

COMMUNITY SURVEY PROJECT
FINAL REPORT

Village of Whitefish Bay

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Project Overview

Whitefish Bay completed a community survey project under the general direction of the Long Range Fiscal Planning Committee (LRFPC). As part of the preparation for the survey, the Village Board selected sub-groups of the public that would have particular viewpoints best understood in a small-group setting. In addition to the information gained through facilitated focus group discussions, the Village Board and LRFPC used issues raised to focus questions posed in a community-wide survey.

The assistant village manager was instructed to invite a broad selection of participants from the following categories to attend a focus group session geared to understanding the things they valued, caused them concern, and satisfied them about living, working, shopping, and playing in Whitefish Bay. Public Management Partners LLP facilitators interviewed a total of 37 residents and businesspeople in the following focus groups:

Business Owners	Renters (no participants)
Realtors (no participants)	Non-profit civic groups
Retirees	Empty nesters
Youth	Parents of school age children
	First time home buyers

Community survey questions were proposed by Public Management Partners LLP and reviewed by the LRFPC, administrative staff, and the Village Board. 5,602 surveys were bulk-mailed the first week in October of 2005. 827 were returned for a total return rate of 15%.

Executive Summary

Focus group participants in general value the beauty and personal safety of Whitefish Bay and its neighborhoods as well as its housing stock. They like the easy accessibility of every-day service providers in the Village as well as the nearness of Milwaukee's regional arts and sports venues. Many feel that they benefit from Milwaukee's strength as an economic driver in the Midwest. They show a strong preference for sidewalks and the walkable nature of a more urban and less suburban community. They appreciate that Whitefish Bay has a strong public school system, that it is near to UW-Milwaukee, and that Village services are strong.

Survey results showed high rankings for most quality of life and safety measures in Whitefish Bay. The highest ranked are as follows:

<i>Feeling of safety</i>	<i>99 % very or somewhat safe</i>
<i>Overall quality of life</i>	<i>98 % excellent or good</i>
<i>Value of investment</i>	<i>95 % excellent or good</i>
<i>Quality of neighborhood</i>	<i>94 % excellent or good</i>
<i>Overall appearance</i>	<i>93 % excellent or good</i>

Focus group participants in general expressed concerns about taxes and the village's inability to expand its borders to add property value. Many observed that Whitefish Bay

would have to “expand up” or “tear down” to increase value and feared new building “monstrosities” that would detract from the village’s sense of place. Many pointed out that present codes may discourage maintaining property; for example, repairs on a 1.5-car garage would require stepping up to a 2-car garage.

Survey results showed 84% feeling that preservation of neighborhood character and existing homes was important or very important.

Many focus group participants were concerned about maintaining quality schools and village services in the face of changes in state financing. However, many were less concerned about taxes than about investing in proper maintenance of public infrastructure and providing appropriate recreational programs and facilities for residents of all ages.

Survey results showed that 72.2 % of the 771 respondents favored the current level of services and the taxes necessary to support them. 19.6% favored a reduced level of services and lower taxes.

Survey results confirmed the Village Board’s commitment to assure quality, cost-effective municipal services to its residents while, at the same time, controlling the tax levy. When asked how important the Village’s investment of tax dollars in quality, cost-effective services was for the Village’s future, the following services received over 90% important or very important ratings:

<i>Public safety services</i>	95 %
<i>Public streets and utility services</i>	95 %
<i>Well-maintained residential property</i>	94 %
<i>Garbage & yard waste collection services</i>	91 %
<i>Well-maintained commercial property</i>	90 %

Survey results showed a clear majority of residents felt that in proportion to the current levels of service, the current level of taxation was OK for the following:

<i>Waste Collection</i>	83 %
<i>Fire and Emergency Medical Services</i>	78 %
<i>Police</i>	70 %
<i>Parks/Forestry</i>	70 %
<i>Public Works/Streets</i>	65 %
<i>Public Health</i>	65 %
<i>Other Village Expenses</i>	65 %
<i>General Services</i>	63 %
<i>Library Operations</i>	60 %

Survey results showed only 44.5% felt the cost of debt service was OK and 37.4% felt the cost was too high.

Although many focus group participants valued Whitefish Bay as a friendly small town that was a good place to live, survey results also showed limits to quality of life ratings. Quality ratings of excellent or good ratings were as follows:

<i>Village as a place to raise children</i>	97 %
<i>Village as a place for teens</i>	85 %
<i>Person-to-person friendliness</i>	83 %
<i>Village as a place for young adults without children</i>	71 %
<i>Village as a place to live when retired</i>	69 %
<i>Acceptance of differences in race, religion, ethnicity, et.</i>	57 %

Some focus group participants observed that changes in the Bayshore Shopping Center might affect both adjacent residential property owners as well as businesses competitors; some felt this change was good. Some were willing to see “tired, plain Jane” buildings removed on Silver Spring and replaced by up to four-story mixed use buildings appropriate for today’s market.

