

Community Questionnaire Results

Village of Empire 2025 Master Plan Update

Introduction

The Village of Empire facilitated a community questionnaire in July—August 2024 to inform their 2025 Master Plan update. The questionnaire was available electronically (Survey Monkey) and printed copies were available at the Village offices and library. In total, 355 people participated in the questionnaire. 300 took it online and 55 completed a paper survey.

This report summarizes the questionnaire feedback into major themes and provides recommendations for the Village to consider, based on the questionnaire results. Attached to this report is an appendix with all feedback provided verbatim.

How to Interpret this Report

Community questionnaires are a helpful tool to gauge the attitudes, goals, and values of a community, but they are but one tool in the Village of Empire’s toolbox as the Village updates its Master Plan. The Village must also consider community data, previous and current studies, planning best practices, Village capacity, local and regional context, and other forms of public input (listening events, meeting comments, etc.) as it charts a path forward for Empire via the Master Plan.

The questionnaire was not designed to be statistically valid, however, the relatively robust resident participant size as compared to the population of the Village of Empire means that readers can interpret the questionnaire results at a 95% confidence level (95% confident that if all Village residents had participated in the questionnaire, the results would vary within 5% of the questionnaire results).

This report summarizes the following questionnaire results:

- Demographics
- Reason for being in Empire
- Empire Today and in the Future
- Favorite Memory of Empire
- Engagement Trends
- Community Priorities
- Capital Improvement Priorities
- Open-ended Response Themes
- Responses Comparison by Age/Residency
- Recommendations

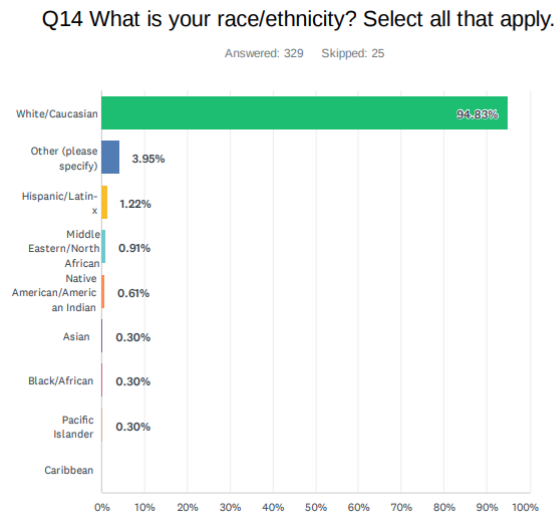
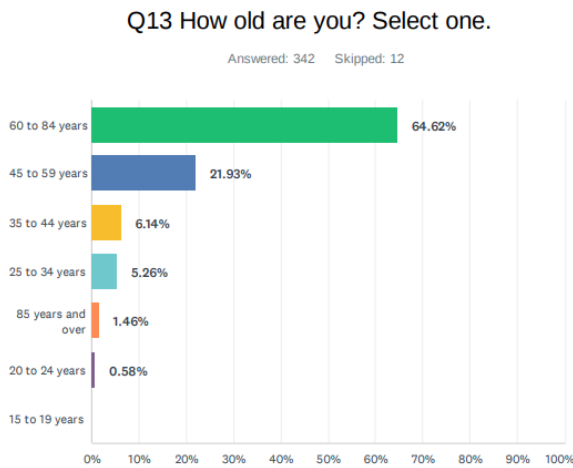
Demographics

Age

Nearly two-thirds of participants are 60-84 years old (65%). 22% of respondents are 45-59 years old. Per the 2020 Decennial Census, 60 to 84 years old represent 52% of the Village population, while 45 to 59 represent 15% of the Village population. This means that people over aged 45 years old are relatively overrepresented in the questionnaire (which is a typical trend in community survey engagement).

Race/Ethnicity

The majority of respondents identify as White/Caucasian (95%). This result is consistent with the overall race/ethnicity of the Village of Empire population; 94% identify as White/Caucasian (per the 2020 Decennial Census).



