

MEMO: TOWN-WIDE SURVEY RESULTS

The Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) hosted a town-wide survey to help establish a community vision for South Acton. Questions were vetted by the Planning Division and the South Acton Vision & Action Plan Advisory Group. A postcard was mailed through the USPS EDDM Every Door using Direct Mail to assure all registered residential mailing addresses received the postcard regardless of rental or ownership status. The survey was open from November 1 to December 5, 2022, and was completed by 972 residents and others who regularly visit the area. Responses from the survey are described in the following memo. Note: all questions were optional so not every respondent answered every question.

About You

First, respondents answered a few questions about themselves. These questions were asked to give MAPC and the Town of Acton an understanding of whether those engaged throughout this process accurately reflect the demographics of Acton.

Figure 1 and **Figure 2** document the answers to questions about each respondent’s living situation. They were asked if they own or rent their home and the type of housing that they live in.

Living Situation of Respondents

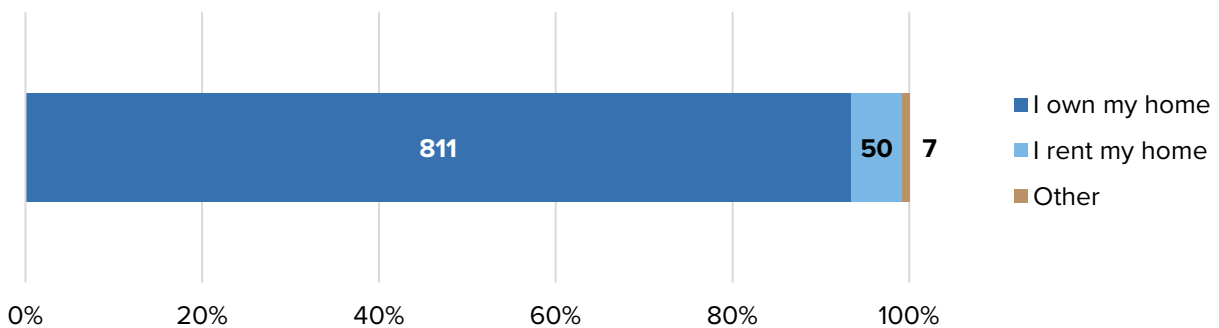


Figure 1: How would you describe your living situation?

The vast majority of survey respondents—more than 93%—own their own home. Just under 6% rent their home, with the rest of respondents selecting “other.” Of those who picked “other,” most indicated that they live in a home owned by family member.

Respondents’ Housing Type

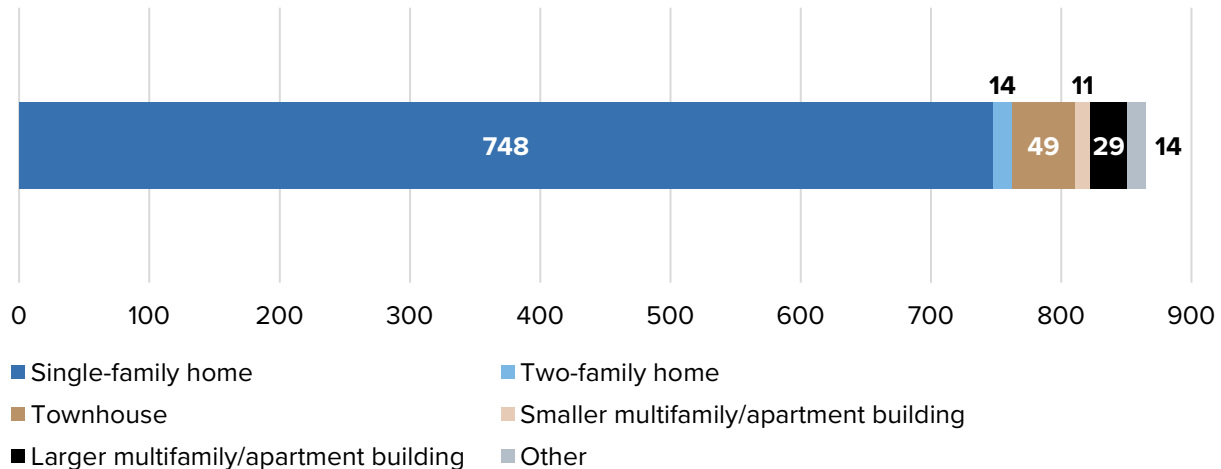


Figure 2: What type of housing do you live in?

A large majority of respondents live in single-family homes (86%). The next most common responses for housing typologies were townhouses (6%) followed by larger multifamily/apartment buildings with ten or more units (3%). Another 2% of respondents selected two-family homes, 2% selected “other,” and 1% selected smaller multifamily/apartment buildings with less than ten units. Only one person selected an accessory apartment and two people selected a three-family home (technically 0% of respondents). Note: housing types represented by less than 1% of responses are not shown in **Figure 2**.

The next two survey questions, shown in **Figure 3** and **Figure 4**, asked respondents to answer demographic questions about their age and racial/ethnic identity.

Age of Respondents

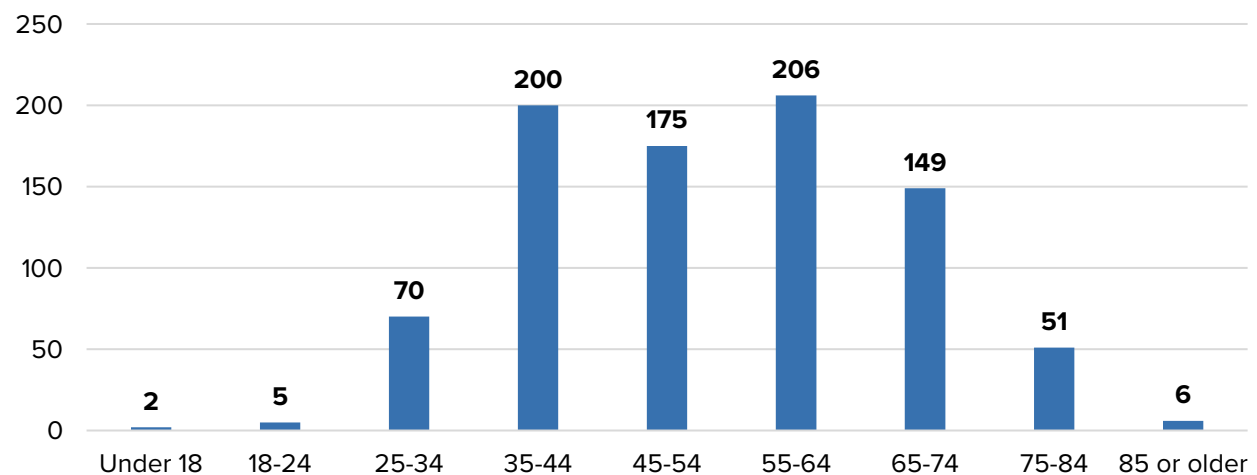


Figure 3: How old are you?

