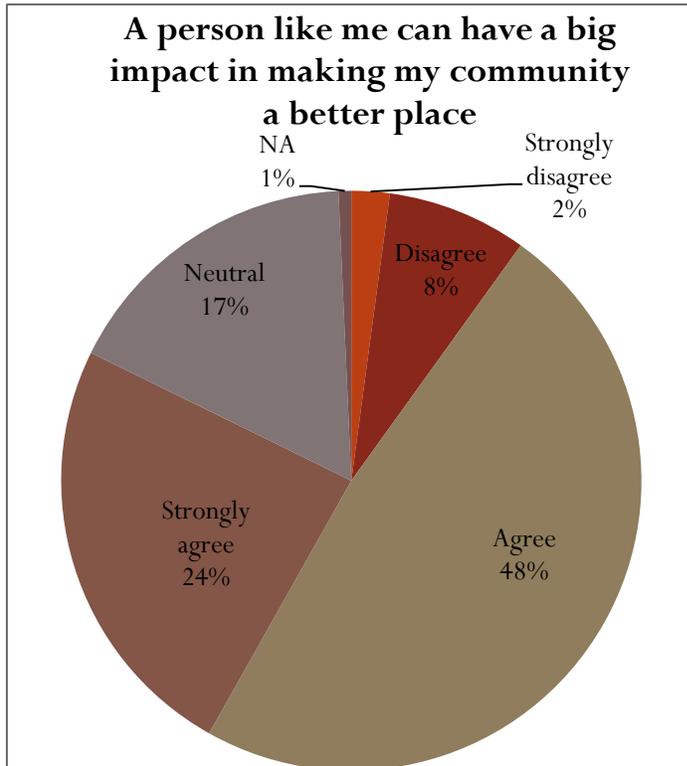
- E-newsletter: look into software options; discuss frequency of communications, content (announcements, mini-articles, etc.), collect emails
- Facebook: Discuss policy for posting/interactions, create Town page, invite residents
- Town website cross posting to facebook and Front Porch Forum

Additionally, digital media provides an opportunity to educate residents about how the Town cooperates with regional partners, municipalities, and organizations. The Town could occasionally highlight collaborations like the Regional Stormwater Education Program (with the City and NRPC) or mutual aid agreements between fire departments.

Participation

INPUT

Seventy-two percent (72%) of respondents agree or strongly agree that they could have



a big impact in making their community a better place, while only 10% disagree or strongly disagree.

Although this sense of empowerment is encouraging, the strong affirmation may be, in part, attributed to the sample of survey takers: people who had shown up to vote and specifically those who self-selected to take the survey. Future surveys or other tools for gathering input should address how to reach those who may feel excluded from decision making processes or even from the community

itself.

Not only do most survey takers believe they can make a difference, most want to act as well. 67% of respondents asserted that they would welcome even more input into Town development and priorities.

Even though most reported wanting more input, only 22% say they would like to serve on a board, commission or committee. Another 37% have no strong opinion and 32% say they do not have interest in serving on a Town board.

RECOMMENDATIONS

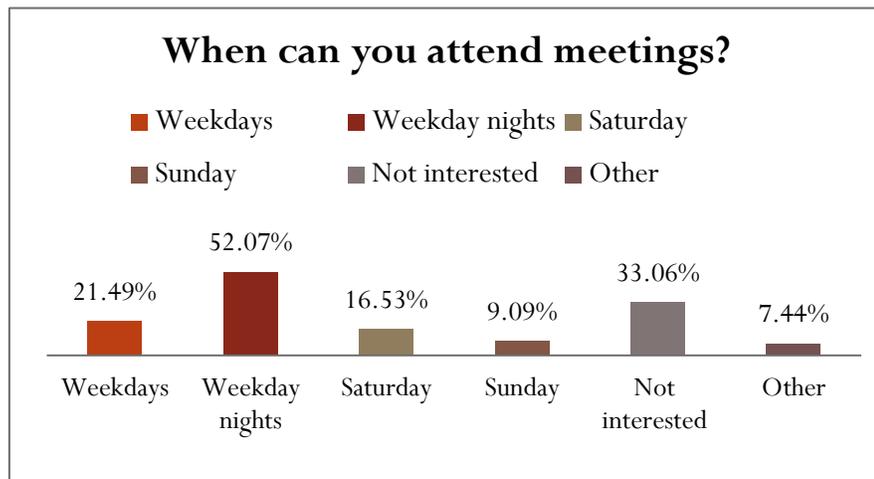
Although the majority of survey takers feel that they can impact the community positively and want more input in Town priorities, only a minority report that they would like to serve on a board or commission. If the Town would like to engage residents more, we could explore mixing various alternative participation activities with the traditional means (meetings, elections).

Online Engagement. In addition to traditional in person engagement (public meetings), the Town can get resident feedback via social media, online surveys, or polling. Online engagement may reach audiences that cannot or will not attend public meetings.

Alternative Engagement. The Town may explore targeted, theme based input such as focus groups or participatory budgeting. Methods such as these may be tailored to reach specific populations or stir interest in a specific topic. Additionally, these engagement practices can be tied to online engagement.

Create Short-term Committees. As the Select Board did with the bike-ped project, the Town can tap residents for committees (especially shorter term commitments) with proper advertising and recruitment.

