

**TOWN OF VALDESE
TOWN COUNCIL STRATEGIC PLAN MEETING
THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 15, 2024, 6:00 P.M.**

The Town of Valdese Town Council met on Thursday, February 15, 2024, at 6:00 p.m. for the Council strategic planning session, led by the WPCOG. Members of the Council met at the Old Rock School, Waldensian Room, 400 Main St. W, Valdese, North Carolina. The following were present: Mayor Charles Watts, Mayor Pro Tem Gary Ogle, Councilwoman Rexanna Lowman, and Councilman Glenn Harvey. Also present were Interim Town Manager Bryan Steen, Town Clerk Jessica Lail, WPCOG Executive Director Anthony W. Starr, WPCOG Director of Community & Regional Planning Alison Adams, and WPCOG Staff.

Absent: Councilwoman Heather Ward, Councilman Paul Mears

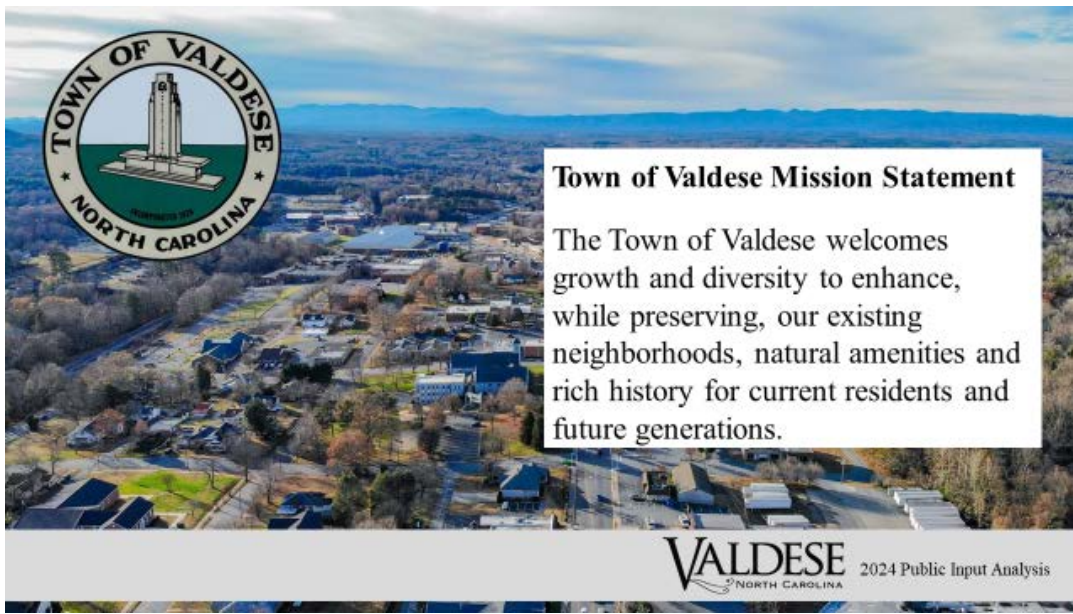
A quorum was present, but no action was planned.

At 6:00 p.m., Mayor Watts welcomed Council and thanked the WPCOG staff for all their hard work.

REVIEW OF PLANNING PROCESS AND GROUND RULES WPCOG Executive Director Anthony Starr went over the agenda for the night's meeting and the ground rules. Ground Rules: 1. Respect each other, 2. Only one person speaks at a time, 3. Listen for understanding, 4. Disagreement about issues is inevitable, attack the problem, not the person, 5. Speak for yourself and from your own experience, 6. Don't repeat the answers of others when listing ideas/issues, 7. Share "air time" as a group, keep comments as brief as possible, 8. Don't get offended if I cut you off, 9. Avoid distracting the group with side conversations, 10. Each person has equal say at this meeting, 11. Meeting time will be limited to about 8:40pm today for this planning session.

OVERVIEW OF PUBLIC INPUT RESULTS (INCLUDES RANKING EXERCISE)

- A. WPCOG Community & Regional Planning Director Alison Adams provided the following presentation showing the results from the surveys and public input meetings:



PURPOSE

The Town of Valdese Council requested Western Piedmont Council of Governments (WPFCOG) to perform a public input assessment to include - public forums, surveys, and data collection to obtain public input. The means of outreach included mailings, internet outreach, and group meetings to analyze the public's opinion of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT).

The Council finds the need to address public ideas and concerns as they move forward with a future action plan, fiscal year budget, and capital improvements.



Public Input Meeting

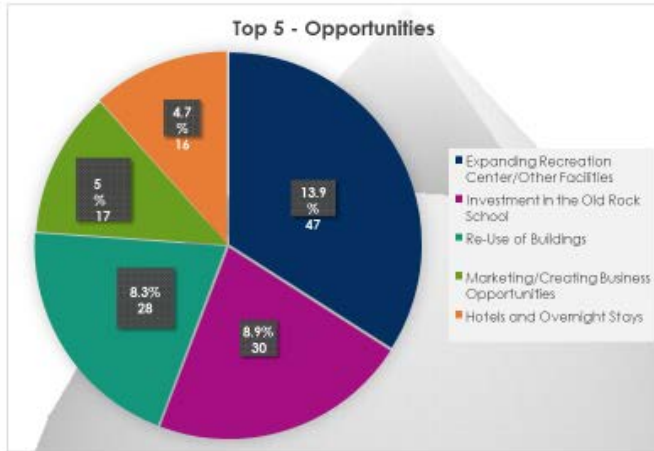
- Meetings held on January 17th and 24th at the Old Rock School.
- 90 people signed-in
- Participants participated in a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) exercise.
- Participants were encouraged to fill out the public input survey either digitally or the one received in the mail.
- Each of the SWOT results were broken down by percent of votes within each category to identify common themes.