Resident, Visitor, or Property Owner?

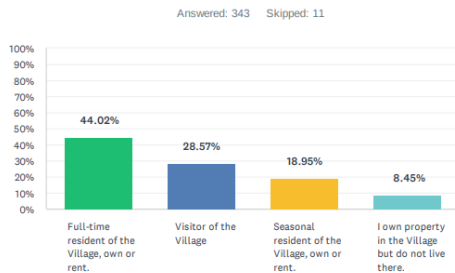
152 respondents (44%) are full-time residents of the Village. Another 65 (19%) respondents are seasonal residents of the Village, for a total of 216 residents who participated (both full-time and seasonal). 29% of respondents are visitors of the Village and 8% own property in the Village but do not live in the Village.

Employment Status

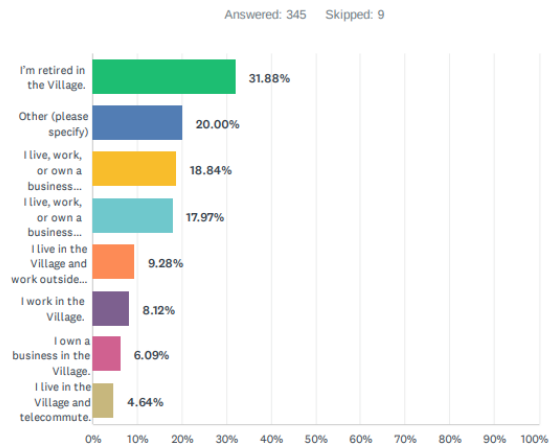
About one-third of respondents are retired (32%), with other respondents noting a variety of employment identities for themselves, as shown in the chart below. “Other” response themes included visitors, past or future resident of the Village, and resident or employee of the Northern Michigan region.

Appendix A

Q1 Which of the following best describes you? Select one.



Q2 Which of the following describes you? Select all that apply.



What brought you to Empire?

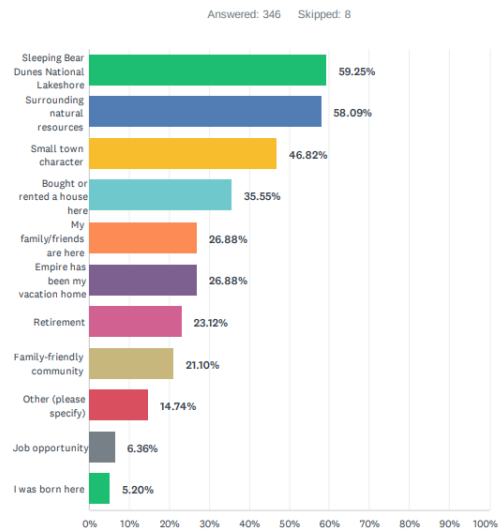
Respondents were asked to select what brought them to Empire initially. The most popular reasons were the Sleeping Bear National Park, natural resources generally, and Empire's small-town character.

Least popular reasons were "I was born here" and job opportunity. "Other" response themes expanded on the respondent's selection, noted a general love and appreciation for Empire, and noted a business or investment opportunity in Empire/the area.

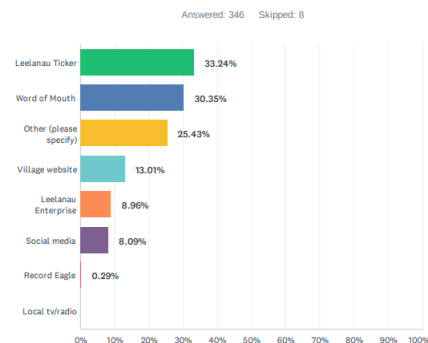
How did you find out about this questionnaire?

Respondents were asked to share how they learned of the questionnaire. This helps inform future Village communication channels for surveys like this and other community news. The most popular responses were the Leelanau Ticker (33%), word of mouth (30%), and "other" (25%). "Other" response themes noted the Village email, Glen Arbor Sun, posters/fliers around town, and community meetings.