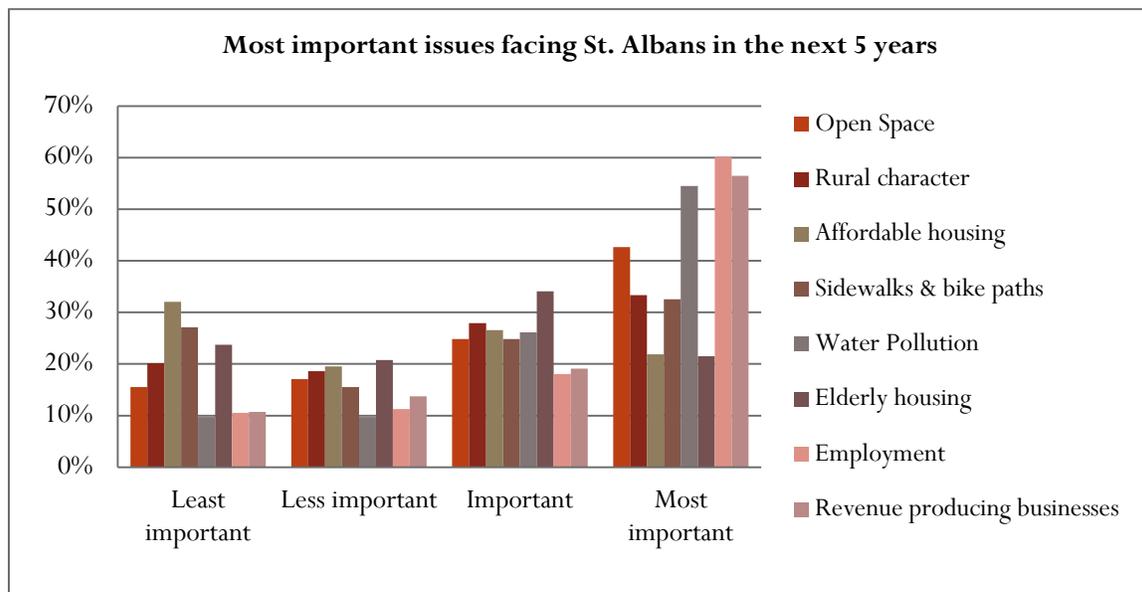
Determine Participation Barriers. The next step could be asking residents what the barriers are to attending meetings and what would make them more likely to attend (childcare, transportation, information about meeting times, content, etc.) A majority of respondents already prefer weeknight meetings, when our regularly scheduled meetings fall.



Land Use Issues

Respondents ranked land use issues in the Town from least to most important. Issues encompassed conservation to accessibility to economic development priorities:

- Protecting open space and natural resources
- Maintaining the Town's rural character
- Developing more affordable housing
- Building sidewalks and bike paths
- Reducing pollution to water ways
- Developing more elderly housing
- Attracting more employment generating investments (businesses)
- Attracting more revenue producing investments (businesses)



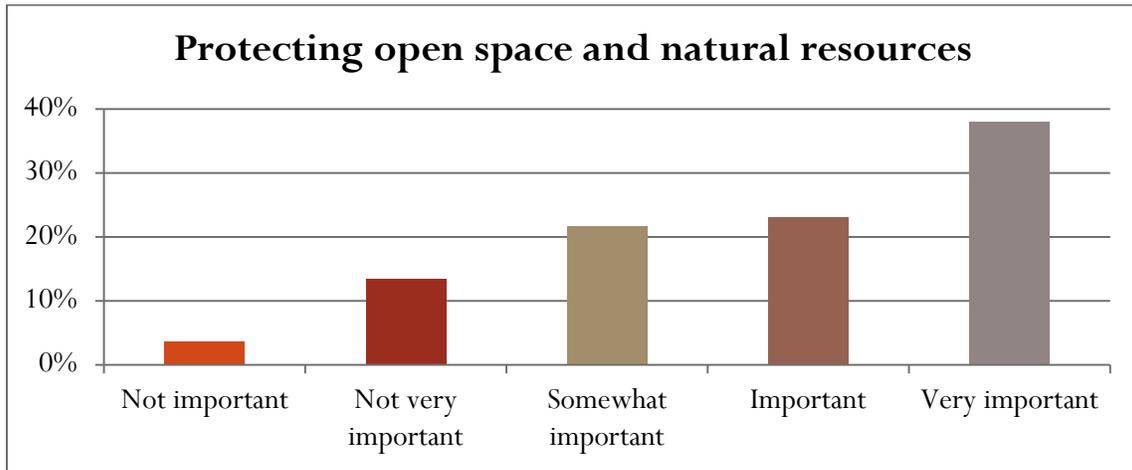
While attracting employment-generating opportunities was the issue most frequently cited as very important, water pollution (81%) was most frequently ranked either important or very important. It is followed by encouraging employment (78%) and revenue-producing businesses (76%). Fifty percent (50%) or more of the respondents rated all but the issue of affordable housing as either important or very important.

After ranking the land use issues against one another, survey respondents were asked about the importance of each of these issues independently from each other. The answers to those questions follow in the next sections.