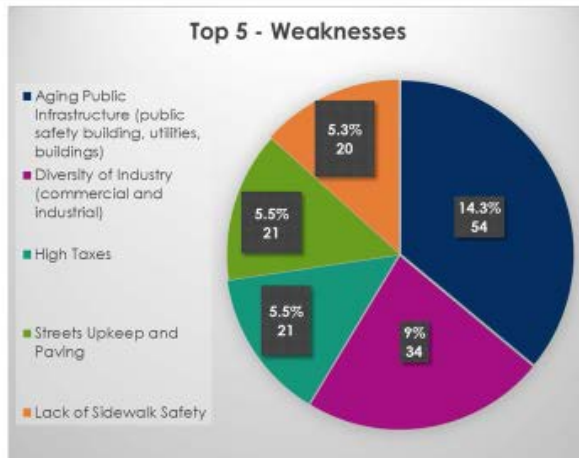
Public Input Meeting Results



Public Input Meeting Results



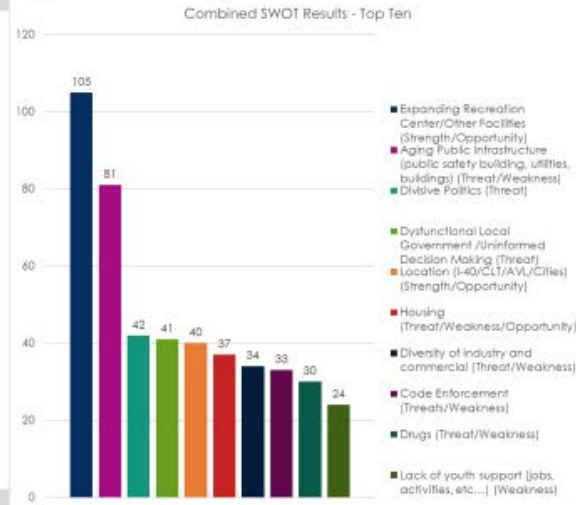
Public Input Meeting Results



Public Input Meeting Results



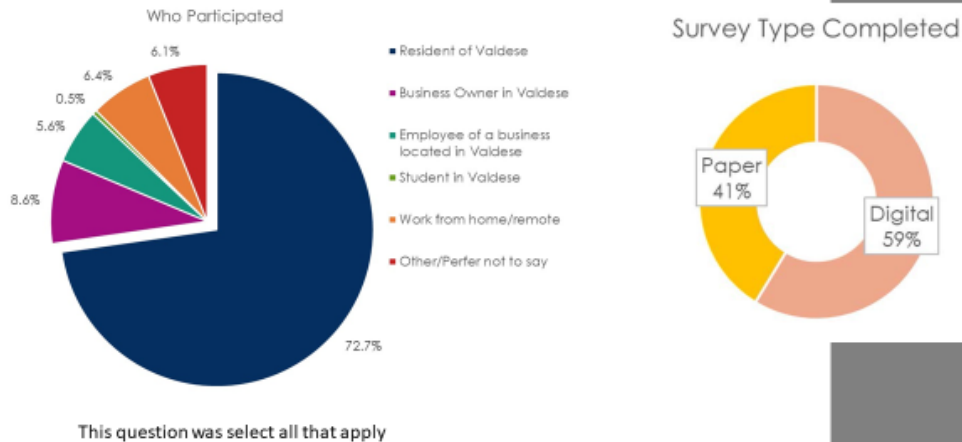
Public Input Meeting Results



Public Input Survey Results

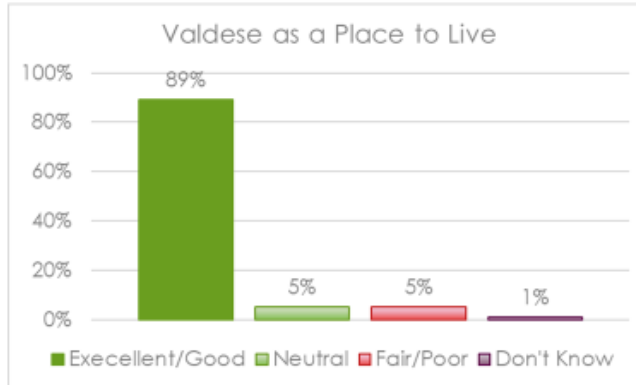
- Both a digital survey and a paper survey were administered to obtain feedback.
- 1,915 paper surveys were sent and 313 were received providing for a 16.3% response rate.
- Total of 218 digital surveys were completed. The total number of responses both digital and paper were 531.
- A total of 12 questions were asked of the participants – 9 rating scale questions and three open-ended questions.
- Results - comparisons from the paper to digital survey results were very similar. Top 3 to 4 responses were consistent between the two survey types.
- Analyzing the data – paired together the positives (excellent/good), the negatives (Fair/Poor), neutral and Don't know were analyzed individually.
- Written explanations were analyzed with AI technology to create a summarized consensus of the comments received.

Public Input Survey – Who Participated



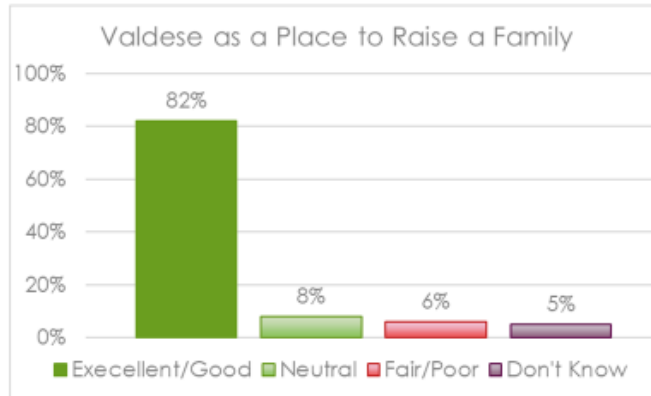
Public Input Survey – Question 1

How would you rate Valdese on the following?



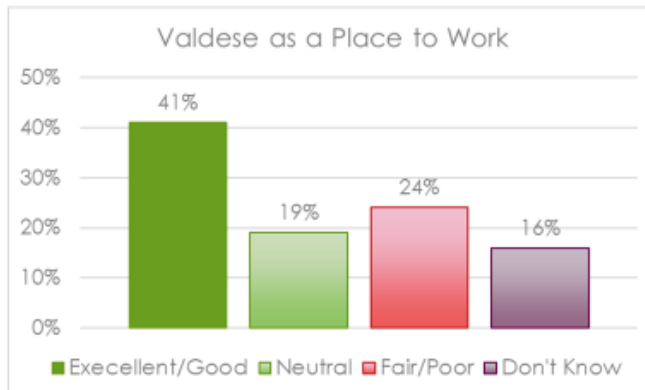
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Public Input Survey – Question 1

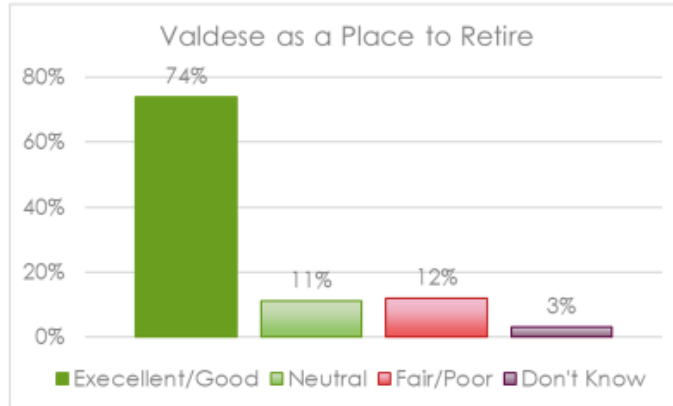
How would you rate Valdese on the following?



