

A VISION FOR THE FUTURE SURVEY RESULTS AND WHITE PAPER

Sabra Briere, First Ward City Council
www.sabrabriere.org

The City Council asked the DDA to prepare a plan to develop the City-owned parcels between Division, Ashley, William and Liberty. This means the lot next to the library, the Old Y lot, the Palios lot, the parking structure at 4th and William and the Klinses' lot. The DDA is supposed to prepare this plan after a "robust public process." If the Council approves the plan, the DDA will issue RFPs for each parcel (after Council approves the content of the RFP). This planning process is underway. I want to be certain you are part of the "robust public process."

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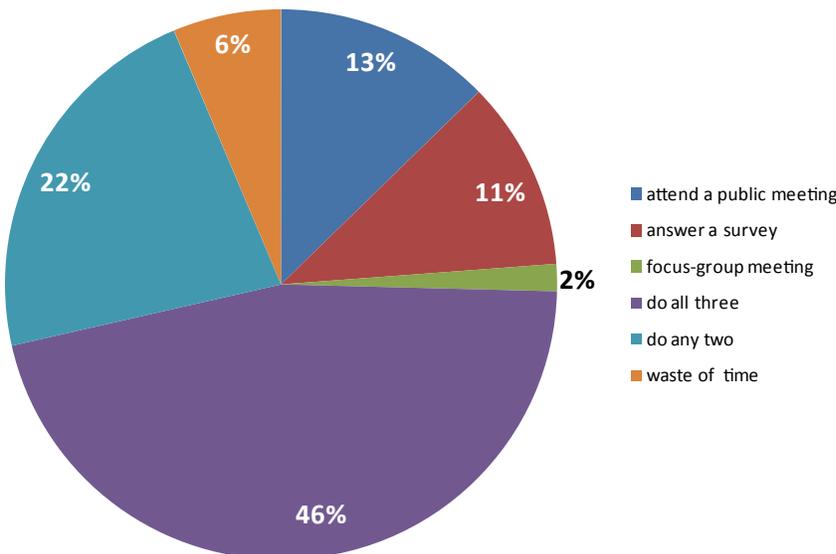
SURVEY RESULTS

WOULD YOU TAKE PART IN A ROBUST PUBLIC PROCESS?

We experienced a serious problem when the City issued an RFP for the top of the underground parking structure. There was no public discussion focused only on what should be built before the RFP was issued. After the public had seen the responses, members of our community objected to the lack of discussion about a park, not a building. Some community members supported a building but wanted something different than developers proposed. Although the process ended without approval for a building, many in the community wanted their view and vision for downtown to prevail.

The Council asked the DDA to prepare a plan for the parcels, and specified that the DDA needed to conduct a public process -- and that it had to be robust. Although 'robust' wasn't defined, most of us expect the process to involve more than a few people who comment regularly. I want people who think their views don't matter

Chart 1: Would you help create a plan for downtown?



to participate. So I asked: are you willing to participate?

It's important to note, here, that not everyone felt participating would be valuable for them. Some people indicated that they would participate fully, answering a survey, going to a focus group meeting, and attending a public meeting, but it would still be a waste of their time. I imagine these few have come to the conclusion that all these opportunities for public input are for show; that the decision makers ignore and discount public input. If I'm correct, making certain that public input is reflected in the final outcome should be a requirement. Public planning is entirely practical if we want to be certain a project won't be derailed because it doesn't fit the public's perception of what's needed and wanted in any location.

Greater diversity of business and more jobs

- Female, under 60

... It seems to me that there could be small "pocket parks" around the commercial areas.

- Female, under 70

WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE DOWNTOWN?

During the last few years, a portion of our community has discussed several differing ideas about the downtown. I've come to consider these 'memes,' ideas that spread from person to person without guidance from the City or community leaders.

After the RFP for what could be built on the underground parking structure resulted in a proposed conference center / hotel, a number of people began to talk about how it really should be a public space. Before that discussion occurred, few of us had even thought about another park. This is why I think these ideas are memes.

