



Ashland Households' Views on Balancing the City Budget

Final Report

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Introduction

The SOURCE (Southern Oregon University Research Center) team, consisting of Dr. Karen Miller-Loessi, Dr. Dan Rubenson, Dr. Eva Skuratowicz, and Pat Acklin, was hired by the City of Ashland to investigate the opinions of Ashland residents on how to approach a budget deficit. This was an exciting research opportunity as SOURCE was able to construct, administer, and analyze a population survey that targeted all households that pay Ashland utility fees. This was a democratic process that gave Ashland households a voice in how to resolve an anticipated budget shortage for the City of Ashland. Unlike listening sessions or surveys that are posted on a website, this mailed-out survey gave every utility-payer the opportunity to weigh in with their opinion and perspective. The research team also included student research assistants Hood Alrahbi, Brooke Carlton, Pandora Hamsa, Katherine Hardenbergh, Emilio McCutcheon, Katie Minich, and Joseph Whitney.

This report includes the same survey findings that were presented to the Ashland City Council on October 4, 2022, and the update that was sent to the Mayor and City Council members on November 7, 2022. This final report covers the survey design, methodology, findings, a brief discussion of policy implications, and an annotated bibliography.

Survey Design

The Ashland Budget Survey was developed to answer two main questions:

- 1) In light of the City's structural budget deficit, should the budget be balanced primarily through spending reductions, or primarily through increased revenue (fees)?
- 2) If spending reductions are to be made, what are residents' specific priorities?

Ashland is not the first city to face budget decisions, and we are not the first researchers to develop a survey for eliciting residents' budgetary priorities. Our initial steps were to review the existing academic literature to determine the best practices in budget survey design. (Annotated citations to a representative sample of this literature are included at the end of this report.)

The best design for budget surveys is based on the contingent valuation (CV) approach. The basic idea is to present survey respondents with situations that require them to think about the trade-offs they are willing to make between competing budgetary priorities. In order to tease out peoples' underlying preferences and priorities, the survey sets up situations where they are asked to explicitly trade off incremental changes in one thing (e.g., public safety) against another (e.g., parks or increased taxes). Context is crucially important as none of the changes in a budget happen in a vacuum.

The best practice in budget survey design is to set up these trade-offs with actual numbers drawn specifically from the programs and policy choices under consideration. Our initial survey draft followed this design, but the Council did not want to include actual City budget figures (program costs) explicitly in the survey and wanted overall policy guidance, rather than specific policy guidance, to follow from the survey results.

Working within these constraints, we pursued a second-best survey design built around bundles of possible budgetary changes, each of which would add up to a \$2 million reduction in the City's structural deficit. Each bundle contained a mix of specific spending or revenue changes. By seeing which bundles were favored by survey respondents we could make inferences about their budgetary priorities.

We were additionally constrained in developing these bundles due to the need to keep the survey short. The printing and bulk postage costs for mailing out 10,766 surveys (and a separate postcard announcing the survey) were costly and creating a two-page survey was not an option as inserting a stapled document into an envelope is very difficult to automate. Additionally, the research team was in favor of a one-page survey to promote completion and avoid survey fatigue on the part of the respondent. Thus, we needed to fit the entire survey on both sides of one sheet of paper. This limited the number of policy options and bundles we could present in the survey.

Our decisions of which specific budget options to include in these bundles were driven by several general principles. We were directed that certain portions of the City budget were off-limits for the survey. These included anything that is not in the general fund (such as most capital improvements and enterprise funds) and programs that are self-supporting through their own fees or other external sources, such as the airport and senior services. We were also directed to exclude any reductions in public safety (police or fire and rescue).

Because of the crucial importance of context in examining budgetary trade-offs, all the spending reductions included in the survey needed to be in specific City functions and programs and identified with specific implications for how residents would be impacted by service changes. For this reason, more general spending reductions, like cuts in City employee compensation, were not included in the survey; responses to those general or across-the-board changes would not provide any information about residents' priorities for specific City programs and functions.

In order to develop a menu of possible budgetary changes to include in the survey, the project team researched several sources. We read through past minutes and documents from Council discussions and Citizen Budget Committee discussions and recommendations. We reviewed City budget documents for additional ideas. We also solicited specific proposals from current Council members and endeavored to include those in the survey where practical.

For each possible budgetary change (spending reduction or change in fees) we needed to estimate a specific dollar saving or cost. In some cases, we were able to find these in City budget documents; in others we had to do the research and analysis to estimate reasonable budgetary implications.

Throughout the process of developing a menu of possible budgetary changes, estimating the cost or revenue implications and describing the impacts on Ashland residents, we worked with City staff, including the City Manager, Finance Director and other staff members.

In addition to the survey questions based on bundles of spending and (possible) revenue changes, we had two more general questions (numbers 1 and 14) which directly addressed the first issue raised: the

preference for balancing the budget through revenue increases or unspecified spending reductions. For a list of the survey questions, please refer to Table 3 below. We provided a website with additional background information and details for the Ashland budget in general and all of the policy options. That website can be found at inside.sou.edu/research/survey.

Overall Methodology

This survey was unusual in that it was a population survey of Ashland households. It is very difficult to do a population survey as often the contact information for an entire population is unavailable, and most survey researchers use a random probability sampling method. The City provided us with the addresses for Ashland utility payers, which are all of those residences and buildings that have utilities through the City of Ashland and pay the utility fees that contribute to general fund revenues. This list did not include those who have an Ashland address, but live outside of the city limits and do not pay Ashland utility fees. It is important to remember that the unit of analysis for this research is the household, rather than the individual. One person per household was asked to answer the survey.

We addressed a number of issues with using utility addresses. The first is that property owners can have their tenants' utility bills sent to them and not to the tenants. In those situations, we had the physical address where the utilities were being used, but only had the property owner's name. We wanted to make sure that renters received the survey, so in the cases that we had a rental address, but only the property owner's name, we addressed the survey to "Ashland Resident".

To facilitate a robust response rate, we followed Dillman, et al.'s (2008) highly regarded recommendations and sent a postcard announcing the survey to each address before sending out the survey. There was a two-fold purpose to this process: 1. Bad addresses would be identified before sending the survey out; and 2. Ashland residents would anticipate that they would be receiving a survey in the mail. A total of 10,766 surveys were mailed in mid-June 2022, and September 13, 2022, was the last day that a survey was entered into the statistical software program. We received a total of 2,647 usable surveys, for a response rate of 25%. Given the fact that this survey was sent out in the summer, that it was a mail survey, and that survey response rates have been declining nationwide, we are very pleased with the number of returned surveys. On top of that, this was a household population survey, not a sample. One of benefits of this number of returned surveys is reflected in the small, estimated margin of error, which ranges from 1.5 – 1.9%, depending on the question.

Demographics

The survey ended with a short series of demographic questions. A total of 85% of households that responded owned the home they lived in. Residences accounted for 98% of the responses, with 2% being businesses. We had some challenges with the understanding of our education question answer categories (see Table 1). There were indications that some respondents may have misunderstood the "graduate degree" category to mean that they had graduated from college. For the age of respondents, as Table 2 indicates, there was a high percentage of surveys returned from older Ashlanders. That will be addressed further below in the section on weighting.

Table 1: Survey Respondent Education

Education Level	Frequency	Percentage
Less than high school	4	.2%
High school grad/GED	140	6%
2-year college degree	185	7%
4-year college degree	821	33%
Grad degree	1,320	53%
Total	2,470	
Missing/Ambiguous	177	7%

Table 2: Respondent Age Distribution

Age	Frequency	Percentage
20-29	37	2%
30-39	97	5%
40-49	196	9%
50-59	235	11%
60-69	555	27%
70-79	699	33%
80 & up	267	13%
Total	2,086	
Missing	561	21%

Findings

Data Procedures

A total of 2,647 usable surveys were received (this number does not include the handful of surveys we received that were completely blank or had only extraneous comments). Of the 2,647 usable surveys, 1,386 (52%) had written an answer to the open-ended comment area at the end of the survey. For the yes/no questions and the demographic questions on the survey, responses were entered as numerical codes into a Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) data file. This software is commonly used for quantitative survey data analysis. It is especially useful for using syntax to compute new variables from existing quantitative data. It is somewhat less useful for handling qualitative data, so we set up EXCEL files to contain the written comments.