- Not all residence work or own a business in Valdese.
- Still a majority positive, but a higher distribution in fair/poor

Public Input Survey – Question 1

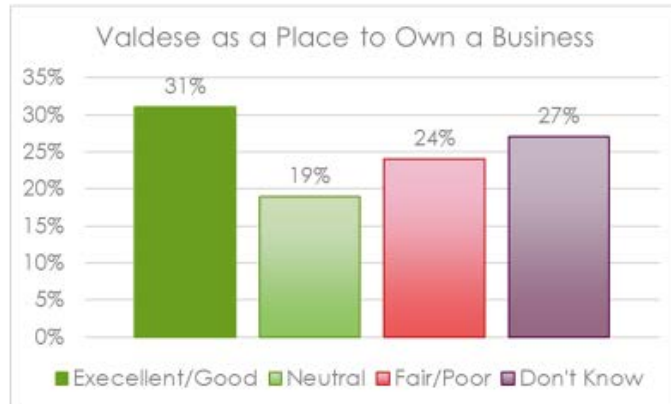
How would you rate Valdese on the following?



- 3% Don't know – imply majority of responses are retirees

Public Input Survey – Question 1

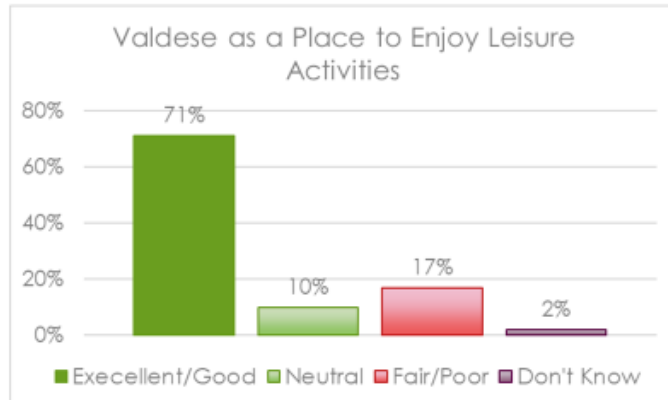
How would you rate Valdese on the following?



- Not all residence work or own a business in Valdese.
- Even distribution of answers.

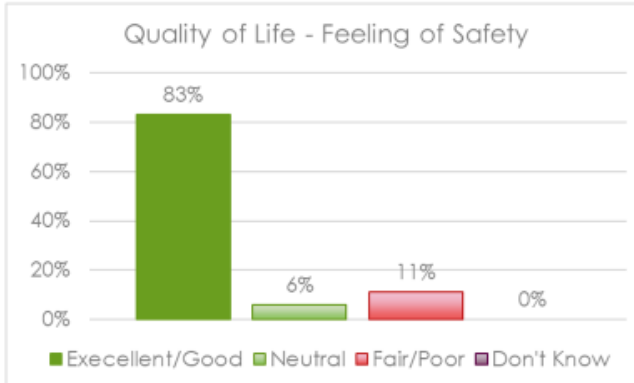
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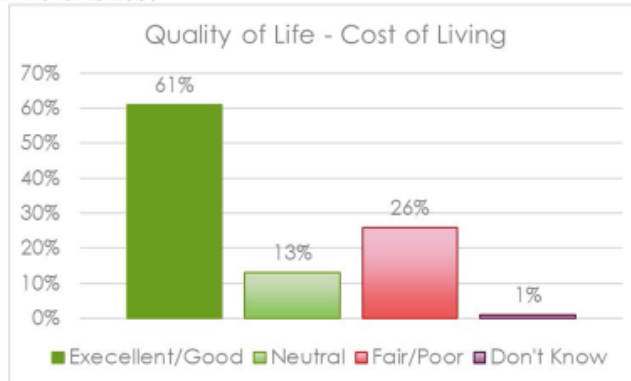
Public Input Survey – Question 2

How would you rate Valdese on the following Quality of Life Characteristics?



Public Input Survey – Question 2

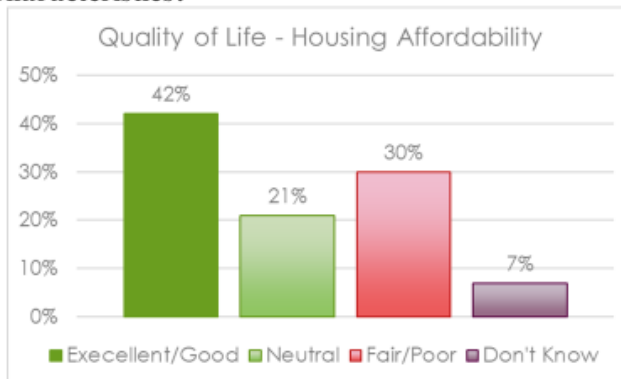
How would you rate Valdese on the following Quality of Life Characteristics?



- Indicates that some participants think cost of living is too high
- 74% are positive/neutral

Public Input Survey – Question 2

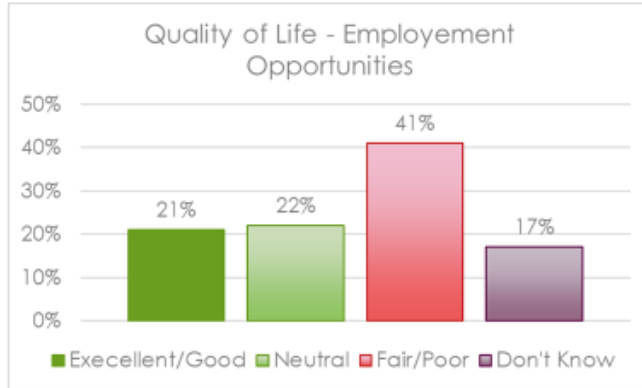
How would you rate Valdese on the following Quality of Life Characteristics?



- Indicates that some participants think housing is unaffordable; however, this is a nationwide issue and not Valdese specific
- 63% are Positive/Neutral

Public Input Survey – Question 2

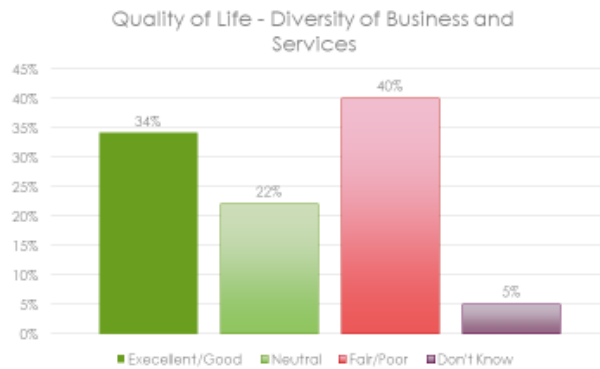
How would you rate Valdese on the following Quality of Life Characteristics?