To me, there are three major memes about downtown: 1) that the City needs increased residential density; 2) that the City needs more retail, including a grocery/pharmacy/hard ware store in order to meet the needs of residents without cars; 3) that the City needs a central, public green space and/or gathering place for the exchange of ideas, events, meetings, and maybe just to find a place to eat an ice cream or to ice skate in winter.

These ideas are not mutually exclusive. If the City promotes increased residential density, having stores that provide for the necessities makes sense.

WHO ANSWERED THE SURVEY?

Median age = >60

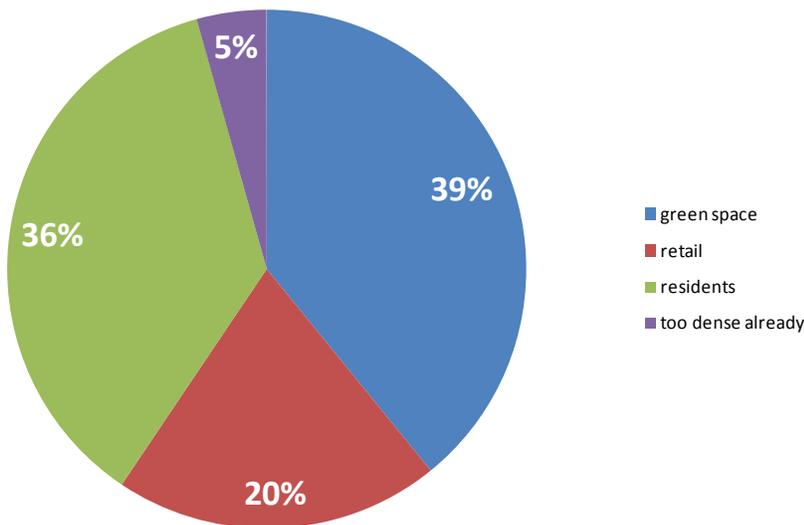
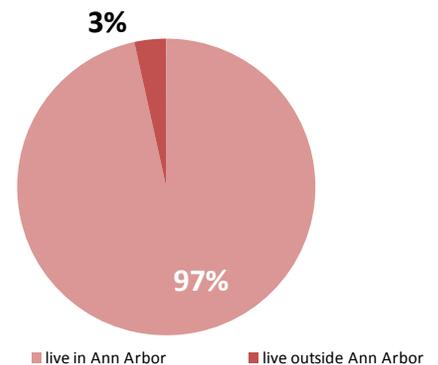
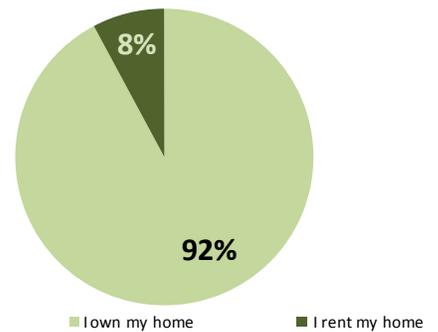
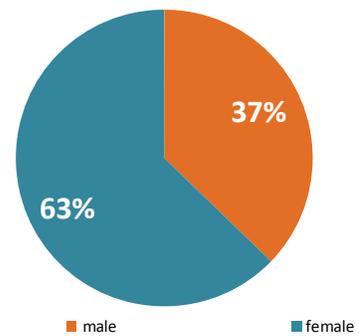
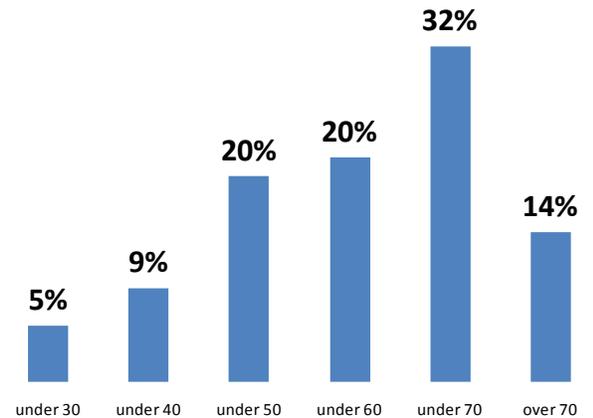


Chart 2: What do you want to see downtown?