The most commonly-represented age groups were 35-44 and 55-64, with each of these two groups representing almost a quarter of survey respondents (23% and 24%, respectively). Another 20% of respondents were 45-54 and 17% were 65-74. About 0.8% were 25 years old or younger and 0.7% percent were 85 or older

Respondents’ Racial/Ethnic Identity

RACIAL/ETHNIC IDENTITY	COUNT
White	722
Asian	99
Black/African American	8
Hispanic/Latinx	14
Indigenous/Native America	2
Other	28
Total	873

Figure 4: Which categories best describe your racial/ethnic identity? Select all that apply.

Approximately 722 respondents—83% of survey respondents—identify as White. Respondents who identify as Asian made up the next most represented racial/ethnic identity, with 99 people. An additional 14 respondents identified as Hispanic/Latinx, eight identified as Black/African American, and two identified as Indigenous/Native American. There were 28 responses for “other.”

Note: the survey asked respondents to select all the racial/ethnic identities that best describe them. There were 32 respondents who selected more than one race. The majority of these respondents identified as White and another race(s).

The question shown in **Figure 5** asked respondents about the number of people living in their household.

Respondents’ Household Size

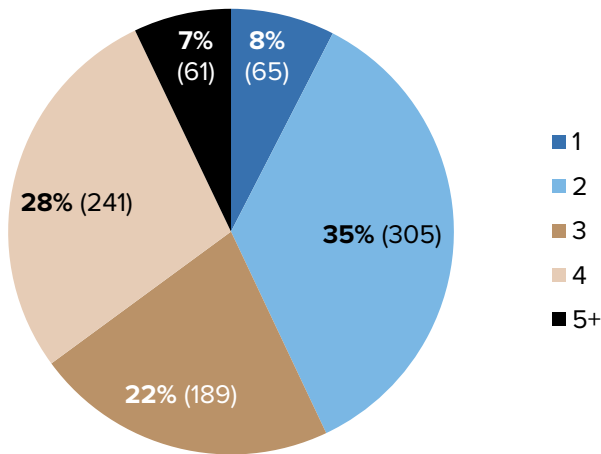


Figure 5: How many people live in your household?

More than a third (35%) of respondents live in a two-person household and combined, another 50% of respondents live in a three or four-person household. About 8% live alone and 7% live in a household with five or more people.

The last two questions in this survey section asked respondents about the amount of time they have spent in Acton (**Figure 6**), and if they live in South Acton specifically (**Figure 7**).

Duration of Residence in Acton

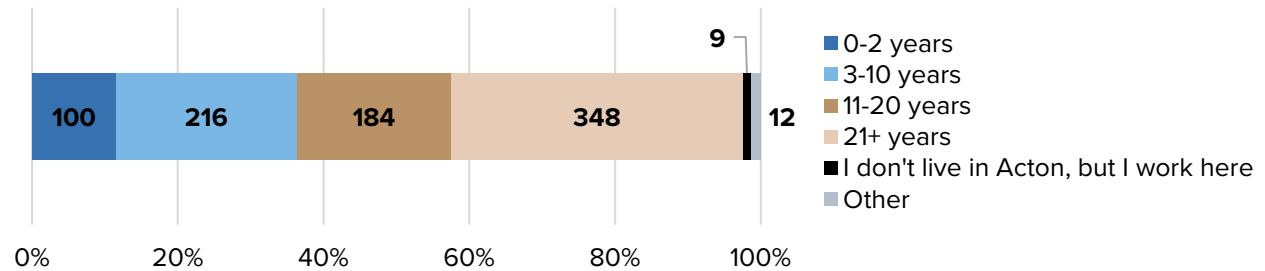


Figure 5: How long have you lived in Acton?

Forty-percent of survey respondents have lived in Acton for more than 21 years. A quarter of respondents have lived in Acton for three to ten years, 21% have lived in town for 11 to 20 years, and 12% have lived in Acton for zero to two years. Another 2% either don't live in Acton but work there or selected "other."

Residence in Acton

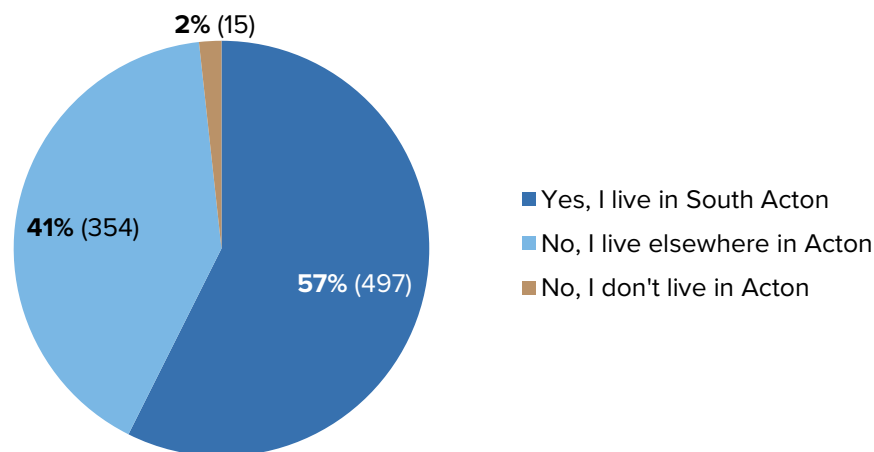


Figure 6: Do you consider yourself a South Acton resident?

More than half of respondents (57%) consider themselves a resident of South Acton and another 41% live elsewhere in Acton. Note: the survey asked residents to self-identify as residents of South Acton without specifying South Acton Village or a specific boundary.

Vision & Priorities

In the next section, the survey asked respondents about their vision for the area and general priorities for the future of South Acton. These priorities serve as a starting point for drafting the South Acton Vision and Action Plan and will inform recommendations for future zoning changes.

The first question in this section asked respondents to select five words that best describe their ideal version of South Acton in the future. In the word cloud in **Figure 8**, the largest words are the ones that were mentioned most frequently.