Most of the respondents who wrote comments used the section at the end of the survey, labeled "Additional Comments", to write on a variety of topics. Some of those comments were quite lengthy. The comments were transcribed verbatim into the EXCEL file and then coded by theme. An overview of the comments is contained in this report. There was also a space allocated within each box for comments. The most common of the responses written in these spaces involved specific exceptions to a vote for a given box, for example, for Box 2, indicating support for eliminating city funding to the golf course but not supporting major reductions in city subsidies for recreational programs. These qualifying comments were given numerical codes and used for analyses involving the specific budget actions.

Six SOU student research assistants were employed to enter the data from the surveys. We used two procedures for verifying the accuracy of the data entry into SPSS. The first was to compare a random subset of the case entries to the original paper survey responses, to check for accuracy and correct any errors. We verified 26% (678) of the case entries in this manner: of these, Dr. Miller-Loessi verified 39%, Senior Research Assistant Katherine Hardenbergh verified 33%, and the other research assistants verified a total of 28% of the case entries of the verified cases. The second verification method was to run frequencies on all the variables once data entry was completed to check for invalid codes and correct any errors.

Responses to Survey Boxes

Table 3 shows the percentage of respondents voting YES for each box, with their associated Margins of Error, which range from +/- 1.5 to 1.9. percentage points. Box 14, "Reduce overall general fund spending by 5%, cuts determined by the City Council and City Manager", had the highest percentage of YES votes at 51%. The lowest percentage of YES votes (19%) went to Box 6, "Delay or reduce future capital improvement projects" and "Reduce or eliminate citizen committees and commissions."

Table 3: Frequencies and MOE for YES votes on Survey Boxes

Survey Box	Percentage voting YES	Margin of Error
1. Maintain current City spending levels • My household would pay about \$13 more per month	42%	+/-1.9%
2. Maintain current City spending levels EXCEPT: • Eliminate all city funding to the golf course • Major reductions in city subsidies for one or more recreational programs such as the Daniel Meyer pool, the ice rink, and the Nature Center. This could result in substantially increased recreation fees and/or reduced availability. • My household would pay no additional fees	36%	+/-1.8%
3. Maintain current City spending levels EXCEPT: • Add 4 police officer positions • Add 4 total fire positions: fire marshal, firefighter, fire inspector, CERT/weed abatement/admin assistant • My household would pay about \$24 more per month	25%	+/-1.6%
4. Maintain current City spending levels, EXCEPT: • Outsource or increase associated fees to cover all costs of Planning and Building Review • Reduce street maintenance by 15% • Regionalize Police, Fire and Ambulance to save on administrative overhead costs • My household would pay no additional fees	25%	+/-1.6%

<p>5. Maintain current City spending levels EXCEPT:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regionalize Police, Fire and Ambulance to save on administrative overhead costs • Reduce Parks and Rec community outreach (including advisory groups and marketing) and administrative expenses to lower costs. • Maintain neighborhood or dog friendly parks by volunteers or contributions. (Parks Department would still maintain Lithia, Garfield & N. Mountain parks). • My household would pay no additional fees 	<p>34%</p>	<p>+/-1.8%</p>
<p>6. Maintain current City spending levels, EXCEPT:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delay or reduce future capital improvement projects (examples include streets, parks improvements, drainage, sidewalks, and right of way) • Reduce or eliminate citizen committees and commissions • My household would pay about \$10 more per month 	<p>19%</p>	<p>+/-1.5%</p>
<p>7. Maintain current City spending levels, EXCEPT:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce street maintenance by 15% • Delay replacement of City vehicles (except public safety) • Major reductions in Parks maintenance budgets (reduce watering, grounds maintenance, trash removal) except Garfield Park, Lithia Park, North Mountain Park • My household would pay no additional fees 	<p>27%</p>	<p>+/-1.7%</p>
<p>8. Maintain current City spending levels, EXCEPT:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce or eliminate citizen committees and commissions • Delay replacement of City vehicles (except public safety) • Transfer state-law criminal cases from the Ashland Municipal Court to Jackson County • My household would pay about \$9 more per month 	<p>39%</p>	<p>+/-1.9</p>
<p>9. Maintain current City spending levels, EXCEPT:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outsource or increase associated fees to cover all costs of Planning and Building Review • Maintain neighborhood or dog friendly parks by volunteers or contributions. (Parks Department would still maintain Lithia, Garfield & N. Mountain parks). • Minor reduction in city subsidies for one or more recreation programs such as the Daniel Meyer pool, the ice rink, and the Nature Center. This could result in increased fees and/or reduced availability • Eliminate all city funding to the golf course • My household would pay no additional fees 	<p>42%</p>	<p>+/-1.9%</p>

<p>10. Maintain current City spending levels EXCEPT:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Major reductions in city subsidies for one or more recreation programs such as the Daniel Meyer pool, the ice rink, and the Nature Center. This could result in substantially increased recreation fees and/or reduced availability. • Keep the marijuana tax revenue in the city general fund instead of transferring to the housing trust fund. • Major reductions in Parks maintenance budgets (reduce watering, grounds maintenance, trash removal) except Garfield Park, Lithia Park, North Mountain Park • My household would pay about \$4 more per month 	<p>20%</p>	<p>+/-1.5%</p>
<p>11. Maintain current City spending levels, EXCEPT:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Add 2 police officers and 1 firefighter • My household would pay about \$17 more per month 	<p>31%</p>	<p>+/-1.8</p>
<p>12. Maintain current City spending levels, EXCEPT:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce Parks and Rec community outreach (including advisory groups and marketing) and administrative expenses to lower costs. • Minor reduction in city subsidies for one or more recreation programs such as the Daniel Meyer pool, the ice rink, and the Nature Center. This could result in increased fees and/or reduced availability • My household would pay about \$11 more per month 	<p>27%</p>	<p>+/-1.7%</p>
<p>13. Maintain current City spending levels, EXCEPT:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transfer state-law criminal cases from the Ashland Municipal Court to Jackson County • Keep the marijuana tax revenue in the city general fund instead of transferring to the housing trust fund. • Delay or reduce future capital improvement projects (examples include streets, parks improvements, drainage, sidewalks, and right of way) • My household would pay about \$9 more per month 	<p>27%</p>	<p>+/-1.7%</p>
<p>14. Reduce overall general fund spending by 5%</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The City Council and City Manager determine how to cut spending. This could mean reductions in city services as described in the other survey boxes or other budget savings that they identify. • My household would pay no additional fees 	<p>51%</p>	<p>+/-1.9%</p>

