



The Corporation of the City of Courtenay

# Briefing Note

**To:** Council

**File No.:** 1390-01

**From:** Director of Corporate Services

**Date:** January 15, 2025

**Subject:** Resident Survey, Your Courtenay, Your Voice – 2024 Results

**PURPOSE:** To review the results of the 2024 Resident Satisfaction Survey, *Your Courtenay, Your Voice*, and compare them to the 2023 findings.

## BACKGROUND:

The 2024 Resident Satisfaction Survey, *Your Courtenay, Your Voice*, follows the inaugural survey in 2023, marking the second year of gathering this important community feedback. This year's survey employed a statistically-valid phone-based methodology to ensure representativeness, targeting 300 respondents (n = 301). A separate city-wide online engagement survey was also conducted in fall 2024 and will be reported on separately.

Resident satisfaction surveys are crucial for evidence-based decision-making, offering actionable insights for both the City and its residents. For the City, these surveys are a powerful tool for evaluating service delivery. They identify successes and highlight areas needing improvement, providing concrete data to inform budget deliberations and strategic planning. This data-driven approach empowers Council to allocate resources strategically and develop plans aligned with community priorities, ultimately leading to more effective and impactful outcomes.

For residents, the survey offers a vital platform to share their opinions and priorities. By participating, residents can directly influence Courtenay's future, as their perspectives are heard and considered in decision making. This transparency and community involvement foster trust and accountability between residents and the City. External benchmarking against other municipalities, coupled with internal year-over-year comparisons, provides valuable context for assessing the City's performance and identifying best practices. As the survey builds a more robust dataset over time, the resulting trends and insights will further strengthen evidence-based decision-making and drive continuous improvement.

## DISCUSSION:

This report presents the key findings of the 2024 satisfaction survey, focusing on trend changes compared to the 2023 baseline. It's important to note that the 2024 survey represents the second year of data collection, and while observed correlations offer initial insights, they may not fully reflect true cause-and-effect relationships. A longer-term dataset spanning five years will be necessary to establish robust trends and provide a more accurate understanding of consistent issues and their underlying drivers. This approach was approved by Council at the August 28, 2024 Council meeting.

## Quality of Life

While a strong majority (84%) of Courtenay residents still rate the quality of life in the city as good or very good, a growing number perceive a decline in this quality over time. Specifically, 68% of 2024 respondents believe quality of life has worsened over the past three years, compared to 59% in 2023. This perception of decline is more pronounced among certain demographic groups, including middle-aged (35-54) residents, those with children, and those with disabilities.

In recognition of the need for improved communication and engagement, the City had already initiated and completed a new Communications Strategy (2024) and is currently developing an Engagement Strategy with an equity lens as part of the Council's Strategic Priorities set at the beginning of the 2022 Council term. These strategies aim to enhance access to important information and create more opportunities for meaningful participation for all residents. By actively engaging with diverse groups and implementing new practices designed to reduce barriers, the City hopes to foster a more inclusive environment for communication and engagement. These efforts are anticipated to result in a broader and more representative input that will inform policy and service development, ultimately supporting an equitable quality of life for all Courtenay residents.

A declining quality of life can impact various aspects of the community, from economic development and social cohesion to individual well-being. Addressing the root causes of this decline is essential for the overall health and prosperity of Courtenay. Residents identified several key areas for improvement to enhance quality of life in Courtenay. Top priorities include initiatives to address homelessness (41%), substance use and addiction (17%), and the development of more affordable housing (15%). These concerns underscore the interconnectedness of social issues and their impact on residents' perceived quality of life.

Homelessness, mental health and addiction, and affordable housing were prominent policy areas in the recent 2024 BC Provincial election, highlighting the widespread recognition of these challenges and the need for provincial leadership and support in addressing them. It is important to recognize that these are complex, province-wide issues that require ongoing collaboration and support from the provincial government to achieve meaningful and sustainable solutions.