If the City promotes increased residential and office density, having a visible, calm central green space can make the downtown a more pleasant place as well as attract folks from all over the Ann Arbor area to events.

Downtown, as defined by the DDA boundaries, is not a tidy rectangle. It sprawls; it follows narrow corridors; in some places it touches nearby residential neighborhoods without a buffer. Private developers have begun to build dense apartment buildings (200+ residents in each). A grocery will be opening in September, on the ground floor of one of these buildings.

But those memes remain. Of course, some people still want to leave everything alone. 5% of the respondents indicated that they thought the downtown was already too dense.

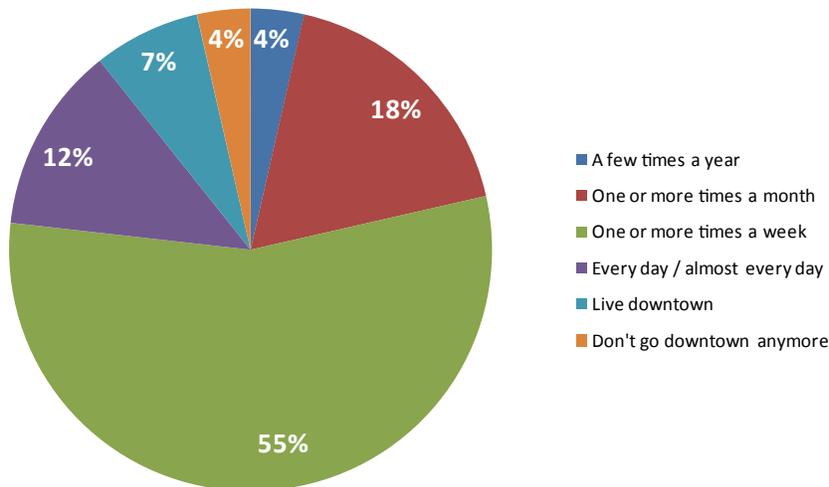
HOW OFTEN DO YOU GO DOWNTOWN?

One of the complaints I hear from some neighbors is that going downtown is too inconvenient, and there's no reason for them to go, anyway. I asked about how often people went downtown.

Because this survey is focused on downtown, it didn't surprise me that most of the people who responded to it are downtown fairly often. Some people live downtown; others work there. Only 8% of respondents indicated that they are downtown rarely. That means 92% of the respondents are downtown at least once a month. Of course, not everyone who could have responded to the survey. But of those who did, most felt they had a stake in the outcome.

We all own the downtown. If we want to show someone around, even just a drive through, we go downtown. We walk there, entertain there, go to events there, and feel strongly about whether it meets our needs -- or fails to do so.

How often do you go downtown?



Your downtown involvement . . .

Sadly, I don't go downtown anymore. The parking structures are poorly designed, difficult to use, and uninviting, while surface parking is becoming ever harder to find. Also, the downtown is becoming more impersonal and unattractive as it is developed. . .

- Female, under 70

Downtown, meaning Main Street? Hardly ever: too touristy, crowded, unaffordable - I've asked my friends from other neighborhoods in the city and they don't either. We don't feel it is our street any more. . .

- Female, under 70

2-3 times per week; it's the heart and soul of town and its distinctive competence.

- Male, under 70

Saturday food and other local shopping; civic meetings

- Female, under 70

You would like to see . . .

First, a community definition of downtown.

- Female, under 70

A park would be good if it is viable for general use. More retail and more residents would be fine.

- Male, no age range given

Central open attraction area like a large fountain.

- person, no gender given, under 30

Need to retain local (non-national chain) retail.

- person, no gender given, under 30

More retail/commercial. I can buy things downtown that I want, but parks tend to fill with people who I don't want to hang out with.