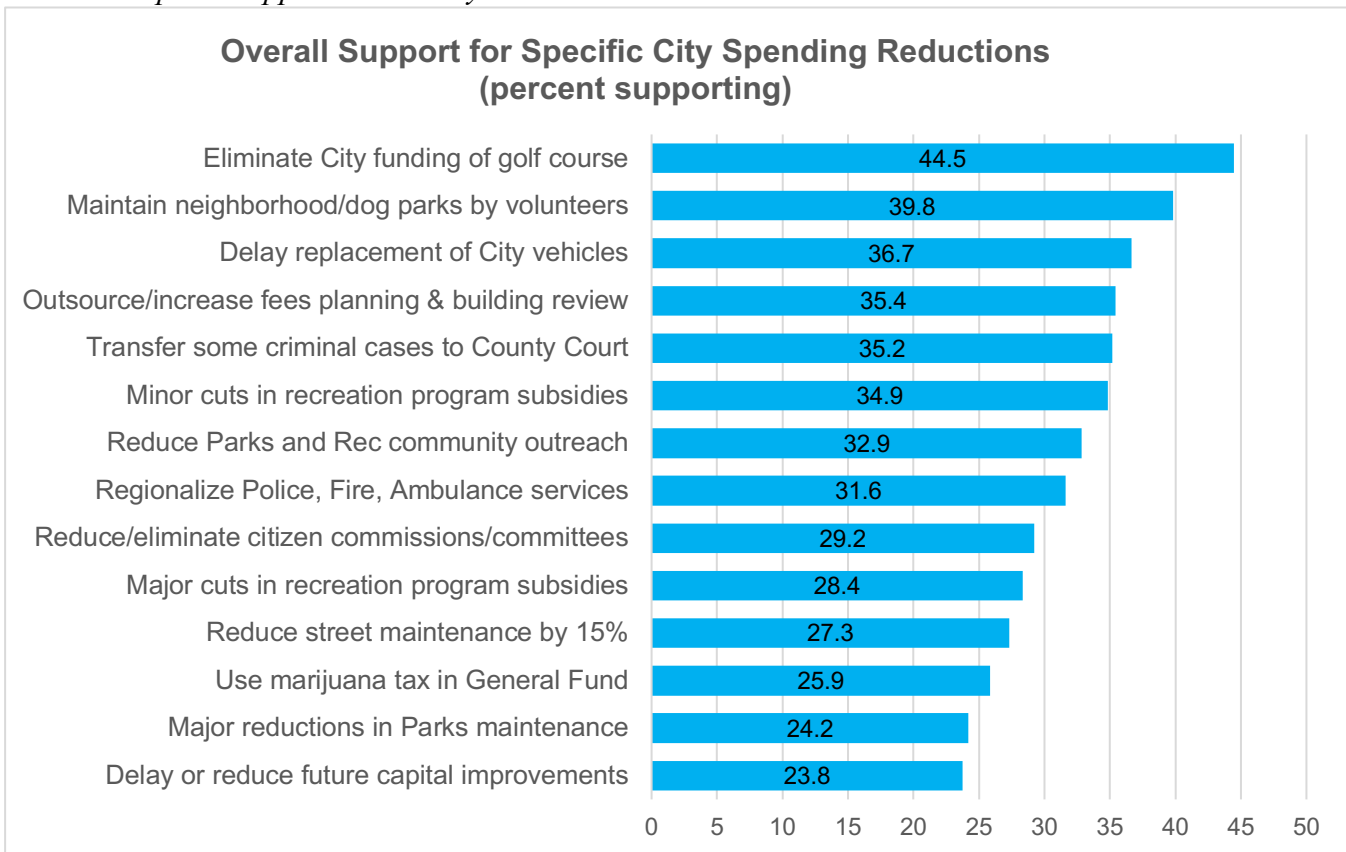
Support for Various Policy Actions

Within each of these boxes, there are policy actions (e.g., “Reduce street maintenance by 15%” or “Reduce or eliminate citizen committees and commissions”) that are bundled together in order to cover the \$2 million budget deficit. Using syntax in SPSS, we were able to unbundle the responses to each box. To determine support for the specific policy actions bundled within the boxes, we used syntax to generate a score for each specific policy action: 0=No support for policy action; 1=Partial support for

policy action; and 2=Consistent support for policy action. Each policy action occurred twice in the boxes of the survey, in different combinations. If the respondent voted for neither of the boxes in which the specific policy action occurred, the score for that specific action was 0. If respondent voted YES for one of the boxes and did not make an exception for the specific action, but voted NO on the other box, the score for the specific policy action was 1 (partial support). If respondent voted YES on both boxes and did not make any exception for the specific policy action, the score was 2. This final vote tally for the specific policy action, as shown in Bar Chart 1, was calculated as the percentage of respondents with a score of 2 (consistent support for the action) plus the percentage multiplied by .5 of respondents with a score of 1 (partial support for the action).

In Bar Graph 1, we note that no specific policy action received majority support. The action with the highest level of support was “Eliminate City funding of golf course” at 44.5%. The action with the least support was “Delay or reduce future capital improvements (examples include streets, parks improvements, drainage, sidewalks, and right of way)” at 23.8%. One noteworthy finding shown in this graph is the relatively high support for maintaining neighborhood or dog parks by volunteers (39.8%) and the relatively low level of support for reducing or eliminating citizen commissions or committees (29.2%), suggesting general support for citizen involvement in Ashland.

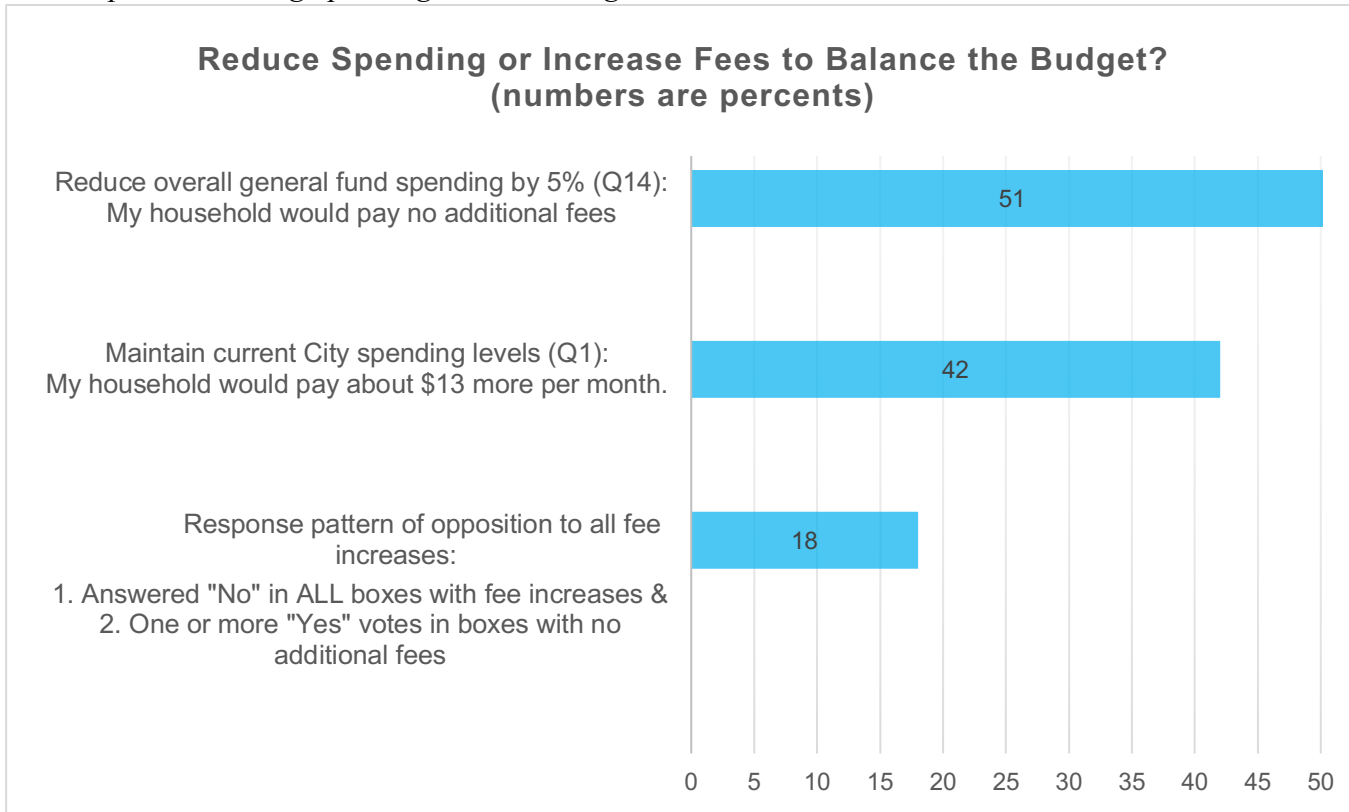
Bar Graph 1: Support to Cut City Services or Activities