Ideal Future of South Acton



Figure 7: Imagine your ideal version of South Acton in the future. What five words describe this future?

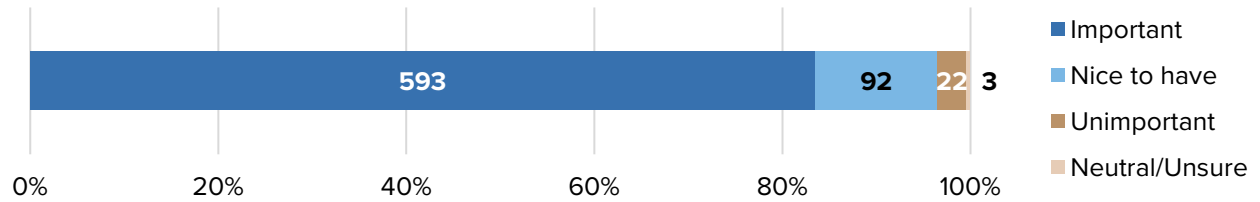
The following ten words were used most:

1. Walkable (234)
2. Safe (140)
3. Community (130)
4. Green (81)
5. Friendly (81)
6. Historic (78)
7. Accessible (63)
8. Diverse (54)
9. Restaurants (50)
10. Vibrant (48)

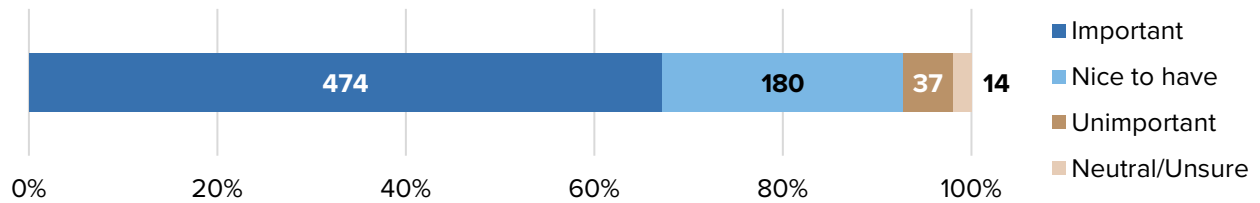
Next, the survey presented nine priorities for creating a vision for South Acton and asked respondents to indicate their level of importance. The breakdown of responses for each priority is shown **Figure 9**.

Priorities for South Acton

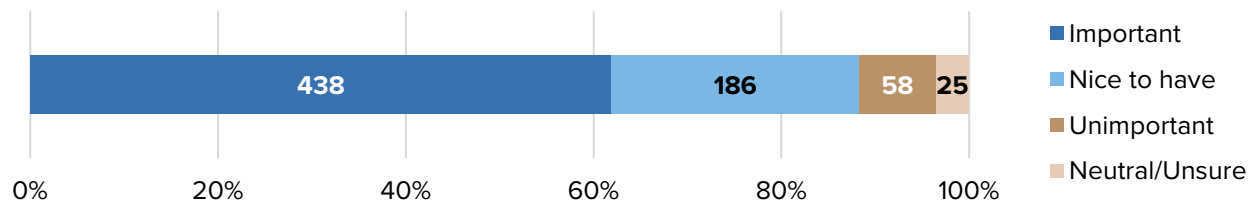
Improve infrastructure for walking and biking:



Promote small-business development:



Integrate sustainable features into new development:



Preserve South Acton's historic buildings and character:

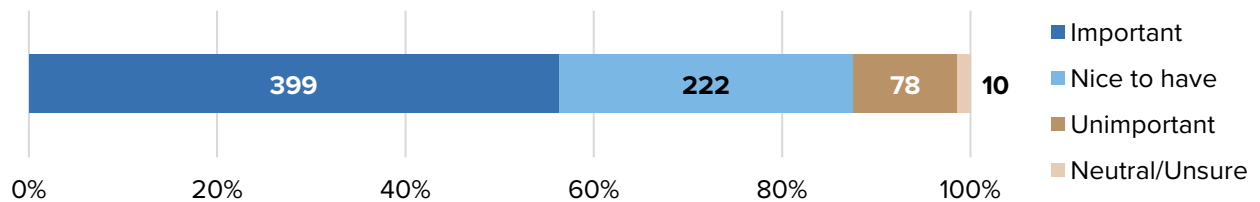
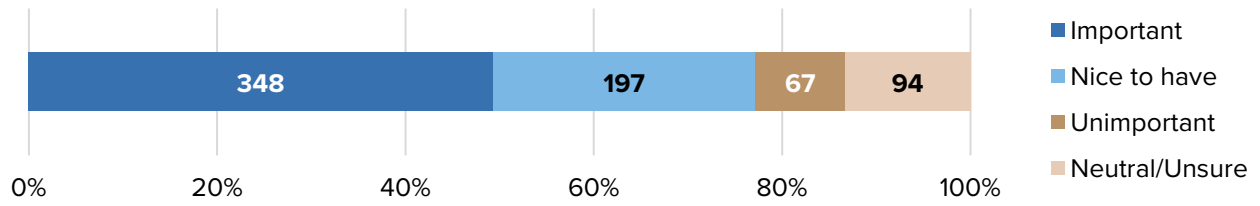
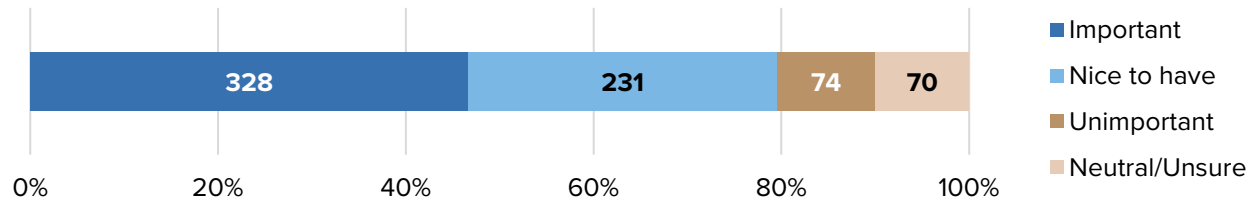


Figure 8: As we embark on this planning initiative, please indicate how important you feel the following priorities are in creating a vision for South Acton.