Female, under 50

THE VISION THING

One good way to decide about downtown Ann Arbor is to try to define what we want and where we're going. I'm looking for your vision of Ann Arbor. Is it as a regional research capital? A dynamic recreational and entertainment destination? A major college town, with a focus on education? A place to retire? A place to start a family? I asked you to tell me what you think.

This was hardest part of the survey because I asked about your vision for Ann Arbor's future. Before our community can begin to talk about a consensus vision, we also need to talk about our vision is today. What do you think Ann Arbor's future should be, and how do you think we can get there?

10% of the respondents didn't give an answer. I imagine that, for this portion of the folks who took the survey, they didn't have a clear answer to give. I could be wrong, of course.

WE WANT IT ALL

Of those that did answer the question, 17% wanted all the choices I offered. Each person felt they were all part of Ann Arbor's future. Another 14% focused on how Ann Arbor should strive to be the best possible college town, with various ways to get there.

There were several who tried to develop a vision. Most were specific about what they thought made Ann Arbor special, and would let it keep and build on that quality. I've included some of those comments in the sidebar.

As you read these comments and think about them, maybe they will spark you to say "yes, that's what I want" or "no, that's not going to make an Ann Arbor that I will love in the future. As you think about what you like and don't like, think also about how your voice on this issue can be heard.

Vision for the future	percent who mentioned this*
All of the above are important	17%
Residential options	17%
Parks / green space	16%
Retail and entertainment destination	16%
A great college town	14%
Retire / have families	9%
Better public transport	9%
Regional research / jobs / IT / biomedical research	7%

**does not add up to 100%*

Although the people who responded to this survey were overwhelmingly homeowners, many acknowledged a desire for more diverse housing in the downtown; housing that would appeal to those out of college. All ages — those under 30 to those over 70 — provided visions of a future Ann Arbor that remained "funky, tolerant, creative" . . . "quirky stores and quirky people."

IN YOUR WORDS

Regional / national destination for events, shopping, dining, and experiences, and a place where young professionals can have an urban lifestyle, get their careers underway, and rent a nice place downtown. We throw away UM's yearly talent output because there's no place for them to rent downtown. Boomer Landlords have far too much power over the political process, it will lead to stasis at best.

Male, under 40

What makes the city attractive is the combination of vibrant retail and residence within a small scale. All the houses downtown that are being knocked down and replaced with giant square buildings are actually a huge loss. . . Right now Ann Arbor has a mix of old and new, large and small, but the balance is tipping toward the new, the huge: when we lose all the structures with a sense of history and human scale, everyone will avoid the place.

Male, under 50

Revitalizing the idea of local sustainable food, being a model for energy efficiency, combining crazy alternatives with great science. Lots of chances to build community and relationships.

Female, under 60

I would like to see more stores and shops with parking available nearby. (need handicapped parking) I would like the downtown to be attractive to townspeople as well as University people. . .

Female, over 70

WHY WE SHOULD HAVE A VISION

I've thought a lot about this in the past few months. Maybe my reasons will make sense to you.

I think our community needs to have a discussion about what our priorities are — not just budget priorities or planning priorities, but to clarify where we want to improve and change, and what we want to retain.

LET'S PRETEND

For just this section, let's pretend that our community had reached a consensus that we wanted to be the best college town, period. Not good, not great, but the best. We could then figure out what the tactics are to reach that goal. We could benchmark our decisions against those tactics to see if doing something would help us reach our vision.

ABOUT DENSITY

Recently the City Council appointed a citizens' advisory committee to review the zoning in near-downtown residential neighborhoods (the R4C / R2A committee). The members of the committee met, invited landlords, property owners, real estate professionals and residents to talk with them about these residential neighborhoods. They listened and incorporated a lot of the various viewpoints in their preliminary report.

At a Planning Commission working session, two members of the committee expressed discontent with the report, because the committee had not identified areas that would be appropriate for higher density housing.

During the past decade, one of the memes that has become present in our community is the need for more density. First, it was density in the downtown — and the Council approved rezoning the DDA to allow taller, denser residential buildings. This zoning allows developers to build a building up-to 14 or 15 stories tall — or 180 feet. This construction is 'by right' and doesn't need special permission from Council. Several buildings have been built, or are proposed to be built, based on this new zoning.