Reduce Spending vs. Increase Fees

Bar Graph 2 addresses the preferences of Ashland residents for either reducing spending or increasing fees to balance the budget. The middle bar shows that 42% of the respondents indicated that they were willing to pay an increase in fees of \$13 per month to simply maintain current City spending levels (Box 1 of the survey). The top bar indicates that 51% of the respondents indicated their preference for reducing overall general fund spending by 5% to balance the budget, and not relying on additional fees (Box 14). To further explore the level of opposition to increased fees by Ashland residents, we analyzed what percentage of respondents fit two criteria: (1) They answered NO to ALL boxes with fee increases, and (2) they answered YES to at least one box with no additional fees (to weed out those few respondents who answered no to all the questions in the survey, a response pattern not necessarily interpretable as opposition to fees). Meeting these two criteria is a stringent test of overriding opposition to any fee increases, so perhaps it is not surprising that only 18% of respondents fit this pattern.

Bar Graph 2: Reducing Spending vs. Increasing Fees

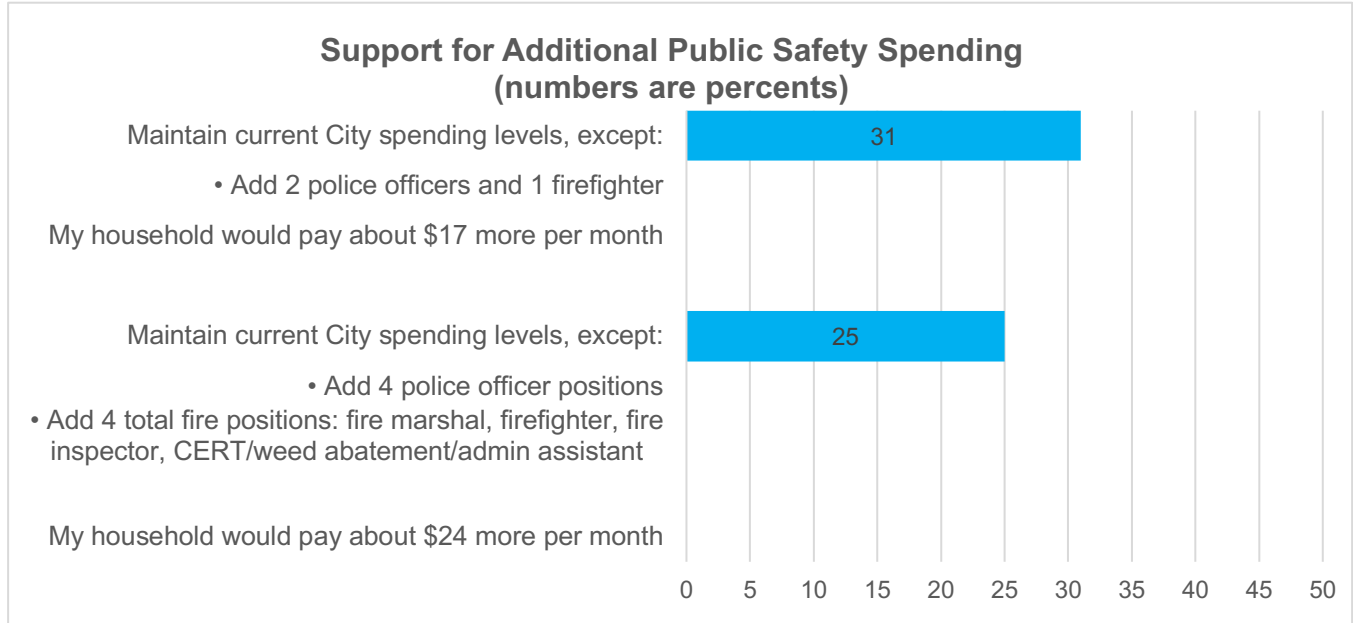


Support for Public Safety Spending

Bar Graph 3 represents support for additional public safety spending. We included two questions about increasing police and fire personnel, despite the current budgetary situation, because Council was aware that for some Ashland residents these are still high priorities, and perhaps increasingly so in the case of fire. The survey offered two scenarios: one with small increases in personnel and increased household fees of \$17 per month, and one with more comprehensive increases in personnel and

increased household fees of \$24 per month. We found that 31% of respondents voted YES on the less expensive option (Box 11), and 25% voted YES on the more expensive option (Box 3).

Bar Graph 3: Public Safety Spending



Methodology for Weighted Outcomes

We compared our 2,647 respondents' demographic characteristics to the U.S. Census 2020 American Community Survey (ACS) for Ashland. It was clear that we had an under-representation in the younger age groups and an over-representation in the older age groups compared to the proportions in the ACS data for Ashland. Thus, following standard statistical practice to address this issue, we weighted cases by age.

The ACS data are in 5-year age categories except for the oldest ages, so we collapsed our age data into the same categories starting with 25- to 29-years old, 30- to 34-years old etc., and ending in 85-years old and over. To get the weights for each age group, we divided the ACS proportion by the proportion in our data. We rounded the resulting weight to the nearest tenth (one decimal). Where age data was missing (561 cases) or, in a few cases, under 25 (16 cases), the weight of 1.0 was assigned so that all cases had a weight and were included in the weighted analyses.

To give examples of how weighting cases works, let's take the age groups with the highest and lowest weights. The age group of the survey respondents with the lowest proportion compared to the ACS data is 25- to 29-year-olds. In this case, 9.3 percent of the ACS population were in this age range, and only 1.0 percent of our respondents were. Thus, the substantive survey responses of every 25- to 29-year-old respondent to our survey were weighted 9.3 times in the statistical software weighting procedure (this was our highest weight). The most over-represented age groups among our respondents compared to the ACS population were both the 75- to 79-year-olds and the 80- to 84-year-

olds age groups. The 75-79 age group was 5.4 percent of the ACS population and 13.7 percent of our respondents. The 80-84 age group was 2.8 percent of the ACS population and 7.9 percent of our respondents. For both the groups, the weights rounded to 0.4, our lowest weight.

Weighted Findings

Responses to Survey Boxes - Weighted

Weighting the box votes by age and giving younger people the greater weight they would have in the population of Ashland, as estimated by the Census, produced only small differences, if any, in vote tallies for the fourteen boxes (see Table 4). The largest differences involved budget increases for police and fire personnel (Box 3 and Box 11), which we discuss in a separate section on public safety below. The vote tallies for other boxes changed either by 1-2% or not at all between the unweighted and weighted results.