The importance of maintaining commercial property was clear with 90% rating this as important or very important. 85% of respondents felt that a vibrant business district was important or very important. However, only 47% felt that a general public use idea frequently discussed, to have public gathering spaces on Silver Spring Drive, was important.

Many focus group participants felt the village should plan more strategically and less reactively. In particular, participants in many different focus groups expressed their perception that the Board was too easily influenced by small groups of citizens who voiced their concerns, even if their viewpoint did not express the view or needs of the community-at-large. Many felt that such responsiveness led to excessive delays and reactive rather than pro-active decision-making.

Survey results showed a majority of good and average ratings of decision outcomes by the Village Board (67%); few (7.8%) rated decision outcomes as excellent. Decisions by appointed Boards and Commissions were only slightly higher in rating (68% and 9.6%). Responsiveness of the Village Board was considered good to average (67%) with 18.5% considering Board responsiveness excellent.

Some focus group participants were willing to consider a broad range of options to maximize village service efficiency up to and including total consolidation.

Survey results showed that 69% of respondents felt that sharing services with other communities/entities was important or very important to the Village’s future.

Focus Group Meeting Synopses

Beyond these responses common to many focus groups, the following unique experiences and perceptions were expressed.

Civic and non-profit groups. These leaders remarked that many moving into Whitefish Bay have family ties, and that the village in general was “provincial” or “comfortably closed” in nature. Family, religious, and civic organizations were seen as the entry-points to “belonging” as well as participating in community life. Their lives were clearly enriched by belonging, and they welcomed others to their groups.

They are conscious of non-profit property not paying taxes, but felt their contribution to the fabric of the community was worth it. They were aware of redevelopment opportunities that would include non-profit changeovers.

Empty-nesters. These generally active seniors are considering living options beyond their detached single-family homes; they want to stay in Whitefish Bay for family and other social reasons. They want housing for the next twenty to thirty years that would be adequately spacious, reasonably affordable, and on one level for ease of access, but Whitefish Bay generally lacked appropriate housing choices.

In addition, the small lots and zoning codes made remodeling existing structures difficult, if not impossible, to accommodate their need to live on one floor. Routine maintenance such as snow-shoveling and yard care were also seen as reasons to relocate. They felt that a benefit of their moving out of their homes would be opening up housing for families.

This group was supportive of the schools as a driver of residential property value. Some were looking for volunteer opportunities to stay active after retirement while others were planning for or dealing with the death/disability of a spouse. They valued services appropriate for seniors.

Parents of School-aged Children. Most of the participants selected Whitefish Bay for a variety of reasons with the public school’s reputation only one factor. Some came for the public schools, some for the private schools, and some without knowledge of the schools.

Personal safety, family ties, easy access to Milwaukee for work and play, and the beautiful look of the village were commonly mentioned. They valued the ease of access by foot or bike to schools, stores, library, etc., that allows a lifestyle for themselves and their children not available in the suburbs. Many looked at homes in Shorewood and Wauwatosa before buying in the village.

They see some singles buying homes. Their sense is that some families move out of Whitefish Bay to Mequon, Cedarburg, etc. when their children are out of elementary school.

Several participants expressed the view that although Whitefish Bay was friendly, it also was socially “closed.” They suggested encouraging neighborhood associations to increase the quality of social and family life in the village.

They were interested in better communication with the village and schools regarding solutions to problems. They were concerned with safety issues and services that would protect their families and their property values.

First Time Homebuyers

These young adults are excited about living in Whitefish Bay and plan on staying in their present home for five years before moving up in the village. These young adults love the urban energy and cosmopolitan nature of Whitefish Bay, and they are committed to the community, not just their homes. They were pleasantly surprised by the perceived number of children and young couples in the village.

After looking also in Shorewood and Wauwatosa, these new residents found Whitefish Bay homes affordable (amount of money due per month) and younger in age. None of the participants chose a home based on tax rates and were somewhat surprised by their first property tax bill.

Although they feel that taxes are worth the investment, this group was the most aggressive about consolidation and other means of reducing service costs. They were willing to roll their trash to the curb and reduce public space “grooming services” as long as the spaces were not “tacky.” They want Whitefish Bay’s tax rate to be comparable so that they are not discouraged from buying a larger home.

