

September 20, 2023

2022-2023 Community Engagement and Visioning Summary

The following summary includes feedback gathered during community engagement over the course of 2022 and 2023, across a wide range of projects, programs and initiatives, including:

- The Affordable Housing Fund and Housing Action Plan
- Redevelopment projects
 - The Heights District
 - Waterfront Gateway
 - Main Street Promise
- Visioning conversations
 - Pop-ups and tabling at 28 community events
 - One-on-one and small group conversations
- Five City Council Community Forums
- Neighborhood engagement
 - Meetings with neighborhood associations and the Vancouver Neighborhood Alliance
- Community Development
 - Our Vancouver 2045 – Comprehensive Plan
 - Fourth Plain for All Community Investment Strategy
- 2023-24 Biennial Budget
 - Biennial community survey, stakeholder meetings and budget prioritization exercise
- Safe Stay Communities (sites 2, 3 and 4)
- Parks, Recreation and Cultural Services
 - Ida Bell Jones Park
 - Shaffer Park
 - Oakbrook Park
 - Bagley Community Park (ongoing)
 - Accessible playground development at Esther Short and Marshall Parks
- Transportation
 - Transportation System Plan
 - Complete Streets projects

Most Frequently Mentioned Concerns

- Affordable housing
- Homelessness
- Public safety
- Economic opportunity (jobs, business development and growth)
- Climate change

Most Frequently Mentioned Hopes for the Future

- Safety in all forms
- Affordable housing/preventing displacement
- Economic prosperity
- Community and neighborhood connections (between places and between people)
- Environmental stewardship and climate resiliency
- Care for parks and public spaces

Engagement Summary

A synthesis of community feedback is included below by Strategic Plan Focus Area.

Transportation and Mobility

- Vancouver community members would like to see increased access and options when it comes to how they get around the city
 - As one community member put it, “people want to get where they want, when they want, how they want”
- When it comes to getting to work, school, shopping, dining or vital services, many residents feel that driving is currently their only option; this is especially true for community members who work outside of the city or across the river in Oregon
- Many community members report that they don’t feel safe riding a bike and that travel times when taking public transit are often unrealistic or unreasonable
 - For example, many community members described having to choose between a 10-15 minute drive vs a 30 to 50-minute bus ride
- Community members who use a wheelchair or mobility device have reported that uneven sidewalks, streets without sidewalks and unsafe crossings are particular areas of concern
 - These individuals also highlighted the acute impacts they face during construction, which often limits access to one side of a street or requires crossing unexpectedly
 - In the future, they would like to see a city that is easier to navigate and more accessible for all, particularly through universal design standards
- In many parts of the city, residents report that walking does not feel like a viable option
 - For some, this is due to the distance they would need to walk to reach their destination
 - For others, walking does not feel safe due to busy streets, speeding cars, unsafe crossings or intersections, or a lack of sidewalks
 - Concern about a lack of sidewalks was particularly common among young people, families with children and those who live outside the city limits, in areas such as East Minnehaha, Sifton, Orchards and Hazel Dell.
- Many community members said that they would like to see increased access to major destinations and to feel safe walking or biking to their destinations of choice in the future
 - Priority destinations include: grocery stores, schools, libraries, medical providers, retailers, such as the Vancouver Mall, transit hubs and service provider offices
- Some community members said that they will continue to drive, even if safety improvements are made or services are available closer to their home
 - These residents typically cite weather, family size or the need to visit multiple destinations as the reason that they would want to continue driving
 - Among these residents, safer driving conditions, reduced drive times and parking were mentioned as priorities
- When it comes to the Interstate Bridge Replacement project, common community concerns include traffic, construction impacts, such as noise or vibrations, and tolling
 - Younger residents, bike advocates and transit-dependent residents have expressed excitement about access to light rail and the potential for improved access
 - Residents who commute across the river for work, including tradespeople who make more frequent trips, are concerned that tolls will be costly; this concern is more pronounced among lower-income workers who have said that they would prefer no tolls or income-based tolling