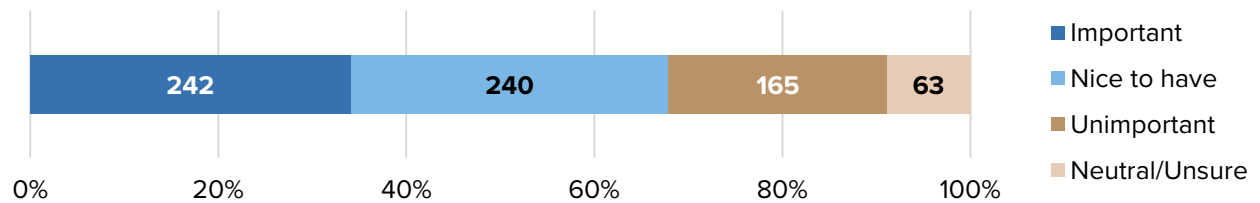
Improve and expand sewer collection system:



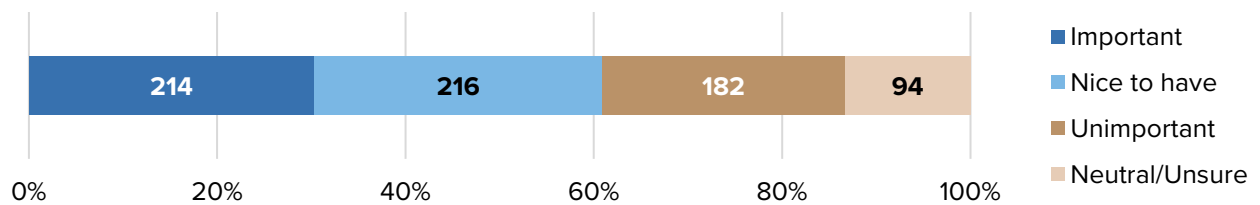
Concentrate growth and mixed-use development in village centers:



Allow a range of housing types (multi-family, duplexes, single family) and sizes:



Promote Affordable Housing for low-income households near the MBTA station:



Allow multifamily housing near the MBTA station:

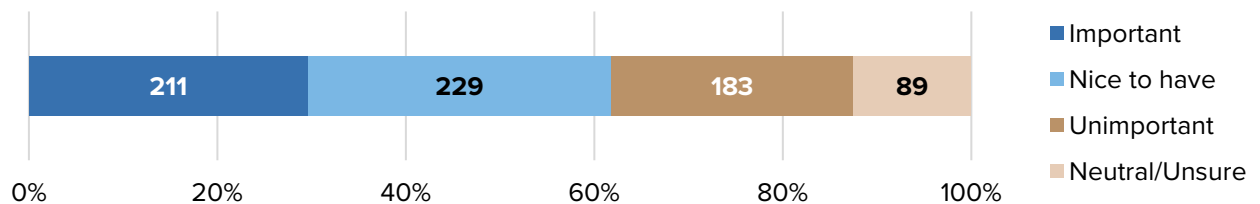


Figure 9 (continued): As we embark on this planning initiative, please indicate how important you feel the following priorities are in creating a vision for South Acton.

For each priority, a majority of respondents felt that the priority was either important or nice to have. Of the nine priorities, the following three had the highest percentage of respondents indicating that the priority was important to them:

1. Improve infrastructure for walking and biking (84%)
2. Promote small business development (67%)
3. Integrate sustainable features into new development (62%)

Respondents were then given the opportunity to identify other priorities for South Acton through open-ended responses. See **Appendix A** for all question responses.

Short Answer Question 1: What other priorities do you have for this process?

Over 80 respondents wrote that they want to see more retail and dining options, which can also function as gathering spaces, to create the feeling of a village center. These comments include mention of coffee shops, restaurants, and attractive shops that can serve commuters and South Acton residents. Exchange Hall and Jones Tavern were floated as potential locations for these spaces. Almost 20 people identified West Acton, with its attractive and cohesive village center, as a model for South Acton.

A priority mentioned by almost 80 respondents is improving conditions for walking and biking. Respondents enjoy the current range of mobility options in Acton, but they also point to a general lack of sidewalks, bike lanes, and connectable trails in South Acton that reduce safety for pedestrians and cyclists. Streets in need of new and/or improved sidewalks and bike lanes include Martin Street, River Street, Piper Street, Stow Street, Liberty Street, and Maple Street. Beyond adding or improving sidewalks and bike lanes, a dozen respondents noted that infrastructure improvements should be located with intentionality, connecting residents to local businesses and important destinations.

Traffic congestion and related safety concerns were described as significant issues by approximately 65 people. There is a need to improve traffic flow in many locations, with respondents identifying Main Street (Route 27), Massachusetts Ave, Central Street, School Street, and High Street as areas of focus.

About 60 respondents mentioned a priority relating to the preservation of the historic buildings and small town feel of South Acton. They generally feel that historic buildings contribute to the beauty of the community and give it its unique character. Some of these respondents indicated that they would be more comfortable with denser development if it involved the reuse of existing buildings or the production of new buildings that integrate historic design and sustainable features into the new development.

The desire for a strong sense of community was mentioned more than 50 times. In particular, these respondents feel that it is important to prioritize Acton's growing cultural diversity and create spaces where the community can come together. Programming ideas for parks and other outdoor gathering spaces were suggested, including farmers markets, live music, pop-up art installations, etc. along with infrastructure additions such as benches and lighting.

There were more than 30 survey respondents who mentioned parking in their response to this question about priorities. The majority feel there is inadequate parking at the commuter rail station and for local businesses, and they believe this to be a major barrier

to new development in South Acton. The idea of constructing a parking garage at the station was mentioned by multiple people. On the other hand, a few of the respondents do not want to see more of the area paved over for parking.

Additionally, about 30 respondents identified the desire to improve and add on to current recreation opportunities. Specific sites were identified as requiring improved pedestrian infrastructure to make it safer to access them, including safe pedestrian connections to Jones Playground. About a half-dozen survey-takers perceive additional housing development as negatively impacting already limited recreation and open space in the South Acton area.

There is a divide between those who support denser and smaller-scale housing options around the station and those who are opposed to anything other than single-family homes. About 25 respondents expressed an anti-growth and anti-multifamily housing sentiment in their comments, while 32 mentioned their support for multifamily housing in the South Acton area.

Those who support housing growth discussed it as a necessary way to make Acton a more welcoming and affordable community, generate foot traffic for businesses, provide options for downsizing seniors and Town employees, allow more people to easily access the commuter rail station, and more. About ten people expressed their desire for housing that includes the integration of sustainable features and net-zero technology to support Acton’s climate goals. A few respondents felt that mixed-use development should be prioritized to improve the vibrancy of South Acton Village and create more destinations for shopping and dining.