But density in the downtown isn't enough, according to some. The price of buildable lots that can hold higher-density residential buildings is high in the downtown; there's pressure to build in those near-downtown neighborhoods that have old houses now. These neighborhoods are zoned R4C, primarily (Residential, multi-family, large lots).

Density has been considered a goal in itself. But, to me, building more concentrated, dense housing has to be a tactic to reach a vision. I just don't know what the vision is.

If it were to make Ann Arbor the best college town, then we could consider what that means. Perhaps one goal would be to improve the rental housing market for students who live off campus. Another goal might be to improve alternative transportation systems so students don't need to own a car. A third goal might be to create a varied downtown retail experience, so those who live downtown can shop for necessities and luxuries without using a car or a transportation system.

A forward-thinking city, that fully supports sustainability — this includes environmental issues, community issues, economic issues, AND the art and aesthetics of sophisticated urban design. I expect my city to have informed and robust leadership, unfettered by parochial thinking.
Person, no gender given, under 40

A place of inter-generational activity. Alleys and pedestrian paths that accommodate "secondary" addresses. Maximum 8-10 stories — mixed uses for new and existing buildings. Legibility that reduces the need for the clutter of "way-finding" signs. A set of places, including "third places" that make us not care how long we linger when we are downtown.
Female, under 70

A mid-size fairly old town with interesting older stores and neighborhoods, many heavily used and beautiful parks attractive to all ages and its diverse population of an major university. These elements draw art and events of all kinds. My vision is to keep the good, the attractive and interesting that we have, and not become a a bigger "anywhere USA".
Person, no gender given, under 30

A place with activities that are readily available to passersby and those with an event as a destination. Local shops with a wide range of products, entertainment . . . walking encouraged, cars routed to entrance parking coupled with van or small bus transport to the core, modified sidewalks that allow both walking and dining . . . retained edge residential areas.
no gender or age given

And in this vision, perhaps one tactic to improve the rental housing market would be to improve the number and variety of housing options for those students. By doing so, the City might also find it's improving the number and variety of housing options for retirees, young families, singles, and those who want both an urban experience and the ability to live in a funky, creative, tolerant neighborhood.

Right now, though, density is treated as if it were a goal in itself. Sometimes people suggest density will prevent sprawl. Sometimes they suggest we need density in order to have viable alternative transportation.

I don't think so.

USING THE VISION

We're still playing pretend. So imagine that goal — becoming the best college town. Let's use that vision as a tool for making some decisions.

How important is public safety in making Ann Arbor the best College town?

How vital is a coherent public transportation system, so students and employees can get around without a car? How valuable are cars in this mix? Do we have to build better streets, more parking, better biking and walking paths?

Do we want to have a downtown park or better recreation along the river? Is this an either/or, or can we afford both? What about the greenway? Would putting our resources there make Ann Arbor the best college town? What about the skatepark? How do we decide?

Do we need to hire more trained inspectors to evaluate the rental housing stock? Do we need to hire more planners, more attorneys, more people to pick up the trash and fix the streets?

These are just some of the questions that I can imagine would need answers. But we cannot get to this level of detail until we have a vision that we can share.

I don't intend you to think that being the best college town is the best or the only vision. I'm just playing pretend. But if, as a community, we can reach a consensus on the vision, then we can begin to set goals, set priorities, and decide how our resources will be spent to achieve those goals and priorities.

All it takes is some vision.