Q3 What brought you to Empire? Select all that apply.



Q4 How did you find out about this questionnaire? Select all that apply.



Empire Today and in the Future

Respondents were asked to share words and phrases that come to mind when considering the Village of Empire today and in the future.

What words/phrases come to mind when you think of the Village of Empire today?



Positive/Optimistic Sentiments:

- **Appreciation for Beauty and Charm:** Many responses express love for Empire's natural beauty, quaint charm, and peaceful environment. Phrases like "beautiful," "quaint," "charming," and "peaceful" are frequently used, reflecting a strong affection for the village's aesthetics and atmosphere.
- **Community Pride:** Several responses highlight the village's friendly and welcoming nature, with mentions of a strong sense of community and safety. Phrases like "friendly," "home," and "caring people" indicate positive feelings towards the local community.
- **Love for the Quiet Off-Season:** Residents seem to enjoy the quieter, less busy times of the year, finding peace and tranquility in the village outside the tourist season.

Concerned/Apprehensive Sentiments:

- **Divisiveness and Resistance to Change:** A significant number of responses mention divisions within the community, especially regarding growth and development. Terms like "divided," "resistant to change," and "stuck in the past" suggest concerns about the village's ability to adapt to new circumstances.

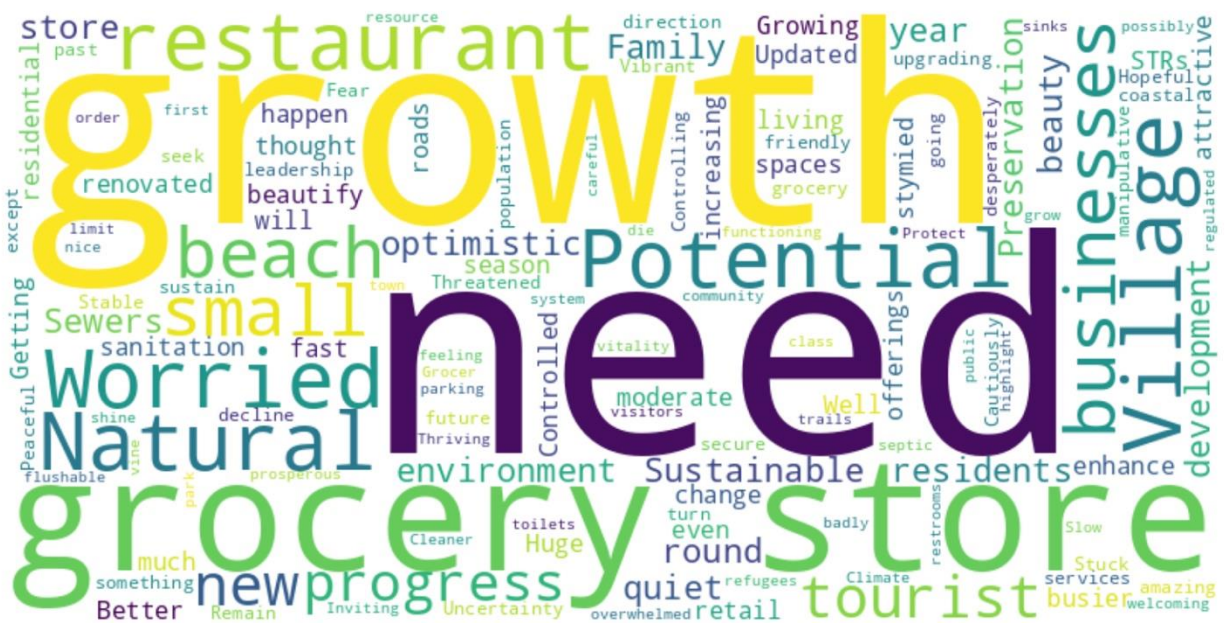
Appendix A

- **Worries About Governance and Management:** There is concern about the effectiveness of the village leadership, with terms like "mismanaged," "dysfunctional," and "lack of vision" appearing in several responses. This reflects a lack of confidence in the current direction of local governance.
- **Challenges with Infrastructure and Services:** Many responses point to issues with infrastructure, such as the need for better sanitation, a grocery store, and improved public spaces. There's a sense that the village is struggling to meet the needs of both residents and tourists.