Table 4: Weighted Frequencies and MOE for YES votes on Survey Boxes

Survey Box	Weighted Percentage voting YES	Margin of Error
1. Maintain current City spending levels • My household would pay about \$13 more per month	44%	+/-1.9%
2. Maintain current City spending levels EXCEPT: • Eliminate all city funding to the golf course • Major reductions in city subsidies for one or more recreational programs such as the Daniel Meyer pool, the ice rink, and the Nature Center. This could result in substantially increased recreation fees and/or reduced availability. • My household would pay no additional fees	38%	+/-1.8%
3. Maintain current City spending levels EXCEPT: • Add 4 police officer positions • Add 4 total fire positions: fire marshal, firefighter, fire inspector, CERT/weed abatement/admin assistant • My household would pay about \$24 more per month	23%	+/-1.6%
4. Maintain current City spending levels, EXCEPT: • Outsource or increase associated fees to cover all costs of Planning and Building Review • Reduce street maintenance by 15% • Regionalize Police, Fire and Ambulance to save on administrative overhead costs • My household would pay no additional fees	24%	+/-1.6%

<p>5. Maintain current City spending levels EXCEPT:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regionalize Police, Fire and Ambulance to save on administrative overhead costs • Reduce Parks and Rec community outreach (including advisory groups and marketing) and administrative expenses to lower costs. • Maintain neighborhood or dog friendly parks by volunteers or contributions. (Parks Department would still maintain Lithia, Garfield & N. Mountain parks). • My household would pay no additional fees 	<p>34%</p>	<p>+/-1.8%</p>
<p>6. Maintain current City spending levels, EXCEPT:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delay or reduce future capital improvement projects (examples include streets, parks improvements, drainage, sidewalks, and right of way) • Reduce or eliminate citizen committees and commissions • My household would pay about \$10 more per month 	<p>18%</p>	<p>+/-1.5%</p>
<p>7. Maintain current City spending levels, EXCEPT:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce street maintenance by 15% • Delay replacement of City vehicles (except public safety) • Major reductions in Parks maintenance budgets (reduce watering, grounds maintenance, trash removal) except Garfield Park, Lithia Park, North Mountain Park • My household would pay no additional fees 	<p>27%</p>	<p>+/-1.7%</p>
<p>8. Maintain current City spending levels, EXCEPT:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce or eliminate citizen committees and commissions • Delay replacement of City vehicles (except public safety) • Transfer state-law criminal cases from the Ashland Municipal Court to Jackson County • My household would pay about \$9 more per month 	<p>40%</p>	<p>+/-1.9</p>
<p>9. Maintain current City spending levels, EXCEPT:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outsource or increase associated fees to cover all costs of Planning and Building Review • Maintain neighborhood or dog friendly parks by volunteers or contributions. (Parks Department would still maintain Lithia, Garfield & N. Mountain parks). • Minor reduction in city subsidies for one or more recreation programs such as the Daniel Meyer pool, the Ice rink, and the Nature Center. This could result in increased fees and/or reduced availability • Eliminate all city funding to the golf course • My household would pay no additional fees 	<p>42%</p>	<p>+/-1.9%</p>

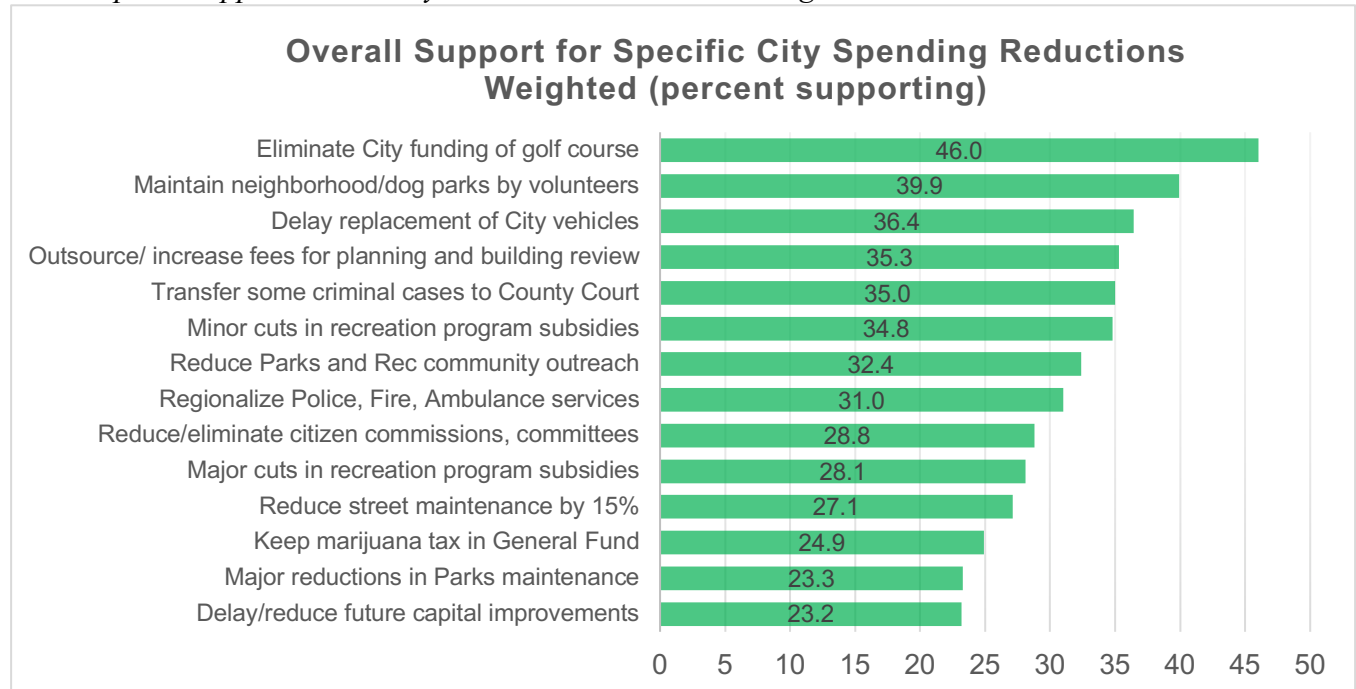
<p>10. Maintain current City spending levels EXCEPT:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Major reductions in city subsidies for one or more recreation programs such as the Daniel Meyer pool, the ice rink, and the Nature Center. This could result in substantially increased recreation fees and/or reduced availability. • Keep the marijuana tax revenue in the city general fund instead of transferring to the housing trust fund. • Major reductions in Parks maintenance budgets (reduce watering, grounds maintenance, trash removal) except Garfield Park, Lithia Park, North Mountain Park • My household would pay about \$4 more per month 	18%	+/-1.5%
<p>11. Maintain current City spending levels, EXCEPT:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Add 2 police officers and 1 firefighter • My household would pay about \$17 more per month 	28%	+/-1.8
<p>12. Maintain current City spending levels, EXCEPT:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce Parks and Rec community outreach (including advisory groups and marketing) and administrative expenses to lower costs. • Minor reduction in city subsidies for one or more recreation programs such as the Daniel Meyer pool, the Ice rink, and the Nature Center. This could result in increased fees and/or reduced availability • My household would pay about \$11 more per month 	27%	+/-1.7%
<p>13. Maintain current City spending levels, EXCEPT:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transfer state-law criminal cases from the Ashland Municipal Court to Jackson County • Keep the marijuana tax revenue in the city general fund instead of transferring to the housing trust fund. • Delay or reduce future capital improvement projects (examples include streets, parks improvements, drainage, sidewalks, and right of way) • My household would pay about \$9 more per month 	27%	+/-1.7%
<p>14. Reduce overall general fund spending by 5%</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The City Council and City Manager determine how to cut spending. This could mean reductions in city services as described in the other survey boxes or other budget savings that they identify. • My household would pay no additional fees 	49%	+/-1.9%

Support for Various Policy Actions – Weighted

As can be seen in Bar Graph 4, the percentages supporting the specific policy actions show little difference between the unweighted and weighted results, with a few exceptions. The first exception is that the vote to eliminate City funding of the golf course is 1.5% higher in the weighted sample in which younger people’s votes are weighted more. The second exception is that the vote to keep the marijuana tax in the General Fund instead of transferring it to the housing trust fund is 1% lower in the

weighted sample. Also noteworthy is that the vote to make major reductions in Parks maintenance budgets is 0.9% lower in the weighted sample. All the other differences due to weighting are a few tenths of a percentage point at most.