- Indicates that participants can't find work in Town and are leaving to find a job.
- 17% - "Don't Know" are students, retirees and/or unemployed
- 43% Positive/Neutral and 41% Fair/Poor

Public Input Survey – Question 2

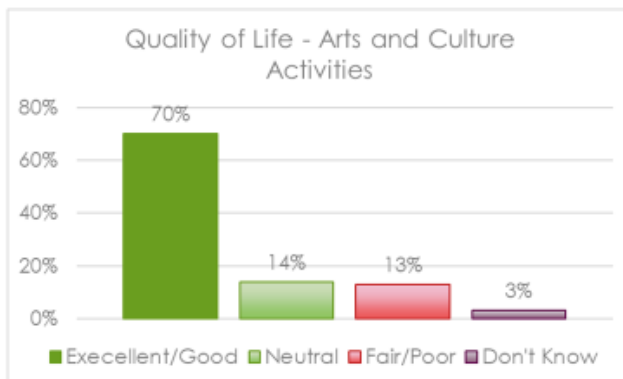
How would you rate Valdese on the following Quality of Life Characteristics?



- Indicates that participants are leaving town to spend money.
- Tax base and services are not diversified.
- 56% Positive/Neutral and 41% Fair/Poor

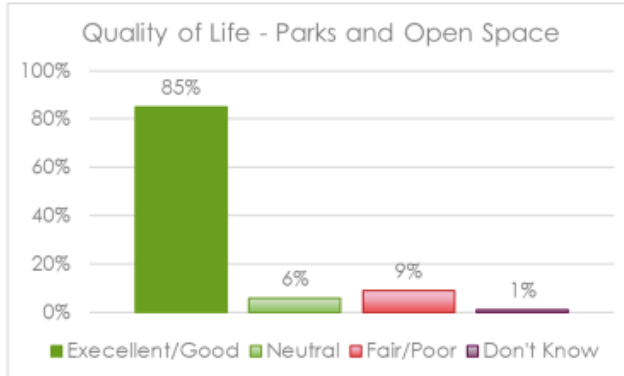
Public Input Survey – Question 2

How would you rate Valdese on the following Quality of Life Characteristics?



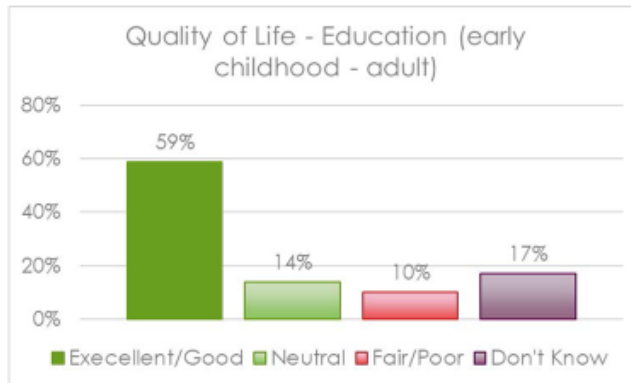
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Public Input Survey – Question 2

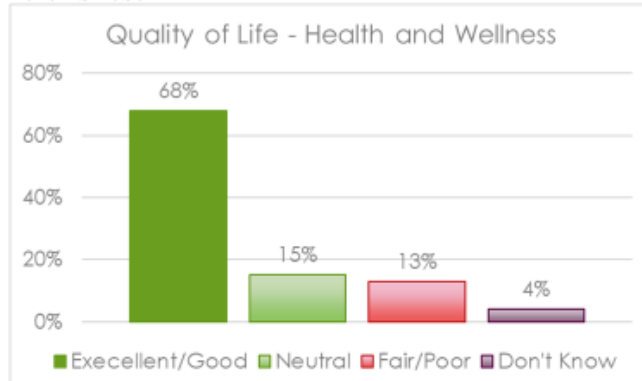
How would you rate Valdese on the following Quality of Life Characteristics?



- 17% Don't know – imply lack of families with children or retirees.

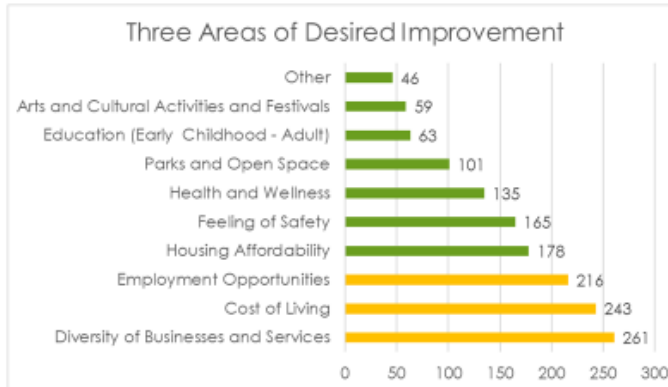
Public Input Survey – Question 2

How would you rate Valdese on the following Quality of Life Characteristics?



Public Input Survey – Question 3

From the list below, what are the top three quality of life characteristics that you would like to see improved upon?



Public Input Survey – Question 4

Briefly explain why you selected your three responses above:

Public Safety: A strong police presence is essential for community safety, yet there are concerns about the effectiveness of law enforcement and the dispatch system. Incidents the local criminal justice system's challenges for systemic improvements, to ensure safety and justice.

Health, Wellness, and Quality of Life: The lack of local health providers and the desire for more inclusive recreational and cultural activities point to significant gaps in wellness and quality of life. Community feedback emphasizes the importance of accessible health services, diverse, and inclusive activities for all residents.

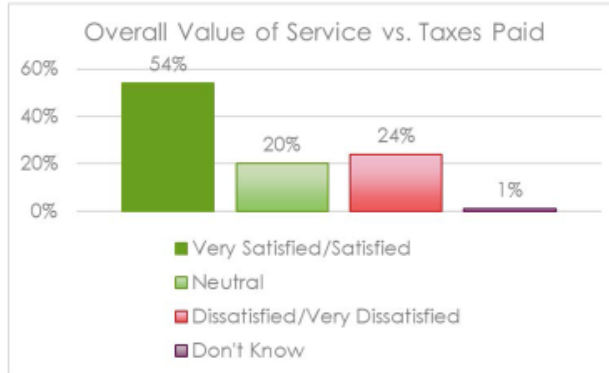
Public Input Survey – Question 4

Briefly explain why you selected your three responses above (continued...)