Mixed Sentiments:

- **Tourism Impact:** Tourism is seen as both a positive and a negative influence. While it brings economic benefits and vibrancy during the summer, it also creates challenges such as overcrowding and strain on local resources. This leads to a mix of appreciation and frustration.
- **Potential for Growth:** Some responses express cautious optimism about the village's potential for growth, but this is often tempered by concerns about maintaining the village's character and avoiding overdevelopment.

What words/phrases come to mind when you think of the Village of Empire in the Future?



Positive Sentiments:

- **Optimism for Growth:** Many responses express excitement about the potential for new businesses, especially restaurants and a grocery store, and see these developments as opportunities for the village to thrive.

- **Hope for Thoughtful Development:** Some residents are hopeful that the village will grow in a way that maintains its charm while enhancing its infrastructure and amenities. There’s a desire for controlled, sustainable growth.
- **Community Spirit:** Several responses reflect a strong sense of community and a desire to keep the village friendly, welcoming, and vibrant.

Concerned and Apprehensive Sentiments:

- **Worries About Overdevelopment:** A significant number of responses express concern that the village may grow too quickly or in ways that could harm its character. There’s fear that Empire might lose its quaint, peaceful nature due to commercialization and the influence of wealthier newcomers. There's worry about the impact of short-term rentals and increasing tourism.
- **Resistance to Change:** Some residents are apprehensive about changes, especially those that might alter the village's traditional, small-town feel.
- **Uncertainty:** Many responses convey uncertainty about the village's future, reflecting concerns about infrastructure, housing affordability, and the direction of leadership.

Favorite Memory of Empire

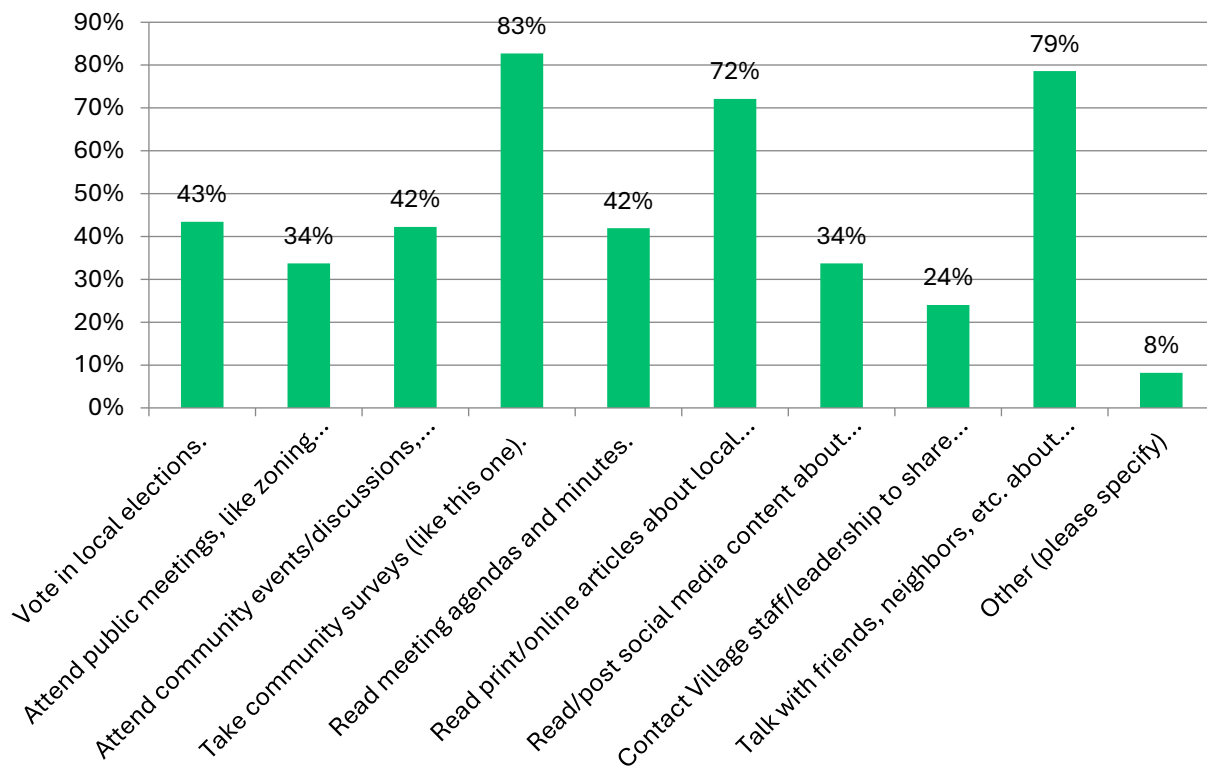
Respondents were asked to share their favorite memory in Empire. Responses often centered around the natural beauty of the area, particularly the beaches, lakes, and stunning sunsets. Many recall spending time with family and friends, whether it was enjoying quiet moments during the off-season, participating in local festivals, or gathering at the beach. The sense of community is strong, with residents and visitors alike appreciating the small-town charm, friendly locals, and the unique experiences Empire offers, from hiking the Sleeping Bear Dunes to enjoying the peacefulness of a walk along the shoreline.