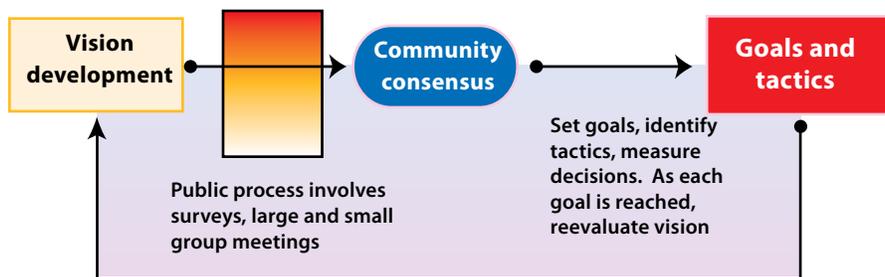


Chart 3: Flow chart of how the process might work.

it's a college town with lots of great recreation and entertainment options. i like the quirky stores and quirky people that inhabit such a town.

Female, under 60

I'd like to see Ann Arbor be a vibrant, inclusive city. It'll always remain a college town first and foremost, but we need to do more to make it a place where everyone can live: retirees, families, and young people. As it stands, we risk becoming a kind of "gilded ghetto" where many people can't afford to make a home, which isn't in keeping with our history or our environmental commitments to sustainability (more people outside the city limits = more driving, less community).

Male, under 30

I think we would do better not to plan for a particular outcome, but to make the city dynamic so that all these activities will happen and reinforce each other. Most successful cities are lots of these things. Ann Arbor already does pretty well, and has no choice but to build on its base as a University town, so we might as well embrace that.

Female, under 60

I want a real downtown with stores, food, drug store, the way Ann Arbor used to be when i got here 33 years ago.

Female, under 60

I see Ann Arbor as a regional research and education capital that revives the small-town charm and livability it once had. That said, I'd like to see Ann Arbor less under the thumb of UM. Although I am an alumna, I think UM has not distinguished itself in supporting the city.

Female, under 70

Creating a vision for Ann Arbor

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Creating a vision for Ann Arbor



Page 1 - Question 1 - Choice - Multiple Answers (Bullets)

Master planning: The City requested the DDA create a plan for the development of all the City-owned property in downtown. Part of this plan includes developing a 'robust public process'. Would you help create the plan?

- I'd attend a public meeting
- I'd answer a survey
- I'd go to a focus-group meeting
- This would be a waste of my time
- Other, please specify

Page 1 - Question 2 - Choice - One Answer (Bullets)

[Randomize]

How often do you go downtown?

- One or more times a week
- One or more times a month
- A few times a year
- Only for special events, such as Rolling Thunder, or the Green Fair, or the Taste of Ann Arbor
- Maybe a few times a year
- I don't go downtown anymore
- Additional Comment

Page 1 - Question 3 - Choice - Multiple Answers (Bullets)

[Up To 2 Answers]

Some individuals think that the downtown should have a large public park. Others want to see more commercial and office space. What would you like to see downtown?

- More green space to cool it off and offer a respite for shoppers and residents
- More retail. There's nothing to buy downtown NOW that I want.
- More residents. The businesses will follow the residential growth.
- Less density. It's already too crowded for me.

Page 1 - Question 4 - Open Ended - Comments Box

The Vision Thing: One good way to decide about downtown Ann Arbor is to try to define what we want and where we're going. I'm looking for your vision of Ann Arbor. Is it as a regional research capital? A dynamic recreational and entertainment destination? A major college town, with a focus on education? A place to retire? A place to start a family? Please tell me what you think.

Page 1 - Question 5 - Choice - Multiple Answers (Bullets)

[Up To 4 Answers]

For statistical purposes: I'd like to know how you would identify yourself. Here are several choices: please pick those that best identify you. (up to four)

- I live in Ann Arbor
- I live outside Ann Arbor
- I own my home
- I rent my home
- I see myself as male
- I see myself as female
- I'm under 30
- I'm under 40
- I'm under 50
- I'm under 60
- I'm under 70
- I'm over 70

Sabra Briere, First Ward City Council, 1418 Broadway, Ann Arbor 734-995-3518, cell 734-277-6578, Sabra.Briere@gmail.com, www.sabrabriere.org

One of a series of survey reports and white papers on current issues in Ann Arbor.

For other survey results, please contact me directly. For ideas about surveys you think I should run, and current issues you think I should discuss, please call me.

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—SURVEY RESULTS AND WHITE PAPER