CONSERVATION

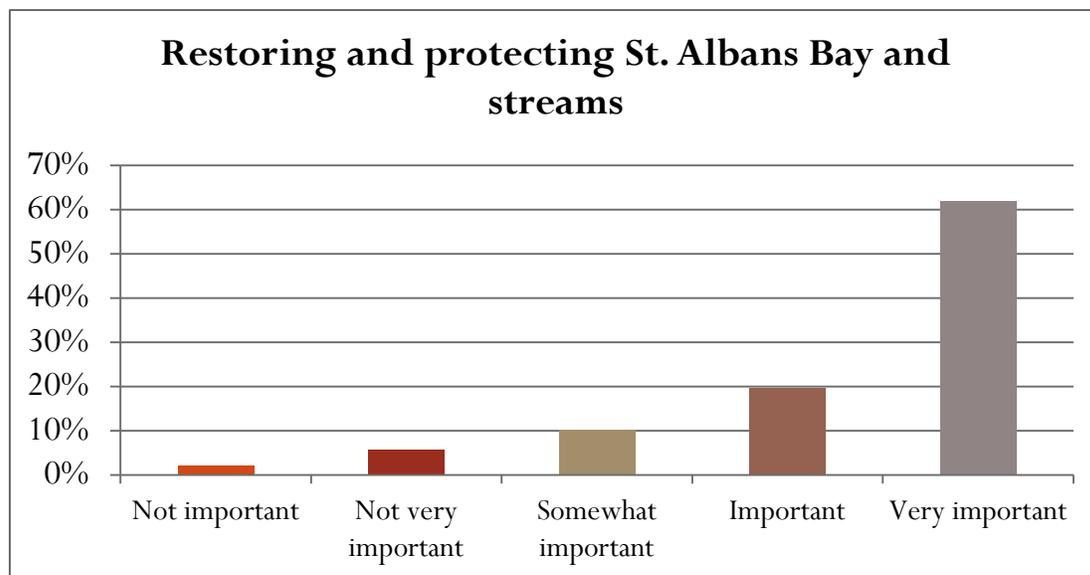
OPEN SPACE & NATURAL RESOURCES

Over 60% of respondents indicated that protecting open space and natural resources in St. Albans is important or very important. Fewer than 20% believe it to be of little to no importance



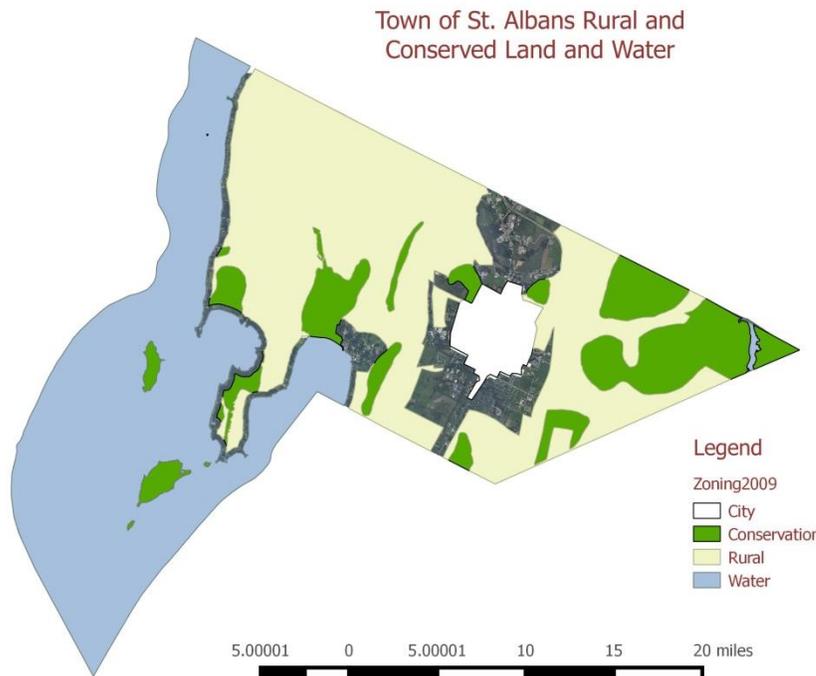
WATER

Out of all land use issues identified in the survey, respondents (62%) most frequently ranked restoring and protecting the Bay as a very important issue. 82% ranked it as important or very important, while only 6% ranked it as only a little or not important.



RECOMMENDATIONS

The Town currently has nearly 5,150 acres of Conservation land, 14,320 acres zoned for rural purposes, and 15,000 acres of water (not including streams and brooks).



Not only do water and land zoned for rural and conservation districts dominate the Town land uses, but they define the traditional character of the municipality. Residents value St. Albans Bay, forested vistas and the rural and agricultural landscapes.

The Town could employ several measures to protect these natural assets.

Conservation Commission. As recommended in the Town Plan, the town could form a Town Forest or Conservation Commission to advise the Select Board, Planning Commission, and DRB on issues relating to natural resources, including site plans. The Conservation Commission may be beneficial in applying for grants, both for their assistance and because they are viewed favorably by the State. The Commission could also assist the Town as it moves forward with its small Municipal Separate Storm and Sewage System (MS4) requirements and its plan to meet the still undecided Lake Champlain Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) requirements.