Local Government Engagement

Respondents were asked to share all the ways they currently engage in local government. The most selected responses included taking community surveys (83%), talking with friends and neighbors (79%), and reading articles about local news (72%). “Other” response themes included volunteering and participating on a committee or board.

How do you currently engage with the Village of Empire local government process? Select all that apply.



Respondents were then asked to provide their ideas for how the Village of Empire could be more engaging or welcoming.

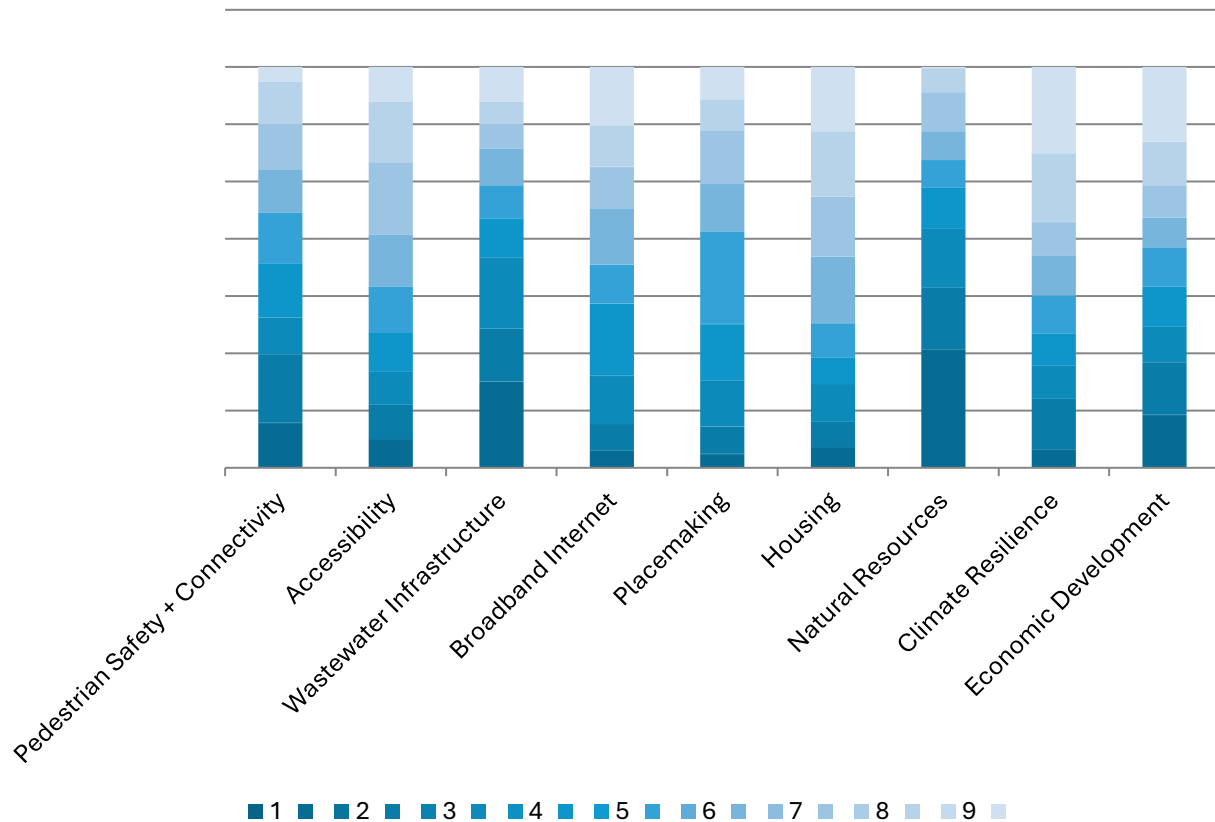
Ideas shared focused on making local government more open and accessible, connected to the community, and focused on community needs.