South Acton Today

The “South Acton Today” section asked respondents how they presently spend time in South Acton and their opinion on current conditions in the area. **Figure 10** and **Figure 11** show responses to the two multiple-choice questions in this section about how regularly respondents spend time in South Acton Village and what brings them to the area.

Frequency of Time Spent in South Acton

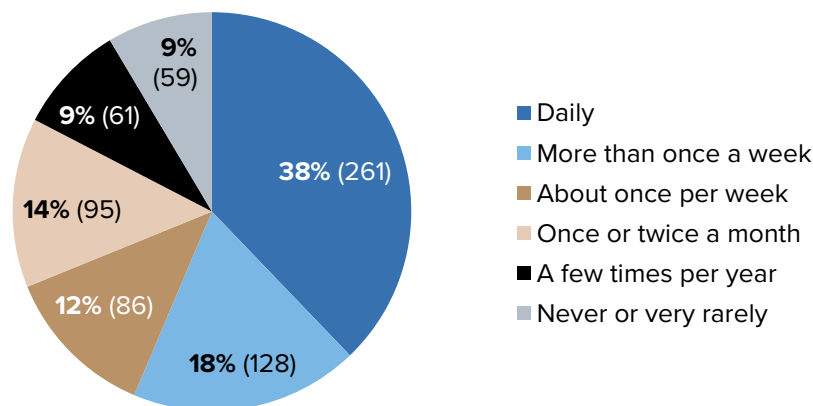


Figure 10: How regularly do you spend time in South Acton Village?

More than a third of respondents (38%) spend time in South Acton every day. Another 18% go there more than once a week, 12% go about once per week and 14% go once or twice a month. About 18% either never go or go a handful of times per year.

Reason for Visiting South Acton

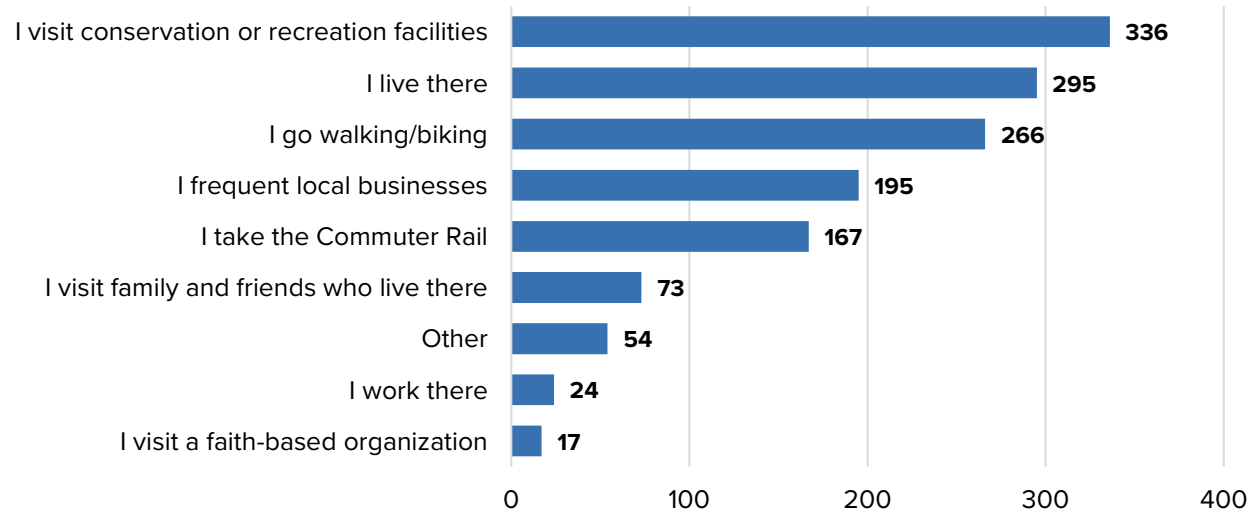


Figure 11: What brings you to South Acton Village? Select all that apply

At 336 votes, conservation and recreation facilities are the biggest draw for respondents to South Acton Village. Two hundred sixty-six also go walking and biking in the area. Almost 300 respondents spend much of their time there as they live in the neighborhood. Other draws include local businesses at 195 votes and the Commuter Rail station at 167 votes. Only two dozen survey-takers work in South Acton. The majority of the 54 respondents who selected “other” indicated that they drive through South Acton to get to other parts of Acton, to go to Maynard, and to bring people to or from the train station.

Next, the survey asked respondents to describe the strengths of South Acton and the challenges facing it through two short answer questions.

Short Answer Question 2: What do you feel are the strengths of South Acton? What does it currently have that makes it a place that people enjoy living in and visiting?

Mentioned upwards of 250 times, the most common responses regarding the question about strengths pertained to the area’s conservation and recreational facilities. Respondents highlighted the Assabet River Trail, Jones Field Playground, Pratt’s Brook, Great Hill, and the area’s farms as especially great. Appreciation was expressed for easily-accessible nature via streets that (mostly) have sidewalks, with almost 50 respondents identifying South Acton’s walkability as a strength.

More than 200 respondents mentioned the commuter rail station and the easy access it provides to Boston as a major strength of South Acton. The ability to walk to the station was expressed as a benefit for the people living in the neighborhood and the presence of the station is a big reason why families choose to live in Acton. Over 35 respondents

mentioned that the area is conveniently located close to Route 2, Route 27, West Acton, Downtown Maynard, and West Concord.

The historic, small-town charm of South Acton was noted as a strength by approximately 185 respondents. Many voiced their love for the neighborhood's historic houses and other historic buildings like the South Acton Congregational Church and Exchange Hall. They especially like the blend of historic elements and green space, which combine to create a unique scenic beauty.

Other strengths of South Acton that respondents mentioned include the Discovery Museum, small businesses like Erikson Grain Mill, the area's sewer access, and the mix of different housing types.

Short Answer Question 3: What are the greatest challenges facing South Acton?

When asked about the challenges facing South Acton, about 250 identified the area's traffic congestion. According to respondents, traffic is especially bad around the train station and at Kelley's Corner, as well as on Piper Road, Main Street, High Street, School Street, and Route 27. A number of people mentioned that the intersection of Route 27, Main Street, and School Street is dangerous due to a combination of traffic, visibility issues, and drivers who speed. Some stated that congestion is particularly an issue during peak travel hours, making it difficult to access the businesses in South Acton and causing people to avoid the area all together.