In 1977 Vermont passed Title 24, Chapter 117, § 4501, V.S.A., enabling municipalities to establish Conservation Commissions. Now there are over 100 Commissions statewide. Typical activities include:

- Developing resource guide to local goods and services
- Organizing education workshops and volunteer days (ie: GreenUp)
- Working with land owners to protect wetlands, forests, ag land, streams

Zoning Bylaws. Zoning is one of the more powerful tools that can support conservation. The Town can continue to limit development in the Conservation and Rural Districts. Additionally, the Town could examine regulations in the Lakeshore district that are aimed at protecting water

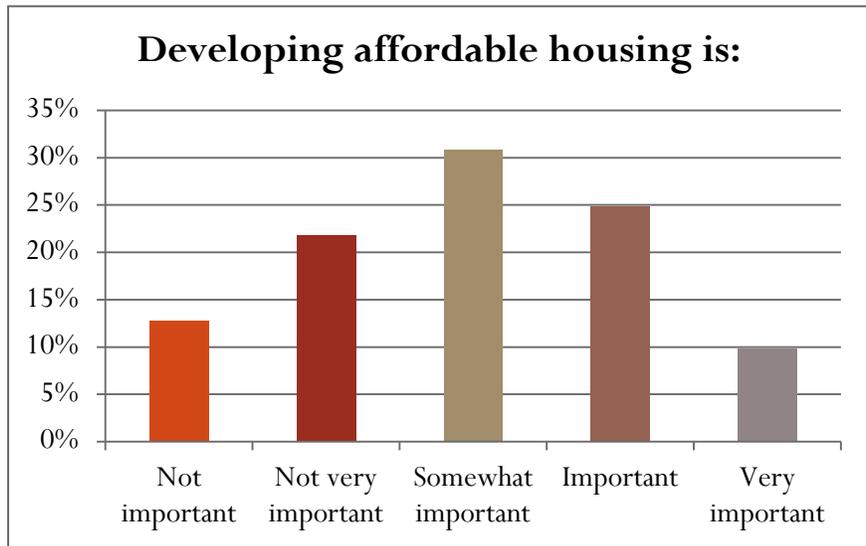
quality in the Bay. For construction on steep slopes (standard definition is 15% grade+) in all districts, the Town could require a plan prepared by an engineer that covers erosion control and stormwater management as long-term maintenance. The Town should also require stormwater management plans that meet specific standards for all development. Finally, the Town should explore including Low Impact Development (LID) techniques into the bylaws.

Project Prioritization. The Town could return to past reports that identify erosion, stormwater, and water quality projects and prioritize them. The Town could use the list of projects to track progress and to seek funding through grants such as the Ecosystem Restoration Grant, Watershed Grant, and Lake Champlain Basin Program Grant.

HOUSING

AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Survey respondents ranked developing affordable housing as the lowest land use priority. Residents appear undecided as to the importance of pursuing affordable housing development. While 35% rated



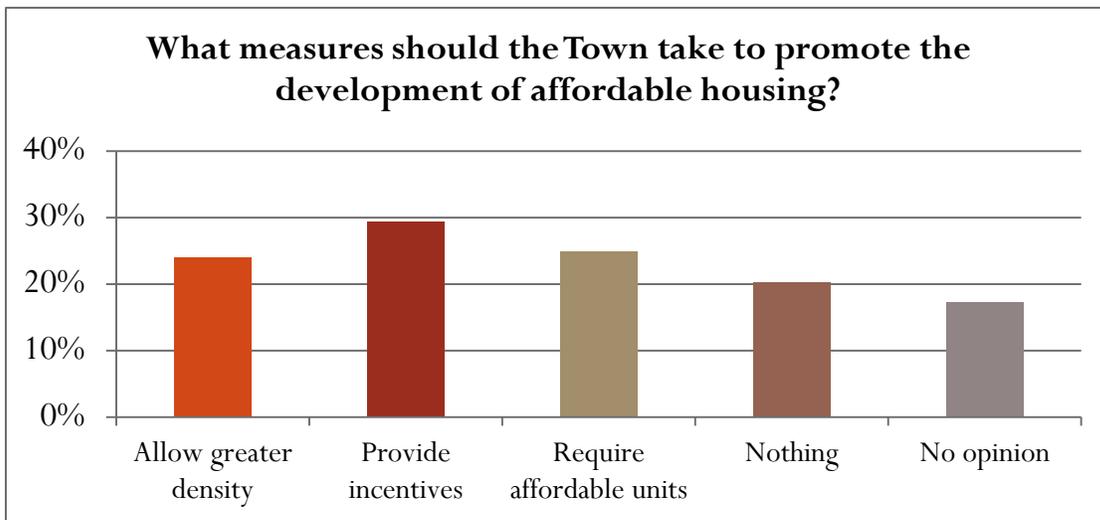
Title 24, Chapter 117, § 4303, V.S.A., Affordable Housing: “Housing that is owned or rented by inhabitants whose gross income does not exceed 80% of the county median income, and the total annual cost of housing, including principal, interest, taxes, insurance, and condominium association fees is not more than 30% of the household’s gross annual income.” In the Town of St. Albans this would amount to spending \$13,200 per year or \$1,100 per month on housing.

affordable housing development as important or very important, another 35% ranked it as not very important or not important, and the final 30% stated that it is somewhat important