1. Make information easier to access online.
2. Improve community connection with residents.
3. Better meeting behavior at public meetings.
4. Focus on key community needs and priorities.
5. Encourage wider range of community members to participate.

Community Priorities

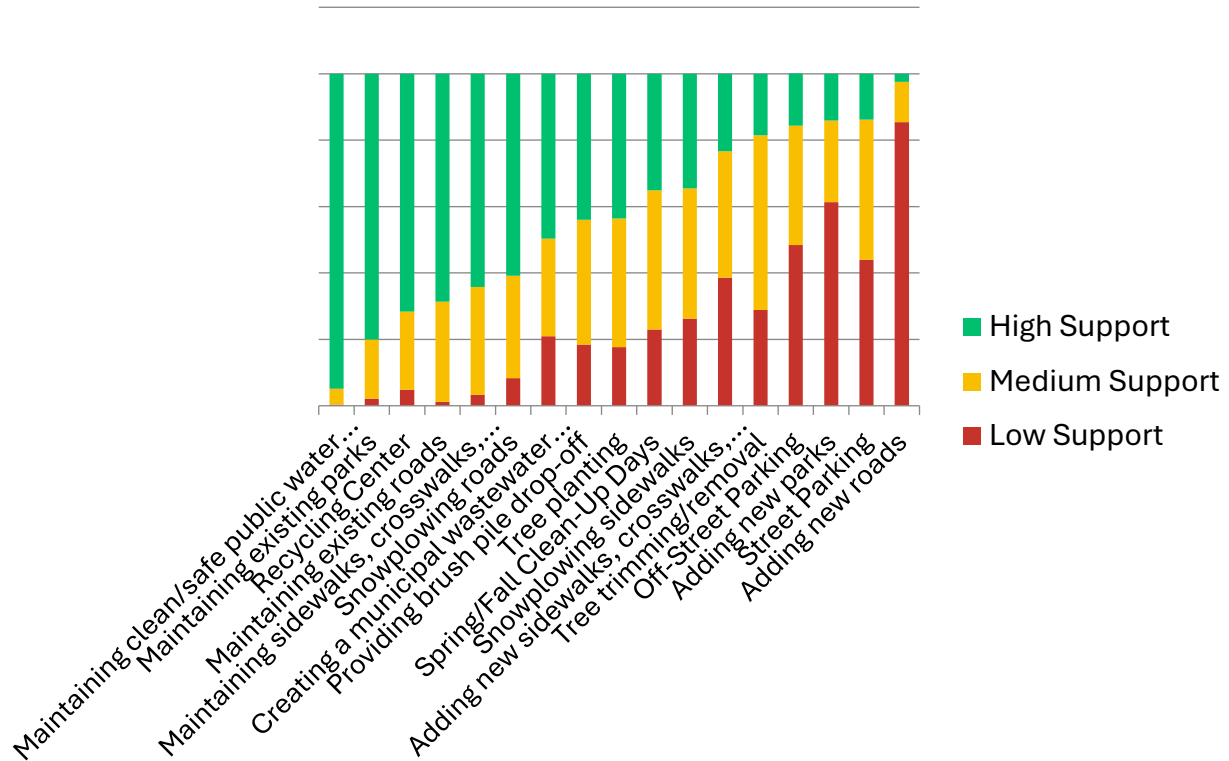
Respondents were asked to rank a list of nine topics from highest to lowest priority for the Village of Empire. This question received some critical feedback, with several respondents noting that they felt forced to prioritize items they didn't care about or that everything was important and difficult to prioritize one topic over another. Respondents also noted that they had a difficult time distinguishing between pedestrian safety/connectivity and accessibility.