The City continues to take a leadership role in advocacy and action to address housing and homelessness in Courtenay and the region, and undertook, several significant actions in 2024:

- **Improving Connect Services:** Investing in outdoor infrastructure, including washrooms, storage, and an expanded outdoor area, to better support unhoused residents. This expansion aims to provide basic necessities and improve the safety and well-being of individuals experiencing homelessness as well as improve conditions for adjacent businesses.
- **Winter Shelter Strategy:** Leading the development and implementation of the Comox Valley Regional Winter Shelter Strategy, including identifying and approving a winter shelter location for the 2024/2025 season. This regional leadership demonstrates the City's commitment to addressing the needs of unhoused populations by providing a safe and warm place to be inside during the colder months.
- **Collaboration with BC Housing:** Working with BC Housing to facilitate the development of affordable housing options, exemplified by BC Housing's purchase of a property on Braidwood Road for purpose-built shelter and supportive housing. This effort leverages provincial resources and expertise to address the critical need for affordable, permanent supportive housing, and purpose-built shelter with wrap-around services in the community.
- **Advocacy and Incentives:** Continuing advocacy at the Union of BC Municipalities (UBCM) for increased support services for people experiencing or at risk of homelessness and waiving building permit fees for below-market housing projects. These advocacy efforts aim to secure additional resources and remove financial barriers to the development of much-needed affordable housing.
- **Housing Agreements:** Securing housing agreements with developers to ensure a proportion of new developments are dedicated to below-market rental units. This proactive approach supports the

development of a diverse range of housing options within the community, to address our Housing Needs Assessment and meet housing targets outlined in our Official Community Plan.

These ongoing efforts demonstrate the City's commitment to addressing the complex challenges related to homelessness, substance use and affordable housing, to improve the overall quality of life for all residents.

### **Value for Tax Dollars**

Residents' perspectives on the value they receive for their tax dollars are evolving. In 2024, 70% of Courtenay residents perceived good or very good value for their taxes, compared to 78% in 2023. While this represents a decrease from the previous year, it is still above the 2024 benchmark average of 67%. Perspectives on taxation and service delivery are also shifting, with 22% favouring tax increases for service improvements (down 7% from 2023), 47% preferring to maintain current tax levels even with potential service cuts (up 6% from 2023), and 18% advocating for service cuts. These shifting priorities, despite the relatively positive perception of tax value compared to other municipalities, may reflect changing economic conditions, evolving expectations regarding the role of municipal government, or other local factors.

### **Satisfaction with Services Provided by the City**

The 2024 survey gathered feedback on resident satisfaction across eleven (11) key service areas, such as traffic management, land use and community planning, bylaw enforcement, garbage and recycling, recreation, fire services, and water/wastewater management. Encouragingly, seven (7) of the eleven (11) service areas saw increased satisfaction levels compared to 2023, three remained the same, and only one (recreation) experienced a decrease. This overall positive trend indicates that the City is generally meeting or exceeding resident expectations in the majority of service areas.

- **Online Services:** Showed the most substantial improvement, rising from 65% satisfaction in 2023 to 81% in 2024. This increase is believed to be a direct result of the City's efforts to expand online service offerings based on 2023 survey feedback. The implementation of new online tools, such as the Bylaw Complaints Submission Form, Delegation Request Form and the Accessibility Feedback Form, has provided residents with more convenient and accessible ways to interact with the City. This significant increase demonstrates the positive impact of the City's investments in online service improvements and its responsiveness to resident feedback.
- **Water and Wastewater Management:** Also saw a significant increase in satisfaction, from 77% in 2023 to 86% in 2024. This improvement highlights the effectiveness of the City's water and wastewater management practices.
- **Recreation Services:** Experienced a decrease in satisfaction, from 87% in 2023 to 82% in 2024. Recreation saw a return to pre-pandemic levels of participation in 2024, resulting in increased facility use and program waitlists. The City plans to initiate a Recreation Strategic Plan in 2025 to inform future planning and service delivery improvements. This proactive approach suggests that the City is actively working to improve recreation services in alignment with resident feedback.
- **Development Services:** Public satisfaction, specifically regarding land use and community planning, rose from 48% in 2023 to 52% in 2024. This improvement likely stems from streamlined application processes, such as delegating minor development variances to the Director, implementing pre-application meetings, and introducing digital application forms. The City will continue enhancing these services by updating bylaws, identifying and addressing process bottlenecks, and prioritizing customer service improvements through resident and development industry feedback, staff training, and system upgrades.

### **Satisfaction with City Staff**

The 2024 survey results report a decrease in overall satisfaction with City staff experiences, from 76% in 2023 to 66% in 2024. Despite the overall perception decline, resident feedback indicated improvements in four (4) of six (6) staff interaction indicators. Positive feedback on staff courtesy rose from 85% to 91%, and perceptions of staff knowledge improved from 80% to 86%. However, these gains were offset by decreases in satisfaction with fair treatment (87% to 82%) and timely responses (72% to 68%).