- **Economic Development and Employment:** The community calls for new businesses to fill vacant buildings and create jobs, aiming for a diverse local economy that reduces dependency on adjacent towns. There's also a focus on holistic economic development, incorporating affordable housing and diverse retail options to support local needs.
- **Infrastructure and Services:** Rising taxes, housing costs, and the cost of living are major concerns. There's a call for more efficient emergency services and improvements in community facilities, reflecting a demand for better value from local services and a more sustainable living environment.

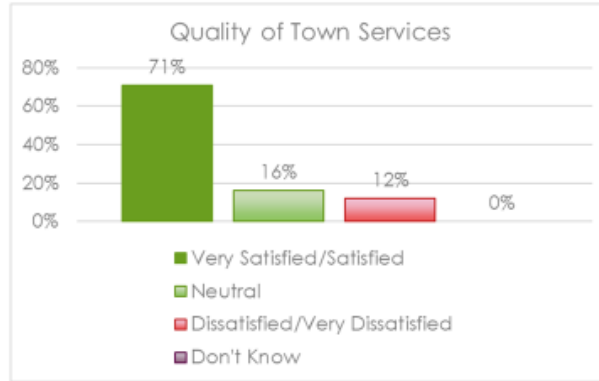
Public Input Survey – Question 5

How would you rate your satisfaction on the following governance and engagement indicators?



Public Input Survey – Question 5

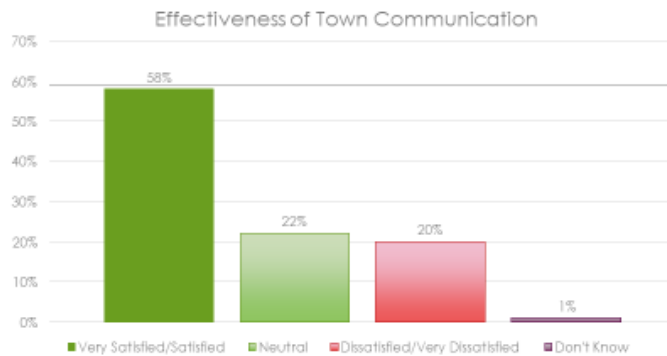
How would you rate your satisfaction on the following governance and engagement indicators?



• 71% of participants are satisfied.

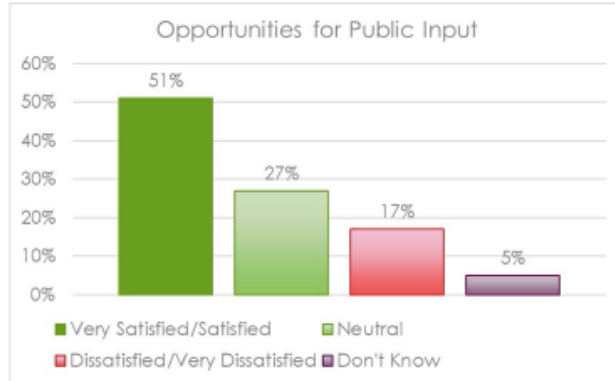
Public Input Survey – Question 5

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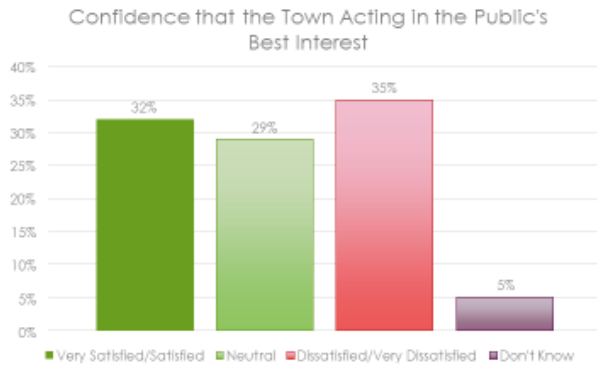
Public Input Survey – Question 5

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Public Input Survey – Question 5

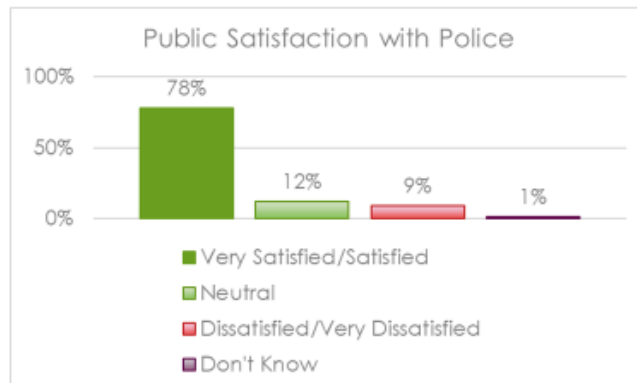
How would you rate your satisfaction on the following governance and engagement indicators?



- 29% neutral – unsure of future of Valdese
- 32% are satisfied
- 35% are representative of divisive politics

Public Input Survey – Question 6

How would you rate your satisfaction with the following services or amenities provided?



Public Input Survey – Question 6

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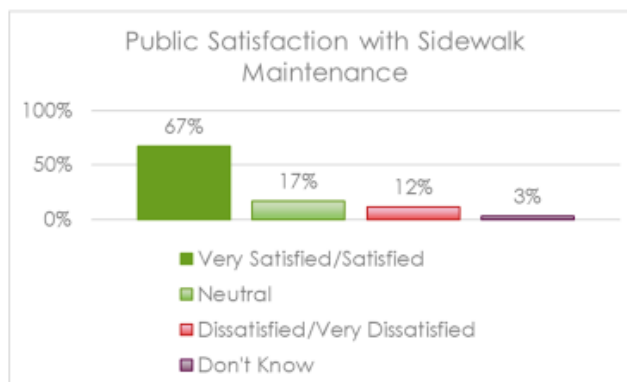
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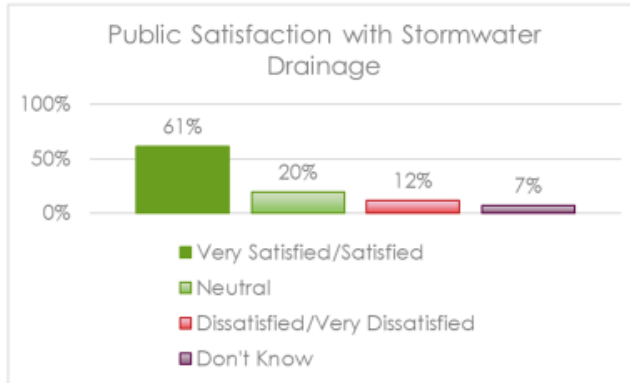
Public Input Survey – Question 6