While some noted walkability as a strength in the previous question, approximately 130 respondents identified a lack of safety for pedestrians and cyclists as a challenge facing South Acton. In particular, they mentioned a lack of sidewalks other than on Main and Central Streets, making it unsafe for many to walk to the Commuter Rail station and Jones Playground.

Over 100 respondents discussed the general lack of businesses in South Acton as a challenge. There are very few commercial establishments to shop at, dine in, or otherwise visit. The businesses that are there are scattered throughout the district and not easy to walk between. Many of the commercial properties are either vacant or not well-maintained and they do not draw visitors in. About 25 respondents consider South Acton Village an eyesore and expressed a desire for more businesses to make South Acton a destination, not just a place that people drive through. A few respondents noted that concentrating denser housing in South Acton would contribute to the success of these business establishments and make it a neighborhood center.

There were a range of views about the value of denser housing in the area around the Commuter Rail station. Some see mixed-use and multifamily development as a major threat to South Acton and would prefer the area to maintain its single-family character. They feel that overdevelopment is contributing to the town's traffic problems and loss of open space.

At the same time, other respondents view this transit-accessible area as the right place for new development in Acton to occur. Written comments stated that mixed-use and multifamily housing would help reduce vehicle dependence and provide much needed housing for Acton’s seniors, young professionals, and others looking for smaller housing types. A number of respondents noted the high cost of housing and lack of Affordable Housing options as a challenge, with a few saying specifically stating that they see “Not-In-My-Back-Yard” (NIMBY) attitudes as impediments preventing Acton from becoming a more affordable and diverse community.

Other challenges that were identified include a lack of parking, sewer infrastructure throughout, and public transportation options within Acton. Also mentioned was the presence of sensitive natural environments like wetlands.

Planning for South Acton’s Future

The final questions in the survey asked respondents for their feedback on elements that new zoning in South Acton could regulate, including land uses, parking requirements, building aesthetics, and more. As respondents answered the questions, they were encouraged to think about what residents or visitors may want to see years in the future, even if it does not seem possible today due to infrastructure or market constraints.

Shown in **Figure 12**, respondents had a few key favorites when asked which commercial land uses they would like to have in South Acton.

Desired Commercial Land Uses

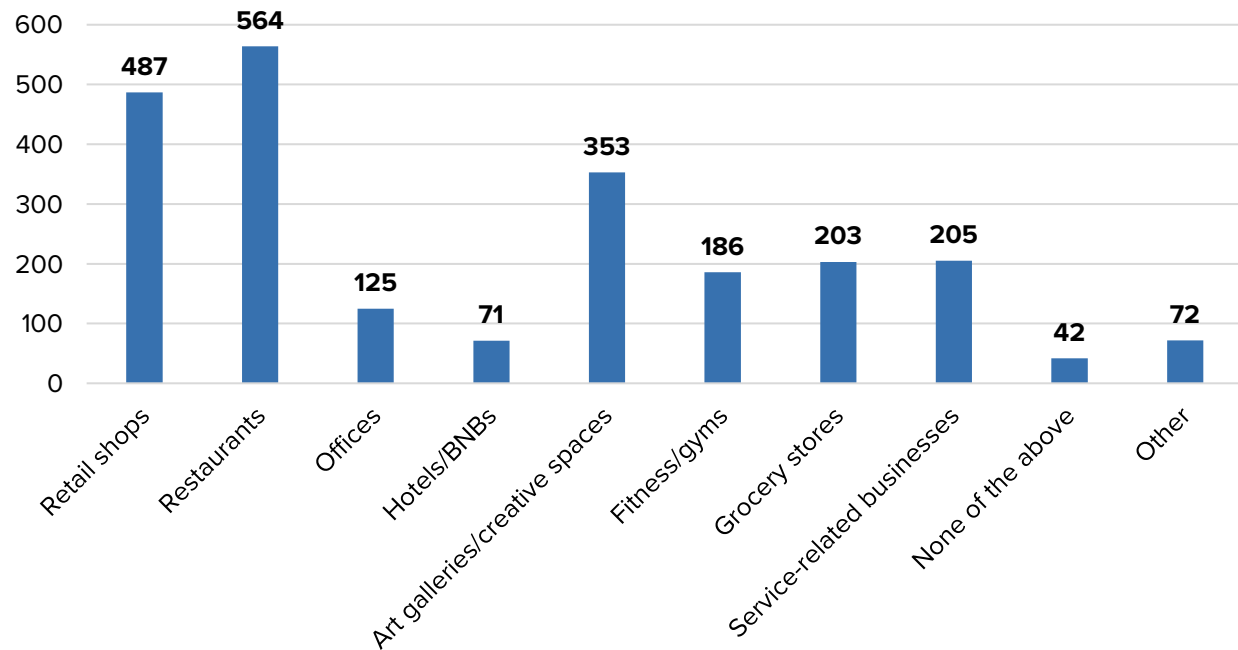


Figure 12: Which of the following commercial land uses would you like to have in South Acton? Select all that apply.

More than half of all 972 survey respondents selected restaurants (564) and retail shops (487) as desired commercial uses for South Acton. Art galleries/creative spaces were also selected by more than a third (353) of respondents. Service-related businesses, such as salons or dry cleaners (205) and grocery stores (203) received the next most votes. For those who selected “other” and left an open-ended response, many identified coffee shops as great to have. Some noted their opposition to the development of banks, which they feel would do little to contribute to the vibrancy of South Acton.

The next two questions in the survey asked about different types of housing. Respondents were first asked to comment on both the building type/style they would like to see in South Acton (**Figure 13**).