RECOMMENDATIONS

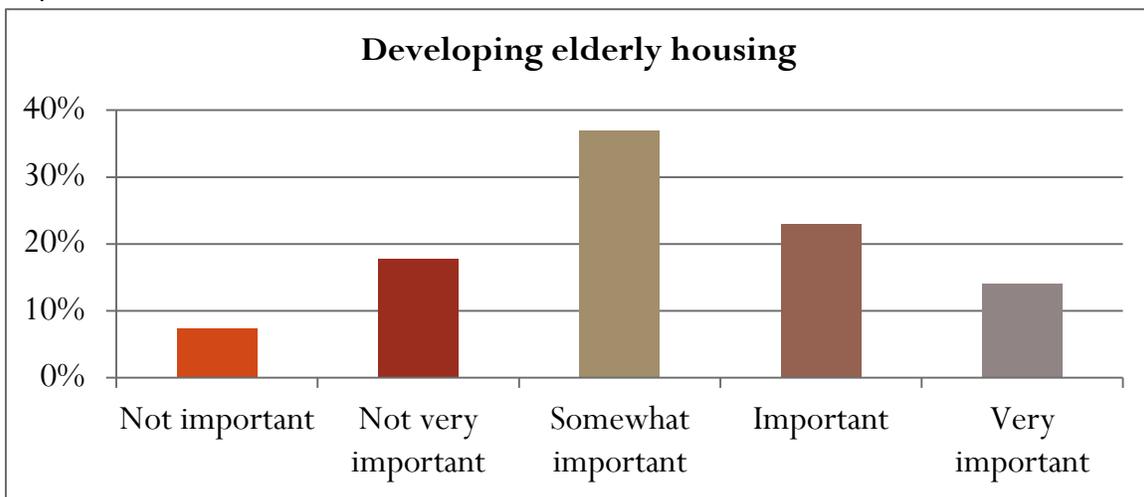
The Town Plan clearly expresses the need for more affordable housing options; it states the Town’s “greatest housing needs include a more diverse base of affordable housing opportunities signified by a range of home ownership and rental units...The increases in market rate prices are preventing potential homebuyers and potential renters from locating within the Town.”

Zoning Bylaws. Survey responders were split over what measures the Town should take to promote the development of affordable housing. Survey takers chose providing incentives to encourage affordable housing as the preferred method (29%). Requiring developers to include a number of affordable units (25%) and allowing greater density (24%) followed closely. Any one of these measures or a combination of the three will help attract more affordable development units. However, it may be more politically palatable to use incentives (such as density bonuses) and increasing density in certain areas (smaller lot size = lower prices).



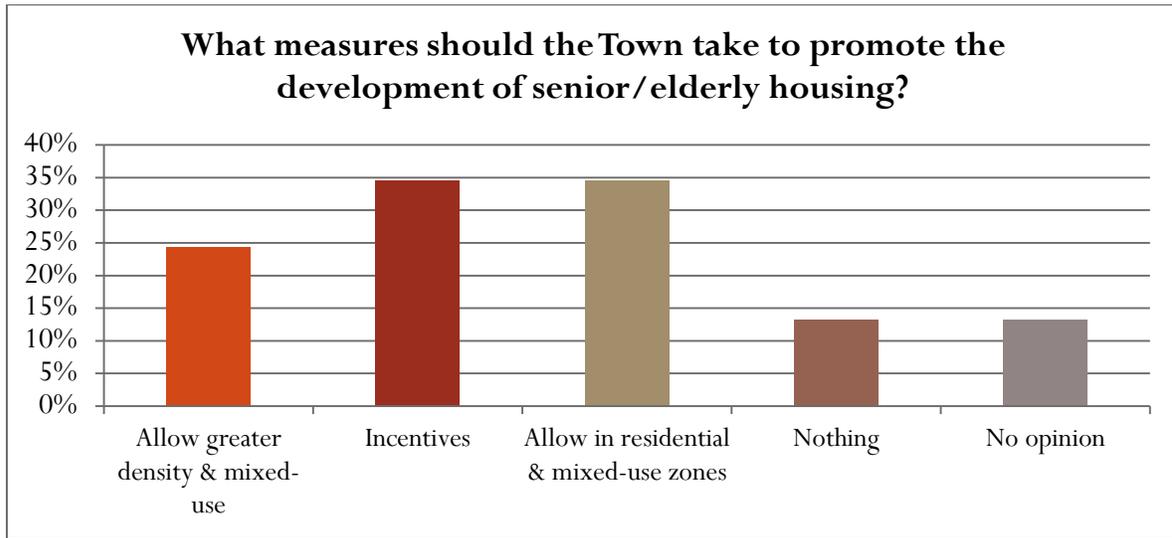
ELDERLY HOUSING

Respondents showed clearer support for the development of elderly housing. Over 37% ranked elderly housing development as important or very important, another 37% ranked it as somewhat important and 25% said it was not very important or not important.



RECOMMENDATIONS

The Town Plan outlines the need provide more housing options for seniors, especially options that are closer to amenities such as community services and public transit. Those over 55 years of age comprise 30% of St. Albans’ total population and this number is project to grow over the next decade (2010 Census).



Zoning Bylaws. Approximately 35% of respondents supported providing incentives for senior housing, another 35% supported allowing senior housing in mixed use zones, and

The Center for Disease Control defines aging in place as “the ability to live in one’s own home and community safely, independently, and comfortably, regardless of age, income, or ability level.

finally 25% supported allowing greater density and mixed use in certain areas. The Town can easily incorporate all three of these strategies into the Bylaws.