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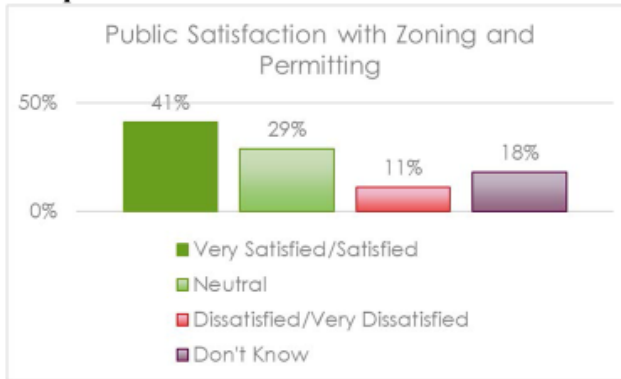
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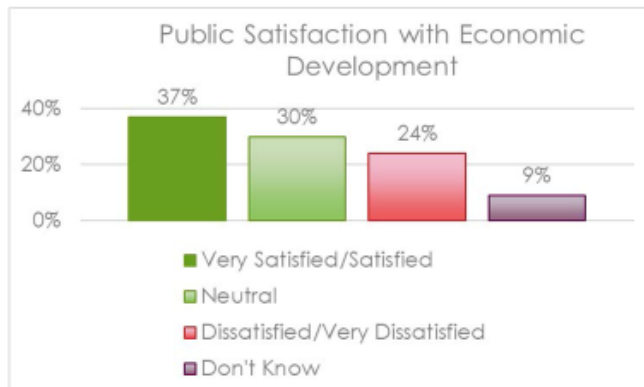
How would you rate your satisfaction with the following services or amenities provided?



- 18% of participants don't engage with this department and its corresponding services.

Public Input Survey – Question 6

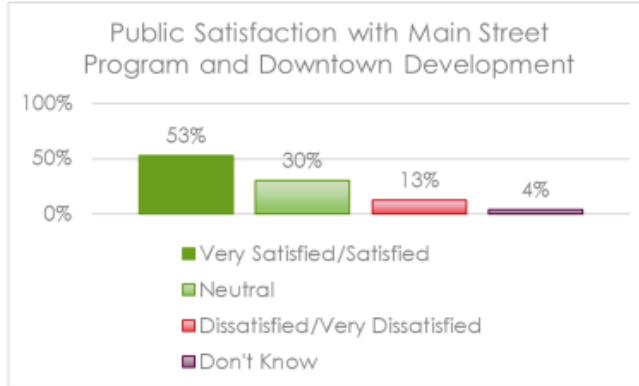
How would you rate your satisfaction with the following services or amenities provided?



- No definition of economic development provided – could mean the following:
- Industrial buildings
- Diversity of commercial business
- Diversity of Workforce
- Recruiting of large businesses
- More in-depth study needed

Public Input Survey – Question 6

How would you rate your satisfaction with the following services or amenities provided?



Public Input Survey – Question 6

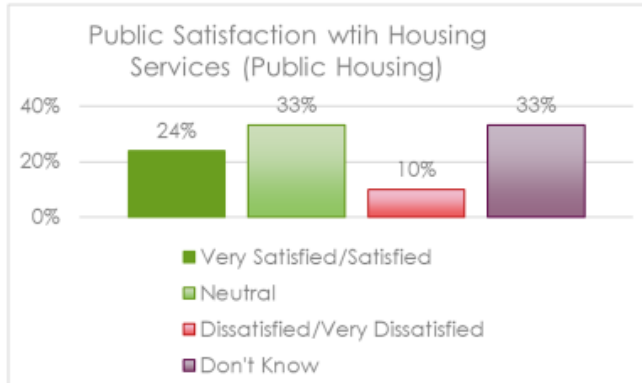
How would you rate your satisfaction with the following services or amenities provided?



- 30% “Don’t Know” – participant doesn’t have a small business or is not familiar with programs offered.
- Resource Inventory and public education opportunity.

Public Input Survey – Question 6

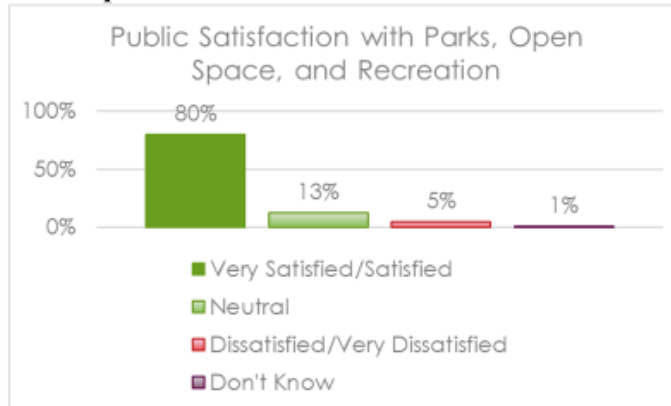
How would you rate your satisfaction with the following services or amenities provided?



- 33% “Don’t Know” – participant don’t rely on public housing.
- Lower negative responses to topic of public housing