Preferred Housing Styles and Types for South Acton

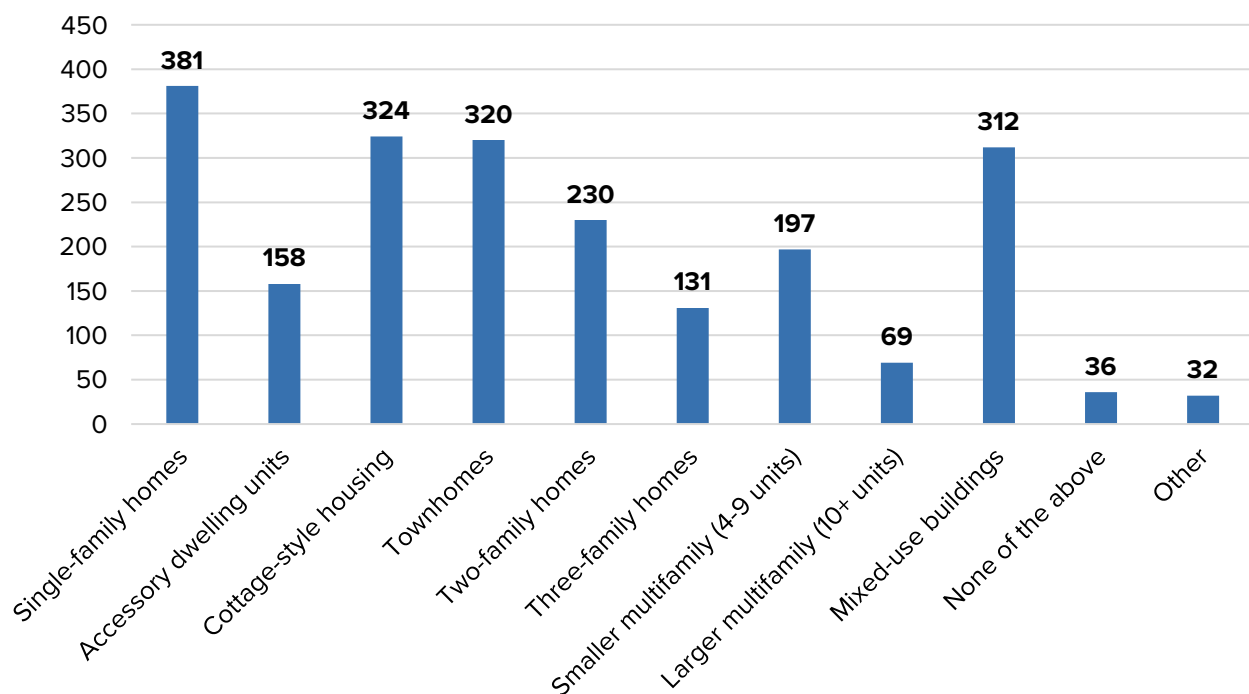


Figure 13: Which of the following housing types and styles would you like to have in South Acton? Select all that apply.

Survey-takers prioritized a variety of housing types for South Acton. The greatest portion of respondents selected single-family homes (381), followed by cottage-style housing where there are small detached homes close together (324), townhomes (320), and mixed-use buildings where commercial is mixed with residential (312). There were 36 respondents who wanted to see none of the housing options in South Acton. About half of those who selected “other” used it as an opportunity to explain their opposition to building additional housing for fear of increased traffic and overcrowding.

Respondents were then asked about the kind of new housing development that would meet the biggest demand in Acton in regard to households’ size, needs, and phase of life (**Figure 14**).

Respondents were also shown a map of the South Acton area and asked to pinpoint up to five areas of opportunity that the Town should explore. **Figure 16** is a heat map with all the locations that respondents pin-pointed. The most selected locations are on the red end of the color spectrum, with sparsely selected locations on the blue end. The locations in green are conservation or agriculturally protected land.

Areas of Opportunity for Exploration

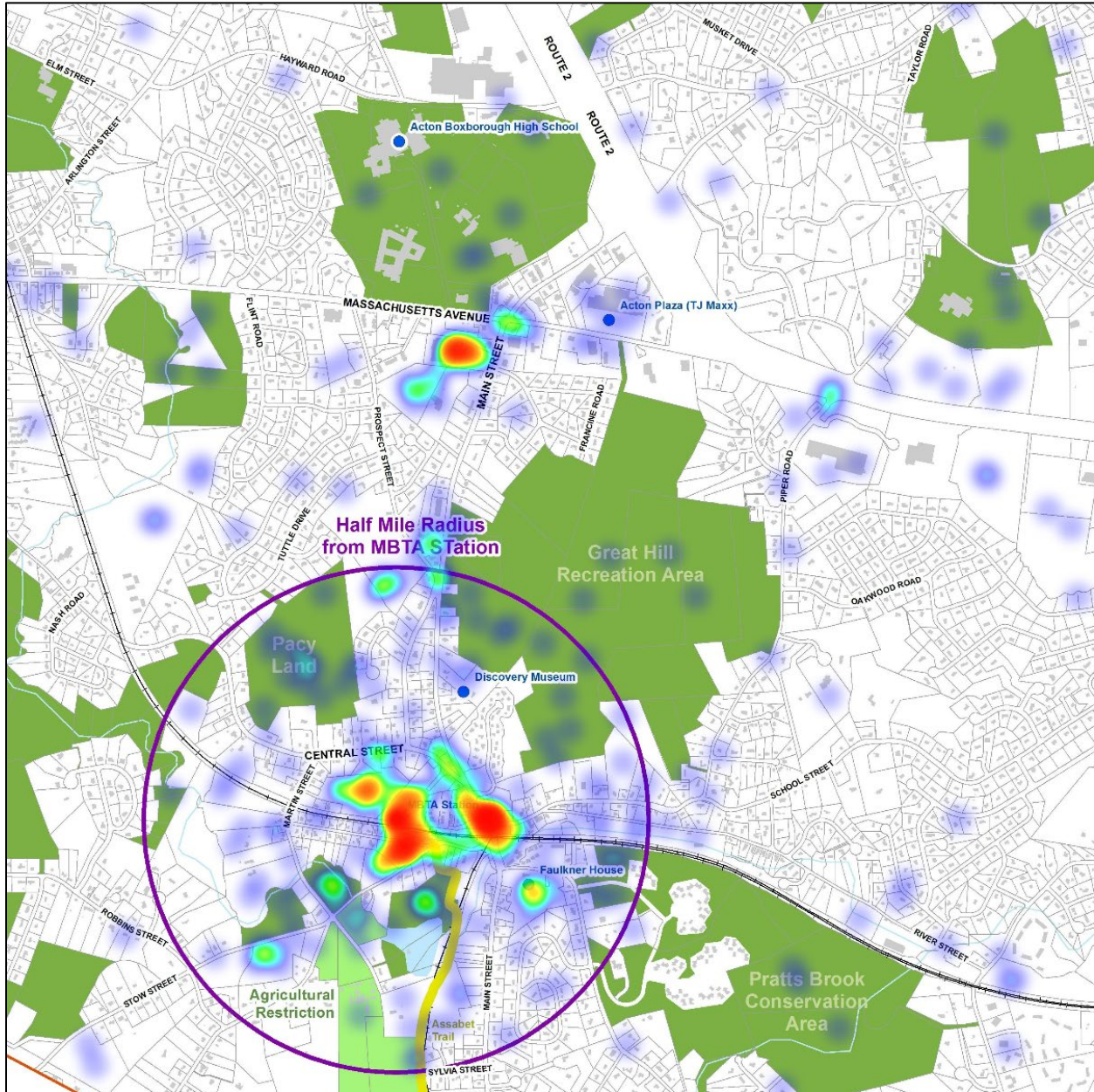


Figure 16: What are areas of opportunity that the Town and others should explore?