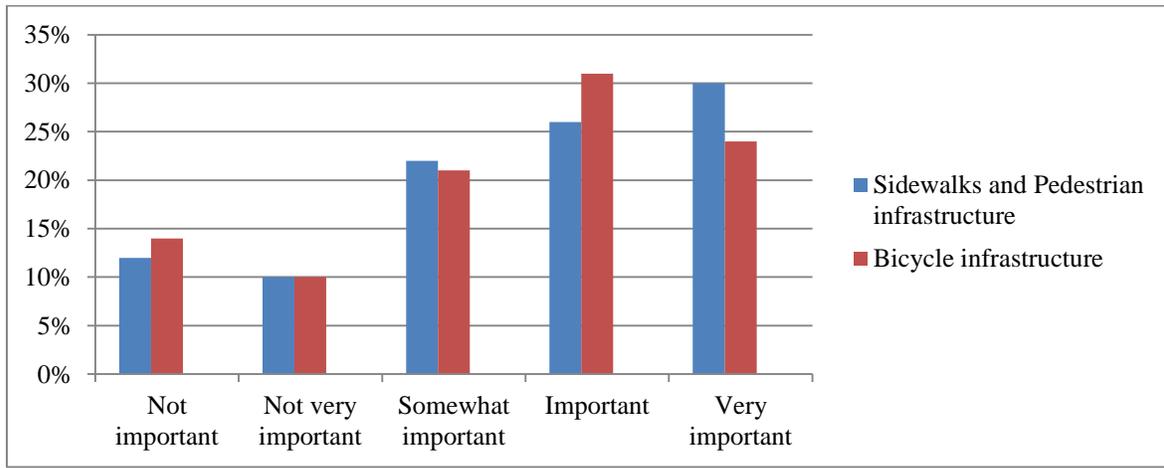
Aging in Place. Examine Town land use policies to ensure that incoming developments and infrastructure improvements support aging in place. The AARP State Survey of Livability Policies and Practices can be used as a guideline to adopt additional senior friendly land use policies.

Housing Study. In the long term, the Town may wish to perform a housing study which takes an in depth look at housing needs of the current population, the quality of housing stock, and availability and affordability of various dwelling types. A housing study could recommend more innovative solutions such as Community Housing Trusts for the residents housing needs.

TRANSPORTATION

SIDEWALKS AND BICYCLE INFRASTRUCTURE

Respondents value bike and pedestrian infrastructure; 56% categorized the development of sidewalks and pedestrian infrastructure and 55% categorized bike infrastructure as important or very important. Those ranking sidewalks and bicycle infrastructure as either not important or not very important numbered 22% and 24%, respectively.

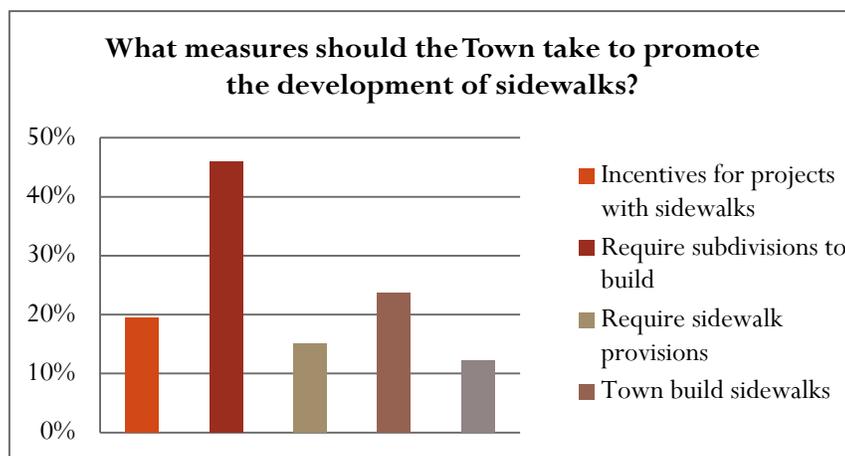


RECOMMENDATIONS

The Town should pursue funding for the preferred alternative in the St. Albans Schools – Collins Perley bike/ped project. The Town could also return to the 2003 Sidewalk study or the Walk-Bike St. Albans surveys and maps to find and prioritize bike and pedestrian projects. In addition to prioritizing capital intensive infrastructure improvements, the Town can adopt some simple regulations that will support walking and biking.

Require subdivisions and PUDs to build sidewalks. 46% of survey respondents believe the

Town should require developers to install sidewalks at the time of construction. Many thought this was already Town policy. Sidewalks are not necessary in all areas, therefore, the Town could start by targeting



specific districts such as the Growth Centers and exclude others such as rural areas.

Based on Act 34, known colloquially as the Complete Streets Law, the Vermont Department of Health developed guidelines of where different types of bike-pedestrian infrastructure are appropriate (excerpted below).