Economic Opportunity

- Community members have frequently cited jobs and economic opportunities as two of their top priorities
- When talking about hopes for the future, community members say that they want to see a vibrant local economy, which supports living wages, higher-paying jobs and the ability of all people to grow in their careers locally
- For many community members, jobs are closely linked to other priorities, such as stable housing, physical and mental health and overall quality of life; when talking about the economy, residents also draw connections to their children, family members and friends
- Among those who have more recently moved to Vancouver, job opportunities were frequently cited as one of the central motivators in moving to the city
- Some community members have mentioned Vancouver's proximity to Portland and the broader metro region as particularly beneficial, as residents can pursue greater choice in terms of employment and the ability to grow in a career, while staying in the area
 - At the same time, some of these same residents say that they would rather work closer to home, where they could avoid traffic or long commutes
- Small business owners and entrepreneurs, particularly those who come from historically marginalized groups, report multiple barriers to starting and running a business, including:
 - Lack of access to capital
 - Lack of suitable space
 - Unaffordable leases
- The Vancouver's Farmers Market is often cited by community members and small business owners as an essential venue for business incubation
 - Community members report especially positive feelings toward the Farmers Market and routinely mention that they would like to see it or similar businesses expand (to other neighborhoods, times of the week or year, etc.)
- Several local business owners also mentioned their appreciation for what one community member called Vancouver's "cultural of support for businesses"
 - Groups such as the Greater Vancouver Chamber of Commerce, Hispanic Metro Chamber, Vancouver's Downtown Association, Uptown Village Association, East Vancouver Business Association and Columbia River Economic Development Council were cited as examples of groups that offer vital assistance to local business owners
- While many business owners report that Southwest Washington is a good location to operate a business, they are also concerned about public safety, housing availability and the possible impacts of increased taxes

Housing and Human Needs

- Homelessness, housing and childcare were among the top priorities mentioned by community members over the past year
- When talking about their hopes for the future, many community members said that they would like to see safe, affordable housing available to all people in Vancouver and an end to unsheltered homelessness
 - For lower income residents, renters and young people, housing insecurity was frequently mentioned as a major concern
 - Among these groups, some have shared a desire for greater protections for renters and specific housing supports for people who are elderly or permanently disabled

- Some community members have said that they would like to see programs that expand access to affordable homeownership
- When it comes to housing concerns, community members have most frequently mentioned:
 - Concerns that housing costs have risen faster than wages
 - Families being forced to live in unsafe or undignified conditions, including multiple families sharing the same home
 - Concern that they will have to leave the region or move further away from Vancouver to afford a place to live
 - Belief that luxury condominiums and large single-family homes are not the type of housing that our community needs
- There is significant interest in increasing access to affordable childcare; residents report that the current system may fail to meet the needs of middle-income residents or those whose wages are too high for some income-based programs
- On the topic of homelessness, the vast majority of community members have said that they support community efforts to:
 - Get people off the street and into permanent housing
 - Connect people to vital services
 - Treat people experiencing homelessness with dignity and respect
 - Reduce negative community impacts of unsheltered homelessness
- Community members have expressed differing views, however, about the actions that should be taken to address homelessness:
 - Although community members are generally supportive of the City's Safe Stay and Safe Park program, some residents have opposed particular locations or suggested that supportive services will have negative impacts on neighbors
 - There is a persistent belief, among some, that services and supports attract people experiencing homelessness to Vancouver
 - Additionally, while some people see homelessness as a failure of systems, a significant number of community members see homelessness as a personal or moral failing
 - Among these residents, the frame of deservingness is often employed to explain who should or should not receive help
- Expanding access to healthcare, especially mental health and drug treatment services, was also frequently mentioned by community members
 - Some residents have described long wait lists or delays in receiving care
 - Some individuals and families have reported difficulty navigating complex social service systems or eligibility criteria that restrict access to only those receiving Apple Health, Washington State's Medicaid program

Vibrant and Distinct Neighborhoods

- Community members have particularly positive feelings about Vancouver's parks, open spaces and public events, these were routinely cited as sources of connection, recreation and health
- Residents have expressed varying degrees of pride in and attachment to the neighborhoods in which they live
- When asked about hopes for the future of their neighborhoods, community members have frequently pointed to:
 - Safety (reduced crime and the desire to feel safe)
 - Walkability
 - Access to amenities