The most concentrated clusters of points were within a half-mile of the commuter rail station. They consist of the areas immediately north and south of the station platform, at the intersection of Main and School Streets, and the undeveloped land to the west of the

station's parking lot. Another concentrated cluster emerged at the site of the now vacant Kmart in the Kelley's Corner area. Three smaller clusters emerged on parcels near the Prospect and Main Street intersection.

The survey asked respondents to identify what new multifamily buildings at the core of South Acton should look like (**Figure 17**). For context, the following images were shown with the answer options to illustrate the building design styles.

- Buildings should look traditional and be compatible with South Acton's historic New England architecture:



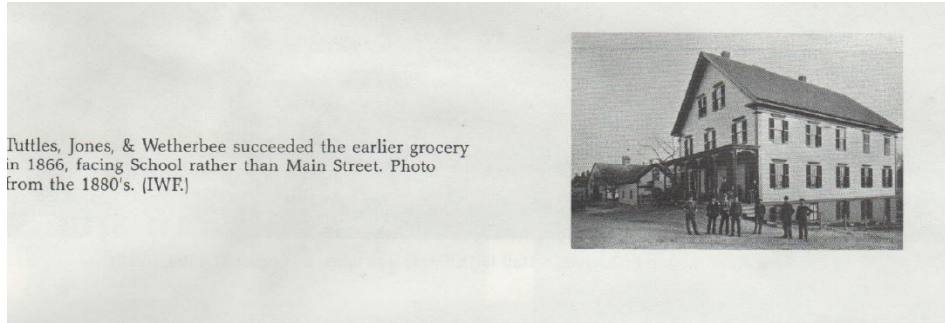
- Buildings should have a modern and contemporary look:



- Buildings should have a good mix of traditional and contemporary styles:



- Buildings should have a historic-industrial style that reflects South Acton's industrial history:



1890's photo of the Chadwick piano stool factory at 81 River Street. Factory was built in 1886, burned 1895. (IWF.)

- Building style is less important, what matters most is that the building is aesthetically pleasing and makes sense for the site
- Other (please specify)

Desired Look of New Multifamily Buildings

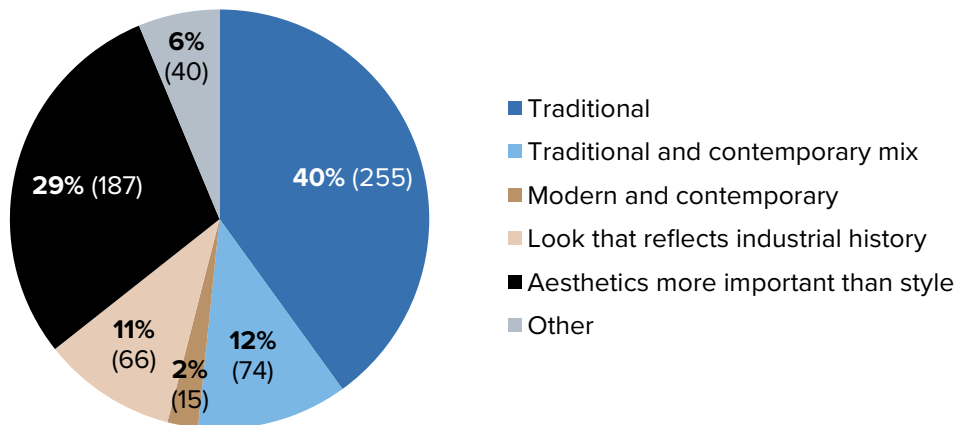


Figure 17: What should new multifamily buildings at the core of South Acton look like?

About 40% of respondents feel that buildings should look traditional and be compatible with South Acton’s historic New England architecture. Another 29% feel that building style is less important, and what matters most is that the building is aesthetically pleasing and makes sense for the site. Only 2% would want to see a modern and contemporary building in South Acton, though 12% would support a building with a good mix of traditional and contemporary styles.

The last question in the survey asked about priorities when balancing parking and pedestrian experience in new development (**Figure 18**).

Priorities for Parking Convenience vs. Walkability

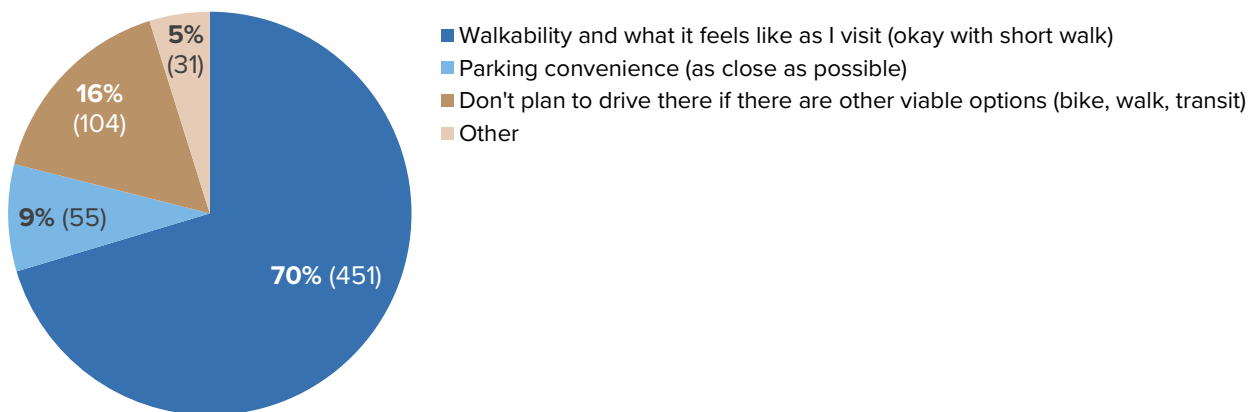


Figure 18: What are your priorities when balancing parking and pedestrian experience in new development?

The vast majority of respondents—approximately 70%—stated that they care most about walkability and what it feels like as they visit. They are okay with a short walk from where they park (less than 3 minutes). Another 16% of respondents stated that they don’t plan to drive there if there are other viable options such as walking, biking, or taking transit. A small portion (9%) care most about parking convenience; they would like to park close as possible to their destination, even if it means a less pleasant pedestrian experience.