This discrepancy between positive perceptions of individual staff service indicators and the lower overall satisfaction rating warrants further investigation. Several factors could contribute to this disparity, including specific departmental concerns, communication barriers, or unmet resident expectations regarding service outcomes. Other unmeasured factors, such as the specific nature of resident interactions or the overall context of service delivery, could also be influencing residents' overall experience with City staff. Gathering additional data over the next few years will be crucial for identifying true trends and developing effective strategies to improve overall resident satisfaction with City staff interactions.

### **Communication & Engagement**

The 2024 resident survey highlighted opportunities for improvement in communications and engagement, providing valuable baseline data against which to measure future progress. While 64% of respondents were satisfied with the amount of information they receive from the City, only 28% of respondents expressed satisfaction with engagement opportunities, with 68% dissatisfied, citing reasons such as poor communication (18%), poor services (15%), a perception of not being heard (15%), and a perceived lack of impact (9%). This dissatisfaction underscores the need for more effective and meaningful communication and engagement strategies. Residents also expressed a desire for more information on: building projects/new developments, municipal planning, project updates, financial/budget/tax information, and parks and recreation programs and events. This feedback provides valuable insights into the specific areas where residents seek greater transparency and communication from the City.

Recognizing the importance of effective communication and meaningful engagement, the City proactively initiated the following prior to the 2024 survey:

- **Communications Strategy (2024):** Developed to enhance communication effectiveness and address resident needs. The 2024 survey data provides a valuable benchmark against which to measure the strategy's success. The 2024 survey results will be instrumental in evaluating the effectiveness of this strategy and identifying areas for further refinement.
- **Engagement Strategy** (anticipated completion February 2025): Designed with a focus on inclusivity and reaching underrepresented groups. This focus on inclusivity is crucial for ensuring all voices are heard and considered in City decision-making. Key components include:
  - **City-Wide Online Engagement Survey:** Gathering broad input from residents. This online survey offers a convenient and accessible way for residents to share their perspectives.
  - **Interest Holder Engagement:** Facilitating discussions with non-profit and equity-deserving organizations. This targeted workshop allows for in-depth discussions and collaboration with key community contributors.
  - **Indigenous Engagement:** Engaging with organizations serving urban Indigenous residents. This culturally-informed approach demonstrates the City's commitment to meaningful and effective engagement with Indigenous service providers and residents and identifying potential barriers to engagement.

These proactive initiatives position the City well to respond to the survey findings and improve resident satisfaction. By implementing these strategies, the City aims to foster a stronger sense of connection and collaboration with the community. While the full impact of these strategies may take a few years to realize, the City is committed to ongoing monitoring and continuous improvement, seeking opportunities to capture the diverse perspectives of its community and enhance both communication and engagement. This commitment to continuous improvement ensures that the City's communication and engagement efforts remain responsive to evolving community needs.

### **Sense of Belonging & A Welcoming City**

The 2024 survey revealed positive trends in residents' sense of belonging and perceptions of Courtenay as a welcoming community.

- **Sense of Belonging:** Agreement with the statement "I have a strong sense of belonging in Courtenay" rose to 75% in 2024, compared to 70% in 2023. This improvement is primarily attributed to an increase in "strongly agree" responses. Interestingly, respondents with higher incomes and those with high school education were significantly more likely to agree with this statement than respondents with lower incomes and those with some post-secondary education. This disparity suggests that income and education level may play a role in residents' sense of belonging, a finding that warrants further investigation to understand the underlying factors.
- **Welcoming Community:** Agreement that Courtenay is a welcoming community also increased, from 77% in 2023 to 81% in 2024. Younger respondents (aged 25-34) and those with higher incomes were significantly more likely to perceive Courtenay as welcoming compared to older residents (aged 55-64) and those with lower incomes. Specifically, 93% of respondents aged 25-34 agreed with the statement, compared to 70% of those aged 55-64. Similarly, 93% of respondents with higher incomes (\$100K-\$150K) agreed, compared to 74% of those with lower incomes (\$40K-\$80K). These age and income-related differences highlight the importance of understanding the diverse perspectives within the community and ensuring that Courtenay is welcoming to all residents, regardless of their background.