Bar Graph 4: Support to Cut City Services or Activities – Weighted

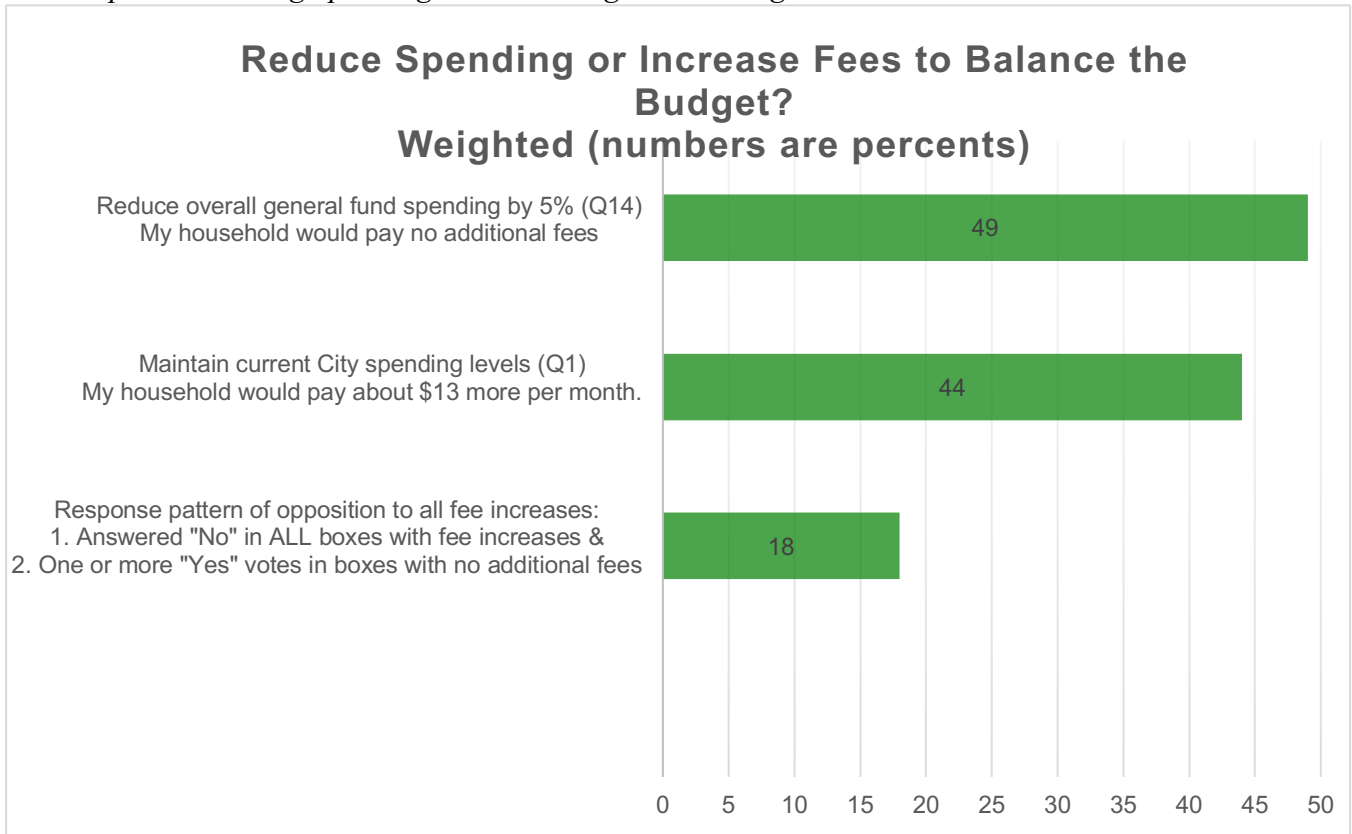


Reduce Spending vs. Increase Fees – Weighted

As Bar Graph 5 demonstrates, weighting young people's responses more and older people's responses less made some difference in the patterns that emerged regarding reduced spending or increasing fees to balance the budget. The vote to reduce overall general fund spending by 5% and letting the City Council and City Manager decide where to make the cuts was approved by 2% fewer in the weighted sample than in the unweighted one, 49% compared to 51%. The vote to maintain current City spending levels by increased household fees of about \$13 more per month, was approved by 2% more in the weighted sample than the unweighted one, 44% compared to 42%. So in the weighted sample the difference between preferring cuts and preferring increased fees to balance the budget is narrowed to a 5% difference, although preferring cuts is still ahead in the vote tally.

This lessened emphasis on cuts over increased fees is not indicated by the response pattern of opposition to all fee increases, discussed earlier. There is a difference of only one-tenth of one percent in the percentage of respondents with this response pattern: 18.2 % in the unweighted sample and 18.3% in the weighted sample, not a meaningful difference.

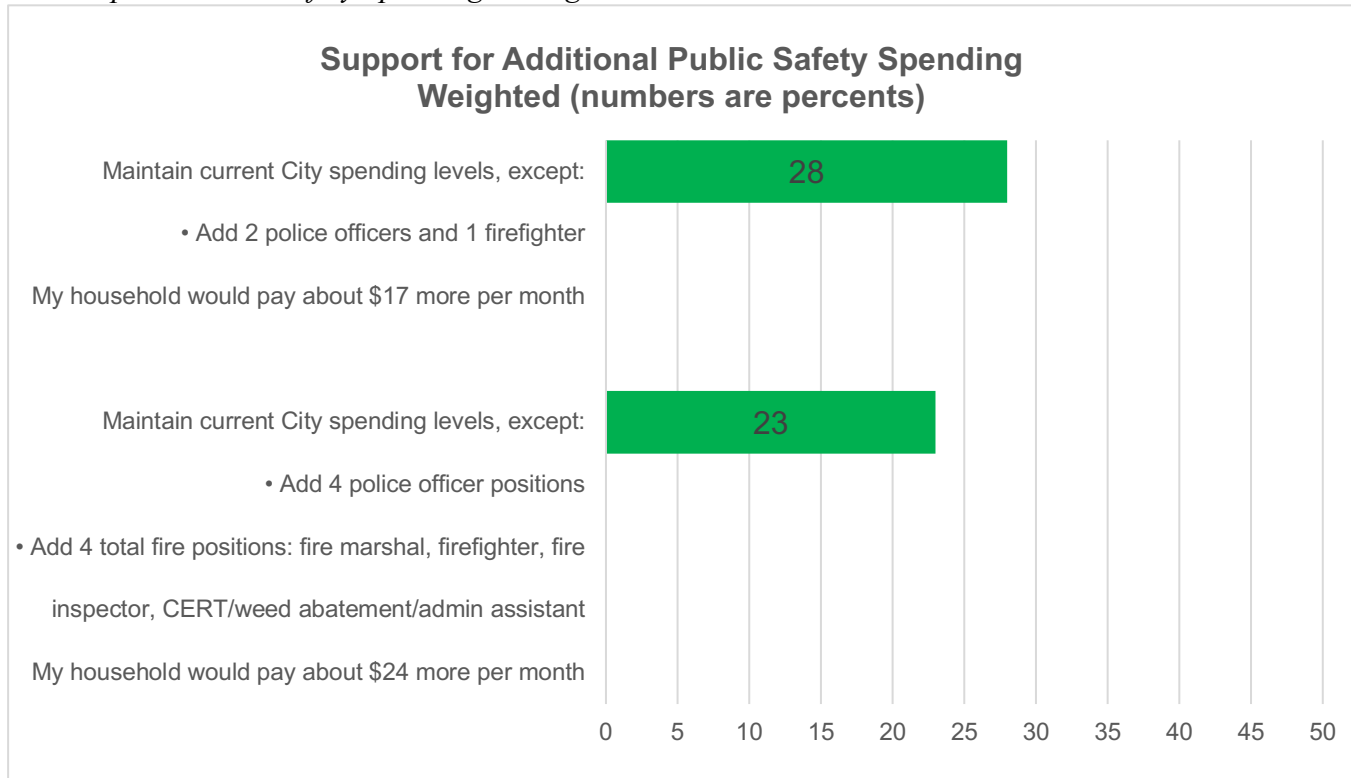
Bar Graph 5: Reducing Spending vs. Increasing Fees – Weighted



Support for Public Safety Spending -- Weighted

Among the differences found in the weighted sample compared to the unweighted sample, the largest difference was for Box 11, “Add 2 police officers and 1 firefighter”, with a 3% decrease in YES votes from 31% unweighted to 28% weighted. Similarly, Box 3 adding four police and four fire positions had a 2% decrease in YES votes, from 25% unweighted to 23% weighted by age (see Bar Graph 6). These results suggest that younger people may be slightly less supportive of paying for increases in Public Safety personnel than older people in Ashland.