Context Zones in Vermont

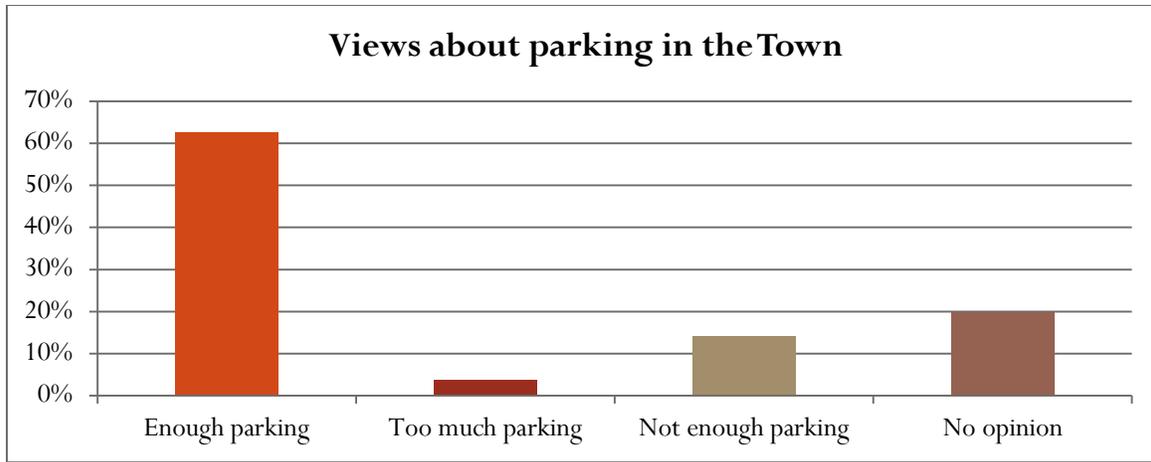
Context Zone	Distinguishing Characteristics General Character	VSDS Place Type	Representative Vermont Places	Photo Example (Randolph, Vermont except where noted)
C1- Natural	Natural landscape Natural features	Rural	Smugglers Notch, Granville Gulf, Middlebury Gap, etc.	
C2- Rural	Agricultural with scattered development Agricultural activity and natural features	Rural	Areas with a working landscape and low density settlement	
C3- Suburban or Transition	Single family residential with walkable development patterns, dominant landscape character Detached buildings with landscaped yards	Suburban/ Transitional	Fringes of villages or downtowns, suburban areas	
C4- General Urban	Mix of housing types including attached units with a range of commercial and civic activity Predominantly detached buildings, balance between landscape and buildings, presence of pedestrians	Hamlet or Village	Centers of Barnard, Jericho, Arlington, Putney, fringes of larger towns	

Complete Streets: A Guide for Vermont Communities, created by the VT Department of Health, illustrates where communities should adopt sidewalks.

Bicycle parking. The Town could support biking by adding a bike parking requirement to our Zoning Bylaw Parking Standards section. For example, the Town could require one rack for every 10 vehicle parking spaces and then one more for every 20 after. This simple measure could be done at little cost to developers. Whereas vehicle parking spaces cost approximately \$1,000 to \$2,000 to build per space, a bike rack for two bikes costs approximately \$150-\$300 to buy and install.

PARKING

Respondents overwhelming believe there is sufficient parking in the Town. Several survey takers who noted that there was insufficient parking noted that they believed there was enough parking in the Town, but not the City.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Zoning Bylaws. Many developers have complained that parking requirements are too high. St. Albans Town requirements are well above the Parking Generation Manual guidelines, which many studies have found to be too high themselves. The Planning Commission with the assistance of the Planner and ZA will review the parking requirements in the Town to make them clearer and more flexible (possibly adding shared parking, shadow parking, and dimensional standards) which will allow for more efficient parking per use.

Parking Study. Parking needs are very community specific despite the attempt to generalize them through things like the Parking Generation Manual. While too few parking spaces can frustrate residents, requiring to many can over burden stormwater systems, hurt business owners, act as barriers to walking and biking, and disrupt the landscape. In the long term, it could be beneficial to carry out a parking study (possibly through the Municipal Planning Grant) which could evaluate current and future needs, and environmental and design concerns.

EMPLOYMENT

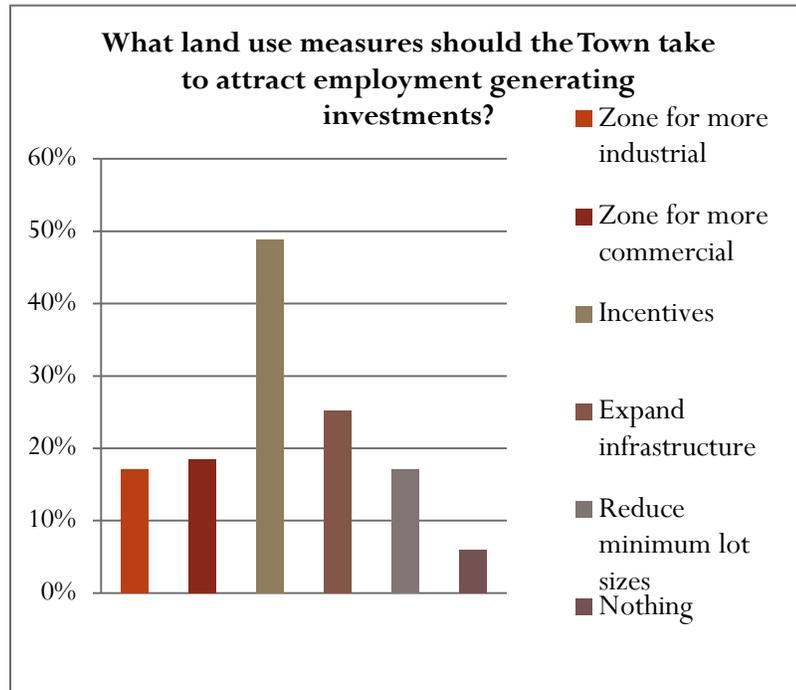
Attracting employment opportunities came out as the top priority for Survey Respondents. Over 60% of respondents ranked attracting employment generating business as a very important priority, and 78% of respondents ranked it as either important or very important.

St. Albans enjoys a relatively low unemployment rate (4.4%) compared to the Vermont (4.5%) and national (6.0%) averages. Nevertheless, the Town has a lower median income (\$53,224) than the State (\$54,168) and a higher percentage of residents receiving federal or state assistance benefits such as SNAP.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Considering St. Albans employment characteristics, the desire to attract job opportunities may not be a question of quantity but one of quality—not just more jobs, but *better* jobs.