Below are the overall results. Highest priority is shown in dark blue and lowest priority is shown in light blue. Overall, natural resources, wastewater infrastructure, economic development, and pedestrian safety/connectivity were prioritized highest. Climate resilience and housing were prioritized lowest.



Capital Improvement Priorities

Respondents were asked to provide their level of support (high, medium, or low) for a variety of capital improvement projects in the Village, some already in-process/ongoing and some new/proposed ideas.



Overall, respondents demonstrated high support for maintenance, recycling, and snowplowing activities and low support for adding new infrastructure, such as roads, parks, and parking. The exception to this is creating a municipal wastewater system, which received a relatively high amount of medium-high support.

Data Comparison by Age and Residency

When comparing questionnaire responses by age and residency, **response themes do not change significantly.** All ages indicated similar levels of support for capital improvement activities and similar prioritization of topics. Pedestrian safety and connectivity was prioritized slightly higher than economic development by respondents 60 years and older, and the reverse was true for respondents under 60 years old, but both topics were relatively high priority.

Both residents and non-residents indicate similar levels of support for capital improvement activities and similar prioritization of topics. Economic development was prioritized slightly higher by resident respondents than non-resident respondents, but not significantly.

Anything else to share?

The last question of the survey gave respondents the opportunity to note any ideas, comments, or questions. The most repeated themes shared here included:

- Need for local amenities (especially a grocery store)
- Concern about overdevelopment/overtourism
- Concern with short-term rentals
- Need for safer pedestrian infrastructure
- Distrust in Village governance
- Desire for natural environmental and small-town/historic aesthetic preservation

Recommendations

Based on the questionnaire responses, below are a series of recommendations for the Village of Empire to consider in the Master Plan update. These are draft recommendations, and could be modified based on other key inputs such as community data, previous and current studies, planning best practices, Village capacity, local and regional context, and other forms of public input (listening events, meeting comments, etc.).

- **Preserve Small-Town Character by Focusing on Thoughtful Growth.** Update zoning and land-use policies to control the scale and type of development, ensuring it aligns with the village's character. Secure land for critical infrastructure, like a future wastewater system.
- **Develop a Plan for Local Amenities:** Attract a small, independent grocery store to the village by exploring incentives, partnerships, or community-supported models.
- **Regulate Short-Term Rentals:** Implement or update regulations on short-term rentals, including possible caps, licensing, and enforcement measures.
- **Enhance Infrastructure and Public Safety:** Install or improve sidewalks and crosswalks, particularly in high-traffic areas, and reevaluate traffic patterns, especially near the post office.
- **Improve Communication and Transparency:** Regularly reference and utilize the Master Plan and other guiding documents in decision-making, and increase transparency by making council discussions and survey results more easily accessible online.
- **Address Environmental and Aesthetic Concerns: Develop** and enforce policies to manage blighted structures and promote environmentally friendly practices, such as dark-sky lighting and native plantings.
- **Foster Community Engagement:** Continue holding regular community meetings and events, and develop volunteer-driven initiatives that involve residents in beautification and community-building projects.