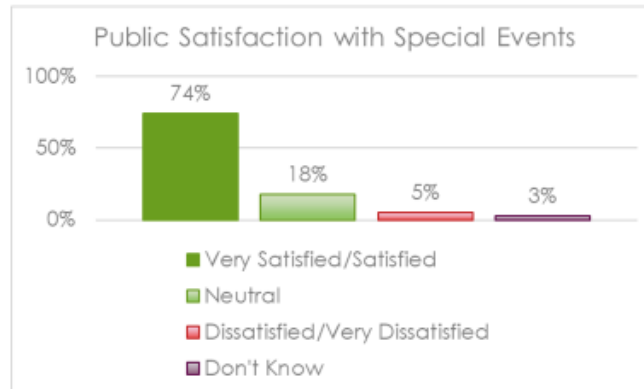
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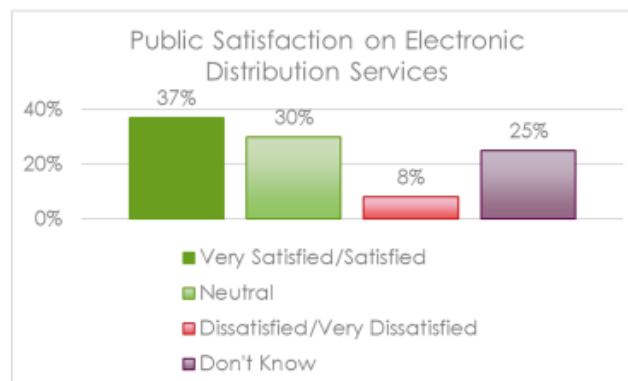
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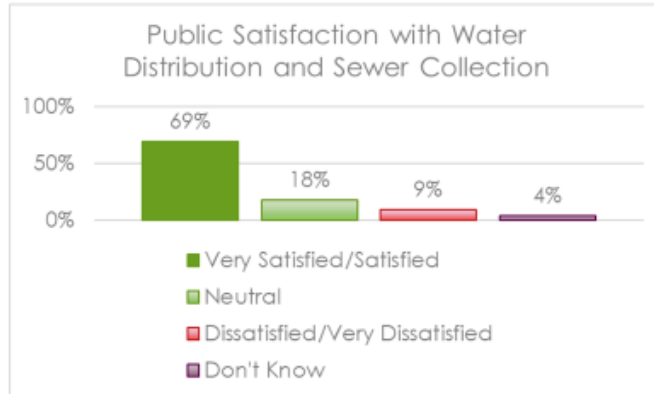
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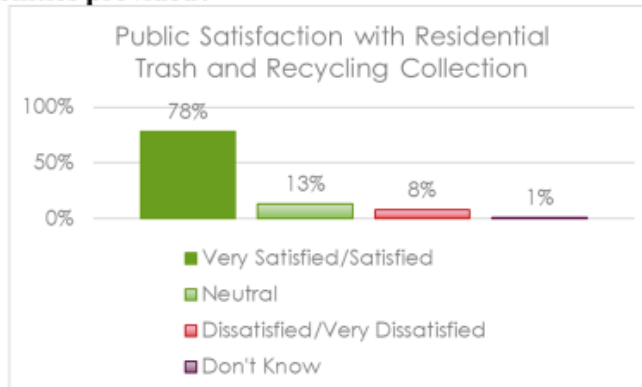
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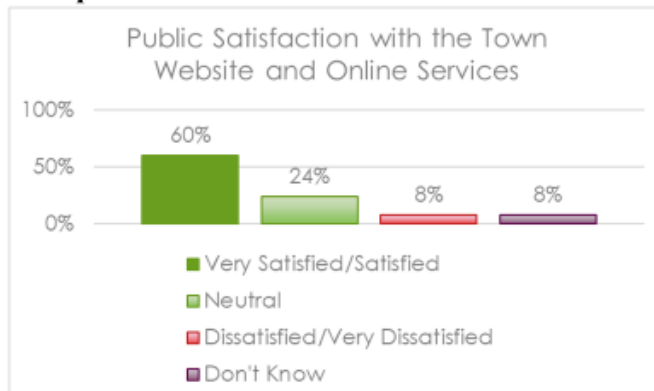
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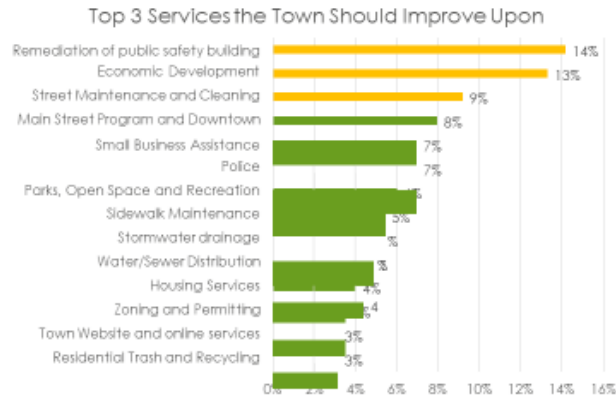
Public Input Survey – Question 6

How would you rate your satisfaction with the following services or amenities provided?



Public Input Survey – Question 7

From the list below, what are the top three services that the Town should improve?



Public Input Survey – Question 8

Briefly explain why you selected your three responses above in the space below?

- **Public Safety and Infrastructure:** There is an urgent call for new facilities for police and fire departments, highlighting the inadequacy of current buildings. Infrastructure concerns extend to sidewalk and street repairs, stormwater drainage, and water quality and pressure, emphasizing the need for comprehensive improvements.
- **Economic and Business Development:** Residents advocate for more diverse business opportunities, including food and beverage options, small businesses, and industrial jobs. The necessity of a vibrant downtown and effective economic strategies are needed to retain visitors and provide diverse shopping and entertainment options.

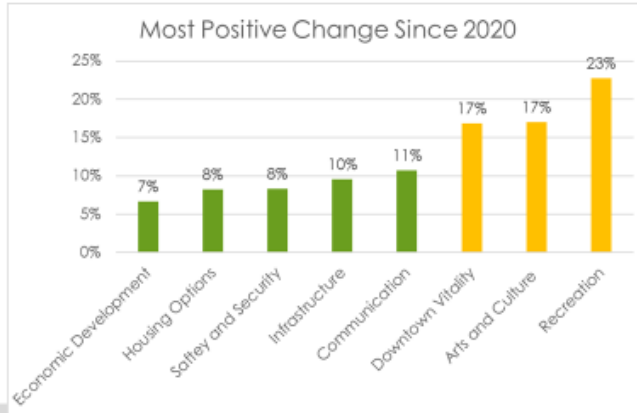
Public Input Survey – Question 8

Briefly explain why you selected your three responses above in the space below?

- **Community Services and Quality of Life:** Feedback praises parks and recreational facilities while suggesting expansions and improvements like the year-round operation of the swimming pool. Addressing safety through increased police presence and tackling the drug and homelessness issues is crucial for enhancing community wellbeing.
- **Environmental and Aesthetic Concerns:** A call for improved maintenance of public spaces, trash cleanup, and enforcement of zoning and maintenance codes to enhance the town's aesthetic appeal. This includes better management of environmental resources.

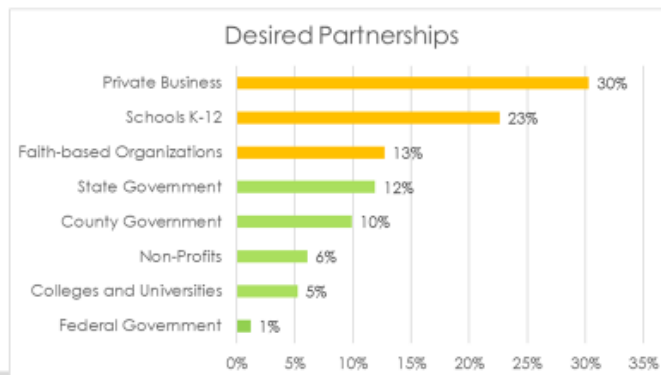
Public Input Survey – Question 9

Of the Town’s focus areas listed below, select the four areas where you’ve seen the most positive change since 2020.



Public Input Survey – Question 10

Partnerships are essential for continuing to move Valdese forward. Of the groups listed below, which is the most important for the Town to partner in the future?



Public Input Survey – Question 11

Please use the space below to share any feedback on anything related to town services, quality of life and the future of Valdese that we did not ask you in this survey.