Zoning Bylaws. Zoning and Subdivision solutions to encourage job creation are limited. However, the Town could examine barriers to development in the Town regulations and explore ways to remove those barriers such as expedited permitting. The Town should also review its zoning districts to allow more diverse industrial and commercial uses in areas close to transportation portals (Exits 19 and 20).



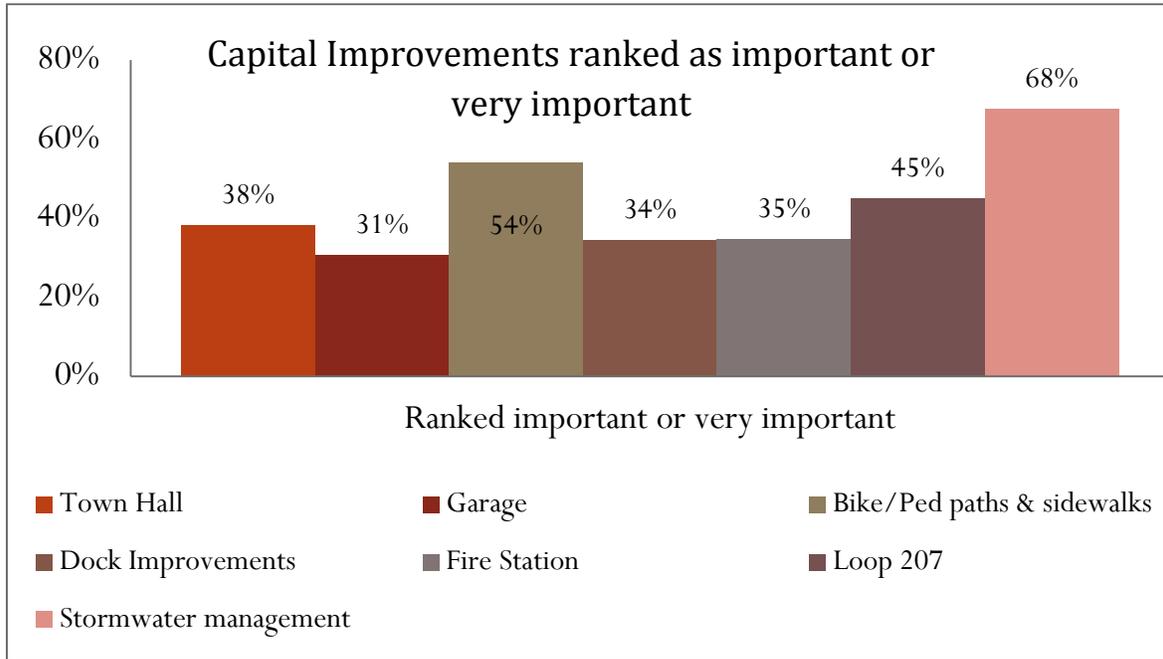
Economic Development

Plan. The Town could develop an economic development plan that analyzes current land uses, grand list, assets, needs (such as retail), build out, and infrastructure capacity/needs and recommends actions. The development of these plans can be funded by Municipal Planning Grants or other grant sources. Proactive planning of this type may be increasingly important after the passage of H. 823 which places more restrictive regulations occurring outside of State designated growth, village and downtown centers.

Propose New Town Center. The Town could explore applying for a New Town Center Designation from the State for the North or South Growth Center. Vermont Economic Development Authority incentives are available to these designated areas. Designated areas also receive preference for state public facility investments, brownfields assistance, community development block grants, and transportation funds.

Capital Improvement Projects

The top infrastructure priorities – classified as important or most important by survey respondents were: Stormwater management infrastructure (68% of respondents), bike/pedestrian paths & sidewalks (54%), and the Loop 207 Extension (45%).



The Town can evaluate this priority list with that of the Select Board. If the priorities do not match up then the Town should examine ways to educate the public about why these are Town priorities (like the LOT campaign). Often time the difference is not a difference in priorities but in understanding. For example, many of those taking the survey had not heard about the Loop 207 Extension, however after receiving a description of the project and an explanation of what the project hoped to address, many respondents supported it.

Recommendations

Below is a table summarizing the recommendations found within this report. The list of recommendations is not exhaustive nor exclusive; while the Town could pursue all recommendations, it could also selectively choose different options. Many of the recommendations are not original, rather they build on recommendations previously expressed in the Town Plan or occasionally employed by the Select Board.

	Communication	Participation	Conservation	Housing	Transportation	Employment	CIPs
Short-term							
Facebook page	•	•					•
Front Porch Forum	•	•					•
E-newsletter	•	•					•
Medium-Short term							
LID in Zoning			•				
Affordable/senior housing incentives				•			
Bicycle Parking			•		•		
bike-ped subdivision requirements					•		
Conservation bylaws			•				
Flexible parking			•		•		
Medium-term							
Letters to the editor	•						•
Online Engagement	•	•					
Conservation project prioritization			•				
Medium-long							
weekly column	•	•					
Conservation Commission			•				
Alternative engagement	•	•					
Econ-Dev Plan						•	•
Long							
Communication Strategy	•	•	•				•
Participation barriers		•					
Parking Study					•		
Housing Study				•			
New Town Center			•			•	•