Bar Graph 6: Public Safety Spending – Weighted



Respondent Comments

The final question at the end of the survey asked for “Additional Comments” and was open-ended so that respondents were free to cover any topic related to the City’s budget. This was a popular option, as 1,386 of the 2,647 respondents (52%) wrote in comments for this question. These comments were coded (sorted) into general thematic categories and then additional sub-categories were generated to reflect important differences. For example, within comments about city management, there were three prominent themes: employee salaries/benefits, hiring freezes or laying off City staff, and consultants/contracts. Some comments addressed a number of themes and they were coded into all of the themes that were applicable. The survey responses from the final question are summarized below, alphabetically by thematic code. In addition to data about the number of comments in each category and sub-category, illustrative quotes are also presented.

It is important to note that comments are a powerful tool in better understanding the attitudes, opinions, and beliefs of the survey respondents. However, it is also important to understand that it can be easy to overestimate the prevalence of what is being expressed in the quotes. As is demonstrated below, all of these comment categories refer to **14% or less** of the survey respondents. This is why the quantitative numbers from the survey are essential in getting a comprehensive picture of the proportion of our household population who share the same attitudes, beliefs, and opinions.

City Management

Of the 2,647 respondents, there were a total of 366 comments (14%) made that related to city management. The vast majority of the general comments expressed dissatisfaction with how money has been spent by the City. Reducing the salaries and/or benefits for city staff was a solution suggested by 152 respondents (6%). Many of those comments pointed to administrators' salaries as being excessive. Hiring freezes or laying off city staff was recommended by 64 (2%) of the survey respondents. Two percent (42) of all respondents pointed to the cost of consultants in their comments. The remaining comments focused on exhortations to the Council and City Manager to solve the problem, pointed to specific boxes on the survey that the respondent supported, and/or suggested being "more efficient", making overall cuts to the budget, taking "a hard look at administrative costs", etc.

Climate

There were 30 respondents (1% of all respondents) who addressed climate issues/priorities and of this group, 11 respondents referred to the need for prioritizing climate change and 9 referenced the need to reduce water usage.

Cuts

A total of 44 respondents (around 2%) reiterated the importance of budget cuts in their comments in the open-ended question.

Fire

Two hundred and sixty-eight respondents (10%) commented on the Fire department. Almost all of these comments indicated supporting the Fire department and/or adding more fire staffing. "As fire is our #1 threat, I would like to see that department increased, everything else cut back." "The most essential budget item should be Ashland firefighters, please." Some felt that adding staffing to the fire department was preferable to the police department, "Why are we adding cops instead of more firefighters? We are on fire every year. I have never been helped by a police officer in Ashland," while others indicated support for additional fire and police personnel, "Happy to pay for more police and fire."

Golf

Opinions regarding City subsidy of the golf course led to 324 respondents weighing in. This is 12% of all surveys returned. Regarding the city-subsidized golf course, 78% (252) of those making comments about the golf course recommended ending subsidies or selling the golf course. "Pools, parks are important for everyone – Golf is NOT essential." "The golf course is an ongoing drain." A number of the surveys with comments not supporting a City subsidy of the golf course pointed to water and the drought. "Huge waste of resources (water) and money for an activity few enjoy." Roughly 22% (72 respondents) of the comments addressing the golf course urged the City to maintain subsidies, "The golf course benefits everyone by increasing property values and attracting tourists."

Homelessness

Fifty-two respondents (2%) commented on services for the homeless. Of those comments, about half encouraged the City to cut or end funding for the homeless, one-fifth advocated for programs for the homeless and the remainder commented on the problems stemming from the unhoused in Ashland.

Housing/Marijuana Tax

In the open-ended comment section, 93 respondents (4%) stated that the marijuana tax should be moved to the general fund.

Income

About 3% of all respondents (72) commented that their household or other households in the Ashland do not have the income to pay increased fees. "Many of us are on fixed incomes yet we are consistently asked to pay more." "Our one concern: This is the sort of town we want to live in, as revealed by our choices (on the survey). But we realize that not all Ashlanders can afford \$24/month more than they're already paying."

Increase/Decrease Fees

Being willing to pay more in fees was the sentiment expressed in the comments of 107 (4%) of the respondents. "The city of Ashland is a wonderful place to live and it is worth paying a little bit more to maintain this quality of life." Others recognized that not everyone can pay increased fees, "We are fortunate enough to be able to afford more outlay per month. The hardest part is that many others are not as fortunate. We would be willing to pay more based on value of property which would allow less fortunate to pay less." On the other side, 95 respondents (4%) commented that increasing fees is not sustainable for the City. "We love this town, but we (and other working families) don't have the deep pockets that all the regular increases in taxes, utility rates and other fees require." "I can't imagine having to add any additional requirement to have households cover the cost."

Mayor/City Council

In their comments, 90 respondents (3%) stated various reasons that the City is facing budget concerns ranging from the actions of past mayors and city councilors to the actions and approaches of the current mayor and city councilors. Thirty-eight (1%) of the comments questioned the need to do a survey for decisions made by the mayor, city council, and city manager.

Parks and Recreation

In the open-ended comments, 206 respondents (8%) expressed support for Parks and Recreation. Examples include, "Don't touch the parks - Ashland's gems. Please!" and "I like living in a city, Ashland, that is comfortable, safe, has such good recreation facilities, parks, parades, good planning, lot of various housing options throughout the city and friendly residents and visitors." Three percent (71) of the respondents had various ideas of how to better manage Parks. Reductions to Parks and Rec was suggested by 66 (2%) of the respondents.

Police

In comments regarding the police, 65 respondents (2%) indicated strong support for the police, with most of these comments including the fire department. An additional 78 (3%) respondents specifically advocated hiring additional police officers and, in most cases, included fire fighters to the request. "As a young family with two kids we would like to see increased spending on parks in addition to police for safety & fire for obvious reasons." On the opposite side, 68 respondents (3%) specifically requested no additional hires for the police department, 'Let me say it again, more police is not an acceptable "solution" here.' Twenty respondents (1%) indicated that there is greater necessity to hire mental health professionals instead of police staff.

Quality of Life

In regards to a good quality of life, 41 respondents (2%) stated that it was worth paying more to maintain what currently exists in Ashland. "Not opposed to some minor increases over time for high quality of life, services, & amenities." Quality of life was directly connected to parks for 26 people.

Recreation

Specific support for City recreation was commented on by 140 respondents (5%). "Please don't reduce funding for any outdoor activities or anything that benefits families with children." On the other side, 71 respondents (3%) recommended cutting funding to recreational programs. "Increasing user fees for pool, ice rink and Nature Center would be appropriate."

Regionalization

Of the 84 comments regarding regionalization of police, fire, and ambulance, half of the respondents were in favor and half were not. In terms of transferring state-law court cases to Medford, 61 respondents (2%) indicated support.

Streets

Ninety-six respondents (4%) called out the importance of maintaining the funding for streets.