- **Governance and Trust in Leadership:** Significant concerns about the town council and leadership have been raised, including issues related to transparency and the impact of political division. Residents express a loss of confidence in decisions made, calling for greater alignment with the community's best interests.
- **Public Services and Infrastructure:** There's a strong call for improvements in public safety facilities, road and sidewalk conditions, and the hiring of a permanent town manager. Residents emphasize the necessity of enhancing public infrastructure to meet community needs.

Public Input Survey – Question 11

Please use the space below to share any feedback on anything related to town services, quality of life and the future of Valdese that we did not ask you in this survey.

- **Community and Quality of Life:** Feedback highlights the importance of enhancing recreational facilities, addressing social issues like drugs and homelessness, and fostering a more cohesive community feeling to improve overall quality of life.
- **Economic and Development Concerns:** Residents call for more job opportunities and local business growth, including the diversification of entertainment and shopping options, to make Valdese a more attractive place to live and work.
- **Environmental and Aesthetic Concerns:** Environmental stewardship, town cleanliness, and the zoning and code enforcement are identified as critical areas for improvement to enhance the town's overall aesthetics.

B. Facilitated Council Discussion – Mr. Starr asked Council to identify key takeaways from the public input.

Councilwoman Lowman – Valdese is a safe place to live, citizens pleased with town services, employment opportunities are needed in Valdese, people are happy raising a family in Valdese, expressed concern about Public Safety Building, need streets paved

Councilman Ogle – Recreation is good, good police & fire, cultural activities at Rock School are good, schools are good in Valdese(DHS, HMS, Valdese Elem), cleanliness of town is terrific

Mayor Watts – Positivity, infrastructure needs work, people expect more of diversity of downtown businesses

Councilman Harvey – Enthusiasm of public forums, priorities from public were spot on, need more job created industries, need more affordable mid-range housing \$100,000 - \$300,000, need hotel rooms

C. Voting exercise for public input results – Mr. Starr asked the Council to identify their top three points regarding public input by placing a sticker dot by the item.

- 3 - Recreation is good
- 3 - Employment opportunities are needed in Valdese
- 3 - Need affordable housing

IDENTIFICATION OF STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES, OPPORTUNITIES, THREATS (SWOT) FOR THE TOWN (INCLUDES RANKING EXERCISE) Mr. Starr completed a SWOT exercise with the Council members.

A. Listing of SWOT now and for the next 3-5 years for the Town

STRENGTHS

Councilman Harvey – Community spirit, I-40 location, rich heritage/history, our new strategic plan

Mayor Watts – Town employees, proximity to hospital and schools, festivals and public events

Councilman Ogle – Recreation facility, industries are doing well, restaurants are good in Valdese

Councilwoman Lowman – Cultural activities, town services, Outdoor drama - From This Day Forward

WEAKNESSES

February 15, 2024, Strategic Plan Meeting, MB#32

Councilwoman Lowman – aging infrastructure water/sewer lines (esp. clay pipes), permanent structure over our pool

Councilman Ogle – lack of affordable/low income/workforce housing

Mayor Watts – older industrial buildings that need to be demolished

Councilman Harvey – public safety building, maintenance/paving streets, centralized building management

OPPORTUNITIES

Councilman Harvey – extending the life of the Old Rock School, replace vacant buildings with economic development sites, engaging local industry in Town planning

Mayor Watts – grant funding, partnerships for housing (exp. Pine Crossing), expanding programs at Community Affairs (exp. Bluegrass festival)

Councilman Ogle – improve our Recreation

Councilwoman Lowman – need a hotel in town, structure over our pool so we can have year around swimming

Interim Town Manager Bryan Steen – Engaging citizen expertise

THREATS

Councilwoman Lowman – not addressing the public safety building, lack of affordable housing, getting qualified/experienced town manager

Councilman Ogle – aging infrastructure, inflation

Mayor Watts – inability to attract industry, demand for services vs revenue needed

Councilman Harvey – danger of committing to access long-term debt

- B.** Brief Discussion of the List – Mr. Starr went back over the each item and Council discussed.
- C.** Ranking Exercise to Identify Top SWOT Items – Council ranked each list to Identify top SWOT items.(4 votes in each category)

STRENGTHS

- 3 – Town employees
- 3 - Town services
- 2 – Recreation
- 2 - Cultural activities
- 2 - Proximity to hospitals/schools
- 2 - New strategic plan

WEAKNESSES

- 4 – Public safety building
- 4 - Need for permanent pool structure
- 3 – Lack of affordable/low income/workforce housing
- 3 - Aging water/sewer lines (esp. clay pipes)

OPPORTUNITIES

- 3 – Grant funding
- 3 - Replace vacant buildings with economic development sites
- 3 - Structure over pool

THREATS

- 4 – Not addressing public safety building
- 3 - Aging infrastructure

- 3 - Lack of affordable housing
- 3 - Getting qualified/experience town manager

IDENTIFICATION PROJECTS, POLICIES, INITIATIVES, AND GOALS (INCLUDES RANKING EXERCISE)

- A. What projects, initiatives, policies, and goals should the town consider over the next 3-5 years?

Mr. Starr asked Council members to think of projects, initiatives, policies, and goals they would like to see in place over the next few years.

- B. Listing of projects, policies, initiatives, and goals for the next 3-5 years

Councilman Harvey – hiring best town manager we can find, continue improving the Old Rock School (consider establishing a committee), recruit at least one new job creating industry with significant employees, continue repaving schedule started in 2023

Mayor Watts – addressing infrastructure (water/sewer & public safety building), recruitment/retention strategies of town employees, expand cultural affairs programs

Councilman Ogle – address the housing issue, how do we keep young people in Valdese

Councilwoman Lowman – tackle current public safety building issue, permanent structure over our pool

- C. Brief discussion of the list – Mr. Starr went through the list and Council discussed each item.

- D. Ranking Exercise to Identify Top Priorities – Each Council member got six votes.

- 4 - Hiring the best town manager
- 4 - Tackle public safety building issue
- 3 - Addressing infrastructure
- 3 - Recruitment/retention of employees
- 3 - Permanent structure
- 3 - Continue repave schedule started in 2023

WRAP-UP AND TAKE-AWAY DISCUSSION Mr. Starr asked the Council to share a take-away from the session.

Councilwoman Lowman, Councilman Ogle, Mayor Watts – pleased that everyone had pretty much the same answers

Councilman Harvey – he sees six things that needs to get done

Mr. Starr shared that they would be at the March 4, 2024 Council meeting to present the final strategic planning report.

ADJOURNMENT At 7:45 pm the public input session ended.

The next Agenda Review Council meeting is scheduled for Monday, February 26, 2024, 6:00 p.m.

Town Clerk

Mayor

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