- Recreational opportunities
- Relationships and connections to neighbors or community groups
- Interest in cultural and community gathering spaces
- Support for neighborhood schools
- Additional conversation is needed, as part of the comprehensive plan process, to better understand the needs of specific neighborhoods and how residents would like to navigate potential land use changes
- During recent engagement for Parks, Recreation and Cultural services, community members have mentioned interest in a wide range of amenities and improvements, including:
 - A desire for more outdoor gathering spaces with flexible uses, such as picnic shelters, small event venues, etc.
 - More diversity in sports courts or fields that go beyond basketball and soccer, such as spaces for disc golf, bocce, futsal and pickleball
 - Spaces and amenities in parks that appeal to broad age ranges, including middle/high school, adults and seniors
 - City-operated dog parks
 - Splash pads and/or water play options in more parks (outside of downtown)
 - The need for accessibility to go beyond just ADA curbs and picnic tables, exploring how we make truly inclusive public outdoor spaces that have play opportunities for everyone
 - Interest in protecting or expanding greenspaces through habitat restoration, native plantings, tree preservation and tree planting
 - The desire to continue finding ways to honor indigenous tribes, natural features of the area and lesser-known Vancouver histories through the park-naming process
 - Ways to make recreation programs more affordable and accessible to residents, beyond the City's existing scholarship program
 - Expanded recreation programming, particularly for children ages 11 to 14

Culture and Heritage

- Vancouver's rich history is a point of pride for many community members, especially longtime residents and those who have grown up in the community
- Community members have consistently mentioned the importance of cultural, religious and historical institutions and community events, as part of what makes Vancouver special
 - Residents report that these institutions and events help them to build relationships, connect with neighbors and strengthen their sense of belonging in the community
 - Residents say that cultural organizations, in particular, are sources of meaning, tradition, connection and support, especially for older residents, refugees, recent immigrants and those new to Vancouver
 - Seeing their culture celebrated and appreciated by the broader community was also a theme mentioned explicitly by Latino, black, Pacific Islander and LGBTQ+ community members
 - In addition to calling out events such as concerts and movies in the park, community members also shared appreciation for specific cultural events, including: Dia de los Muertos, Four Days of Aloha, the Juneteenth Freedom Celebration, Multicultural Resource Fair and Vancouver Pride
- There is broad support for holding additional cultural and community events in the future, especially in areas outside of downtown

- When talking about their hopes for the future, community members mentioned their desire to see additional venues for arts, culture, entertainment and community building, including comedy clubs, studio spaces, venues for live music and performing arts, along with more community centers and libraries
- Many community members take pride in the city’s public art, especially the mural program
 - Some community members said that they would like to see art expand to other areas of the city, including neighborhoods that currently lack public art
- Some longtime residents have also expressed concern that those moving to the community may not be aware of Vancouver’s history and regional culture
 - While this sentiment is sometimes expressed alongside concerns about how the community is changing, there is a genuine desire to expand opportunities for learning about history; these residents would like to see more storytelling, public art and celebrations of the city’s history

Safe and Prepared Community

- Across a wide range of projects and engagements, community members have consistently identified safety as their top priority and hope for the future
 - Residents report specific concerns with vehicle theft, burglaries, break-ins and property crime; many community members said that they don’t want to worry about their car getting stolen from their driveway or their catalytic converter stolen every time they go shopping
 - Violent crime was mentioned by a significant number of people, as well, including a belief that violent crimes, such as shootings, could “spill over from Portland”
 - Some community members report feeling unsafe walking at night, particularly downtown; others have said that they no longer feel safe walking on certain trails, including the Burnt Bridge Creek Trail
 - These community members have most commonly cited negative encounters with unhoused residents, as well as people who appear to be experiencing mental health crises or openly using drugs
 - Among the business community, retail theft and property crime are major concerns
 - Larger retailers report thousands of dollars of theft each month
 - Some businesses have experienced multiple break ins or robberies
 - Retail workers have reported feeling unsafe at work or being directly affected by robberies, assaults or thefts
- Community members who are black, Latino, Pacific Islander and LGBTQ+ also reported specific concerns about safety
 - Some community members mentioned negative interactions with police and concerns about police use of force, particularly shootings that have taken place since 2019
 - Others have said that they don’t feel safe or welcomed in certain parts of Vancouver or Clark County; demonstrations by groups, such as Patriot Prayer or the Proud Boys, and visible displays of the Confederate flag were cited by some residents as specific incidents that have made them feel unsafe
 - LGBTQ+ community members have also shared varied experiences and perceptions of safety in the community; while some longtime residents and those who have grown up

in Vancouver have shared their belief that the community has become more accepting and inclusive over time, others report feeling unsafe.