Business Representatives

The business group had somewhat limited representation; however, they felt that their comments were reflective of the business community. The represented businesses are in Whitefish Bay because they want to be part of the community. They live here and want to do business here.

There is a general sense that retail opportunities and health have declined from great to merely good over the years and that Whitefish Bay no longer is a destination for shopping. Focus has moved to local business serving community residents.

The adequacy of parking and the strictness with which parking is enforced is a concern shared by many urban businesses and discussed here as well. The general sense is that tickets are issued within “seconds” of metered time expiring and that Whitefish Bay has developed a negative reputation.

Rents are perceived as being high, but the occupancy levels appear to be high and there is business interest in the Community. Improving entrances to Whitefish Bay was seen as a need as was the need to manage traffic on Silver Spring. Sidewalks and the new pedestrian crossing signs are appreciated and a good first step. More could be done to control speeds on Silver Spring and to help businesses attract customers from drive-by traffic.

Retail business supports events like the sidewalk sale that bring focus to Whitefish Bay and attract customers. More events would be welcome. Addition of a Village Center or other attractions on Silver Spring would help retail business as would the addition of a

first class restaurant. The 10:00 business closing is seen as a problem in attracting certain businesses including the aforementioned restaurant. The general consensus was that the Village has a more than adequate number of banks and drugstores.

Village government is perceived as very accessible and responsive. Conversely, there is a perception that the Board favors residents over business and that a vocal minority can adversely sway issues. Furthermore, there is a sense that change is unnecessarily difficult and that the decision-making process is both slow and challenging. There is the feeling that the Board is seeking 100% resident consensus before taking action.

Retirees

Most retirees were long term residents who primarily love the small town feel of Whitefish Bay. They also value the public school system, accessibility to the region on the I-system and downtown. They value proximity to the lake. They appreciate that homes are well-maintained and that property values are increasing. They very much enjoy and want to retain the character of the village including the housing mix, mix of young and old people, and are vehemently opposed to efforts to tear down existing homes and build mansions. In particular, they don't want to "become Mequon."

They like the low crime rate and perceive that the community is safe and the young people respectful. There is concern, however, that housing opportunities for retirees in a condo-style are nearly non-existent in Whitefish Bay as are assisted living opportunities. There is a concern that housing and zoning code regulations are excessive and inhibit the ability to improve properties.

Retirees are pleased with the walkability of the community and appreciate the sidewalks. There is limited programming for seniors and younger, more active retirees are seeking organized trips, appropriate activities, etc. At the same time, the Retired Men's Club is reputed to be folding due to lack of interest.

Infrastructure maintenance is seen as inadequate by the seniors. 60% of city streets are felt to be in need of repair. Storm sewers and other utility infrastructure as well as more obviously dilapidated tennis courts need repair. The library generated mixed opinions in this group, though there was a general sense that the present library was overdone, but less so than the original concept; however they feel that it is being well used and a sense that "we deserve" a quality library.

Taxes are perceived as very, very high but are not necessarily considered a priority issue for the community. There is, however, a concern that non-profits are not carrying their fair share and that the long time lags between reassessments have caused an imbalance in tax burden.

There is a perception that the Board not particularly good at decision making and spends too much on consultants. Policy is often shaped by pressure groups whose priorities may not reflect the community as a whole.

Parking was discussed as a problem, but the consensus said that if you knew where to go, there was parking available. Improved signage and information about parking options might be appropriate to maximize the use of existing parking.

Youth

This group also expressed support for Whitefish Bay's small town feel, walkability, knowing everyone, and participating in community events. Their common modes of transportation are readily available and include bus, bike, and walking; they can go wherever they need to reasonably easily. Having said that, participants turned to their concerns.

This group expressed need for a place to congregate and activities for those in middle school and higher. Park & Recreation activities are aimed at fifth grade and lower students. Schools are resistant to scouting. Although the Jewish Community Center has facilities and programs, such are limited to members.

There is general interest in recreation facilities such as a skate park and pool; they want something to "keep them busy." Klode Beach is a nice facility but it is dirty and generally not safe for swimming. A lack of summer jobs in the area further decreased their options for staying busy. They felt that volunteer activities were also limited.

There was a concern that businesses must close by 10pm, too early for their tastes and needs. When asked about the Bayshore Mall, movies, and other commercial entertainment options, they said that Bayshore stores did not appeal to them and that movies were too expensive.

There was talk about programs that involve family as well as programming that involve high school students with younger students – events, activities, haunted house, café, etc. Other ideas generated were a kids' triathlon, bike races, more community events, and maybe movies at parks. They want organized activities appropriate for their ages.