Tourism

Tourism and the necessity to maintain parks and recreation as well public safety to draw tourism was mentioned by 29 respondents (1%). Fifteen respondents (less than 1%) want to tax tourists and OSF to a greater degree.

Other Ideas

There were 116 suggestions (4% of all respondents) of other ways that the City could address the budget issue. Topics included privatize the Ashland Fiber Network, the airport, and utilities; allow food trucks downtown; reduce or eliminate funds for public art; use community volunteers for a variety of City services; go to online utility billing; install parking meters; stop giving rebates; write grants; increase parking citation fees; sell city-owned properties; close the water treatment plant; and reduce or discontinue providing services for the homeless.

Implications for Policy

The survey findings provide useful answers to the two main questions outlined at the beginning of this report. The survey's robust response rate, and the absence of lop-sided findings on specific questions, support the conclusion that a wide range of opinions are represented in the survey. Given the diversity of opinions held by Ashland residents, it is not surprising that the results do not come down overwhelmingly on one side or the other for the questions asked. Opinions expressed through the survey are more nuanced.

The first question addresses whether the budget should be balanced primarily through spending reductions or increases in fees. More respondents prefer that City leaders balance the budget through spending cuts (49%), but the percentage willing to pay increased fees to make up the deficit is close behind (44%). Only 18% of respondents appear opposed to all increases in fees. Residents are not looking to pay more, but at the same time are relatively happy with City programs and overall spending levels as they stand. Our interpretation of these results is that residents want to maintain Ashland's high quality of life and level of municipal services while at the same time pursuing any available opportunities to control costs. They are asking City leaders to work for this balance.

The second broad question addresses residents' priorities for specific City functions and programs. When confronted with reductions in specific City activities, in general they did not express a strong preference for those cuts; none had over 50% support. The highest level of support was 46% for eliminating City subsidies to the golf course. Two questions asked about support for additional staffing in public safety; neither had strong support.

The findings do suggest that Ashland residents support volunteerism and citizen involvement. The idea of shifting some of the maintenance for neighborhood parks to volunteers was relatively popular as a cost-saving measure. Reducing or eliminating citizen committees and commissions was relatively unpopular. Taken together it appears that residents view these as important avenues for contributing to the City and connecting with its governance.

Annotated Bibliography

Berry, W. D. and Lowery, D. (1990). An alternative approach to understanding budgetary tradeoffs. *American Journal of Political Science*, 34(3): 671–705.

This article focuses on the federal budget and the conceptualization of trade-offs.

Blomquist, G. C., et al. (2004). Public Preferences for Program Tradeoffs: Community Values for Budget Priorities." *Public Budgeting & Finance*, 24 (1), 50–71. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0275-1100.2004.02401003.x>.

This article discusses the contingent budget choice technique. Blomquist et al. discuss providing survey respondents with a fixed amount of funding to add to public services, rather than providing an amount of budget cuts that the respondents need to remove from the budget. The researchers constructed their survey to have the respondent add up to a total of \$100, which represents \$100 million.

Crompton, J. L. (1988). A citizen-sensitive approach to retrenching services in the public sector. *The American Review of Public Administration*, 18(1), 79-93.

The authors emphasize that the best approach to struggling programs is not always to direct more funding into those programs. Reducing funds to or eliminating struggling programs is sometimes more realistic; as the source of struggling may not be simply lack of funds but other factors that diminish the relevance of the programs. This is similar to the idea of loss aversion in Moore et al. Crompton says there are three retrenchment strategies: "leave the program alone; modify its delivery strategy; or withdraw resources from it" (pg. 87). The main argument of this paper is that it's important to consider what citizens want when making decisions about reallocation of public funds.

Dillman, D.A., Smyth, J.D., and Christian, L.M. (2008). *Internet, Mail, and Mixed-Mode Surveys: the tailored design method*. Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons.

Koford, B. C. (2010). Public budget choices and private willingness to pay. *Public Budgeting & Finance*, 30(2), 47-68.

The author discusses connecting public marginal willingness to tradeoff (MWTTO) and an individual's own willingness to pay (WTP). The practical difference between MWTTO and WTP is that WTP can inform benefit-cost analysis, whereas MWTTO can only inform cost effective analysis. This relates to the Ashland Budget survey as there is a tradeoff component (CV between services with a certain budget) and a willingness to pay component (own support for tax increases).

McDaniels, T. L. (1996). The structured value referendum: Eliciting preferences for environmental policy alternatives. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 15(2), 227-251.

This article refers to a method called a structured value referendum (SVR). Voting is generally not used (or used poorly) to understand preferences for nonmarket goods. Other methods discussed are contingent valuation and multi-attribute value.

McGowan, M. J., Pope, J. V., Kropf, M. E., & Mohr, Z. (2021). Guns or Butter... or Elections?:

Understanding intertemporal and distributive dimensions of policy choice through the examination of budgetary tradeoffs at the local level. *Public Budgeting & Finance*, 41(4), 3-19.

Moore, W., Baber, W. F., & Bartlett, R. V. (2012). Loss aversion and rationality in cutback management: a deliberative democratic approach to contingent valuation. *Public Finance & Management*, 12(3).

The article focuses on budget cuts and reductions of spending. The authors emphasize the importance of determining what people are actually "willing to sacrifice." Economists and public officials often

underestimate the irrationality of responses to budget cuts. “Loss aversion” refers to the preference people express for goods and services that they already have. This paper provides an overview of contingent valuation (CV) and the theory behind it – “the theory of the economic value of public goods is derived from the standard utility maximization problem for consumers found in microeconomic theory” (pg. 243). The authors draw attention to how the “free rider” problem, non-excludability and non-rivalry of pure public goods impact people’s responses about their preferences for these goods. They also discuss the drawbacks of CV and some benefits of dichotomous choice, which involves randomly assigning participants with outcomes for a range of possibilities, and then the participant accepts or rejects that outcome. This method is intended to reduce the amount of strategic and skewed answers that CV can elicit. Here is another concern specifically on the use of CV for budget cuts: “Any choice that does not include a specific payment vehicle is unlikely to be incentive compatible and that would include the choice of budget cuts. For this scenario to be incentive compatible, a choice of a specific reduction in taxes or increase in another specific public good would be necessary for revealing true preferences and avoiding strategic responses” (pg. 247).

Nollenberger, K., Maher, C., Beach, P., & McGee, M. K. (2012). Budget priorities and community perceptions of service quality and importance. *Journal of Public Budgeting, Accounting & Financial Management*.

The survey utilized in this research included both a \$1 million budget increase and decrease allocation. It also included categorical questions about the perceived quality of services and the perceived importance of services.

Ozdemir, S., Johnson, F. R., & Whittington, D. (2016). Ideology, public goods and welfare valuation: An experiment on allocating government budgets. *Journal of choice modelling*, 20, 61-72.

The authors provide another demonstration of a method for gathering preference information, specifically for choices given “budget-constrained combinations of public and publicly provided goods and services (pg. 70). They note that it is important to identify the source of funding for any increases to areas in a budget. Ozdemir et al. found that across ideological lines, providing specific details about what would be lost due to cuts makes people less likely to approve of said cuts. They found more evidence of loss aversion in their survey participants: “the disutility associated with program decreases was much higher than the utility associated with corresponding increases” (pg. 71).

Robbins, M. D., & Simonsen, B. (2002). A dynamic method of citizen preference revelation. *Journal of Public Budgeting, Accounting & Financial Management*.

This paper discusses two models: one in which the survey respondents know the budget constraints facing the government but they are not given information about the impact on the quality of services or the associated changes in tax rate (CV), and the other which prompts focus on the cost to the respondent to reveal their willingness to pay for various levels of public services. They propose a blend of these two models, in which respondents must consider both the challenge from the government’s perspective and the tax challenge relevant to respondents.