- On the other hand, people who have moved to Vancouver recently (in the past five years), have shared stories of feeling a greater sense of safety and belonging in Vancouver; perhaps unsurprisingly, this sentiment seems to be most common among people who have moved from less LGBTQ+-friendly communities; additional engagement is needed to better understand how to strengthen feelings of belonging and safety for all community members
- Some community members have also pointed out that safety is directly related to other issues, such as mental health, poverty and a lack of economic opportunity
 - These community members have said that they see investments in economic growth, job creation, housing and social services as ways to make our community safer
 - Some would also like to see additional investments in co-responder services to better respond to community members experiencing a mental health crisis
- Among community members concerned about climate change, resiliency, preparedness and adaptation were frequently mentioned as priorities
- Disaster preparedness was mentioned by a very small number of residents
 - They would like to see greater investment in earthquake-resilient infrastructure and community preparedness, especially at the neighborhood and household-level

Connected and Resilient Infrastructure

- When talking about roads and streets, safety continues to be a high priority for community members, especially those living on or near major corridors, such as Fourth Plain Blvd., Mill Plain Blvd., Andresen Rd. and 162nd Ave.
 - Many residents report that they don't feel safe biking or walking in certain parts of the city, especially in areas with high-speed traffic that lack sidewalks and bike paths
- When asked to describe their hopes for the future of their neighborhood, many community members have described a neighborhood that is more walkable, connected and easy to get around with nearby parks and amenities
 - Although few community members use the term, many have described a 15-minute neighborhood as what they would like to see in the future
- There is growing awareness among some residents that historic land use policies have limited their access to certain services, such as grocery stores, restaurants or coffee shops
 - Additional conversation is needed during the comprehensive plan process to better understand the needs of specific neighborhoods and the types of change that people want to see
- Community members have also said they want to see the City prioritize maintenance and care for existing infrastructure, such as roads, parks and water systems
- Community members report being generally satisfied with the city's roads, however pavement quality was mentioned by some as an area of concern, especially on neighborhood streets that are paved less frequently
- Projects that have languished without funding, including those on the unfunded list of the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP), were also mentioned by a few community members as sources of frustration

- Aside from concerns about climate change or disaster preparedness, resilience was not a common phrase that community members have used to describe infrastructure
 - Instead, residents have been more likely to talk about streets that are safe and easy to get around, and services that are reliable
 - Additional engagement for the City’s Water Resiliency Strategy will provide further information about community needs and attitudes toward resilient infrastructure

High Performing Government

- Residents have consistently said that they want the City to be responsible stewards of public funds and to deliver services that are responsive, accessible and accountable
- Community members have highlighted specific concerns about emergency services, including:
 - Police and fire department response times
 - Currently, some community members feel that the City does not respond to 911 or 311 calls in a timely fashion
 - This has led some residents to report that they no longer feel that it is useful to call the police for certain crimes, such as petty theft or property crimes
 - Community members have said that they hope and expect 911 response times to improve in the future
 - Concerns over perceived lawlessness
 - Some community members feel that police are not enforcing laws or that they have been prevented from enforcing certain laws by recent legislation
 - Desire to reduce police-use-of-force incidents
 - Officer-involved shootings continue to be a major concern for many community members; while some of these community members have expressed hope that recent reforms and the implementation of a body camera program will improve things, some residents have also called for additional steps to be taken, such as civilian oversight
- Community members have also said that they would like to see police services that are accountable, transparent, responsive to community concerns and focused on building relationships with the community
 - Some community members said that they would like to see greater engagement between the police department and community groups, including younger residents, recent immigrants and black, Latino, Pacific Islander and LGBTQ+ community members
- Community members, including local disability rights advocates, have also voiced concerns about the accessibility of City programs and the need to decrease barriers to accessing social services and programs, including:
 - Difficulty finding information or knowing who to contact
 - Lack of language translation and interpretation services
 - Lack of trusted channels of information
 - Prohibitive costs to participate
 - Access to transportation
- Some residents have also called for greater transparency in how the City spends public funds
- Some community members feel that the City staff is not genuinely interested in their input and will “do whatever they want” regardless of community input