These positive trends suggest that the City is making strides in fostering an inclusive environment where a growing number of residents feel a sense of belonging. However, the demographic disparities highlighted in the data warrant further investigation to ensure that all residents, regardless of age, income, or education level, feel equally welcomed and included in the community. Understanding these disparities is crucial for developing targeted strategies to promote inclusivity and enhance the sense of belonging for all residents.

### **Benchmarking Resident Satisfaction: Courtenay vs. Peer Municipalities**

This section compares resident satisfaction in Courtenay with similar-sized municipalities (populations 15,000 – 115,000) across three key areas: overall satisfaction with city services, value for tax dollars, and quality of life. Data from comparable resident satisfaction surveys were used for benchmarking.

- **Value for Tax Dollars:** Courtenay achieved a 70% satisfaction rating in 2024. While this represents an 8-point decrease from the previous year, it remains above the mean satisfaction level of 67% among our comparator municipalities. This suggests that despite the decline, Courtenay continues to perform relatively well in this area compared to its peers.
- **Quality of Life:** Courtenay stands at 84%, below the mean of 90% among comparator municipalities. This represents a 6-point decrease compared to Courtenay's 90% score in 2023. It is important to note that comparator municipalities also experienced a slight decrease in mean satisfaction,

dropping from 91% in 2023 to 90% in 2024. Nevertheless, the significant drop in Courtenay's score warrants further investigation to understand the underlying causes.

- **Overall Satisfaction with City Services:** Courtenay's overall city service satisfaction (66% in 2024) lags significantly behind the comparator average (74% in 2024), a more substantial drop than the slight decline observed among peer municipalities (from 76% in 2023 to 74% in 2024). While satisfaction levels increased in seven (7) of the eleven (11) identified service areas, remained the same in three (3), and decreased in only one (1), this overall positive trend at the service-area level does not translate to the overall satisfaction score. The contradiction between increased satisfaction in the majority of individual service areas and overall service satisfaction decline warrants further investigation to understand why improvements in individual service areas have not resulted in higher overall satisfaction. To this end, the 2025 resident survey will include additional questions to better understand the factors influencing residents' overall satisfaction ratings.

## Conclusion

The 2024 Resident Satisfaction Survey, representing the second year of data collection, reveals a mix of positive progress and areas requiring ongoing attention. Significant improvements were observed in online service satisfaction (a substantial increase from 65% to 81%), water and wastewater management satisfaction (an increase from 77% to 86%), and a growing sense of belonging (an increase from 70% to 75%) and welcoming community sentiment (an increase from 77% to 81%). These positive developments are encouraging and demonstrate the effectiveness of some of the City's initiatives and its commitment to enhancing key services and fostering a positive community environment. The City's proactive efforts to enhance communications and engagement, along with continued investment in affordable housing and support services for vulnerable populations, are also positive steps towards addressing resident concerns. These proactive measures demonstrate a commitment to continuous improvement and responsiveness to community needs, particularly regarding critical social issues.

However, the survey also highlighted challenges requiring further attention. A decline in overall satisfaction with City staff interactions, despite improvements in individual performance areas, warrants further investigation. Additionally, decreased satisfaction with recreation services and a concerning trend of residents perceiving a decline in quality of life, particularly among certain demographics, necessitate further analysis.

Benchmarking Courtenay against similar-sized municipalities reveals a mixed performance. While satisfaction with value for tax dollars remains above average despite a year-over-year decrease, overall satisfaction with City services lags significantly behind comparators. This disparity, coupled with a decline in quality of life satisfaction relative to peer municipalities, highlights key areas requiring further investigation and strategic intervention. The 2025 resident survey will incorporate targeted questions to better understand these discrepancies and inform future service improvements.

While the 2023 and 2024 surveys provide a valuable foundation, a more meaningful analysis of trends and resident expectations will be possible with a more extensive dataset. Five years of data will establish a robust baseline for evidence-based decision-making and ensure that resulting insights are accurate and reliable. The City will continue to monitor progress and leverage this expanding baseline data to inform decision-making, support continuous improvement in service delivery and community well-being, and ultimately enhance the quality of life for all residents.

## POLICY ANALYSIS:

**Official Community Plan Vision:** “Courtenay is responsible for the future, supporting high quality of life, with a low-carbon footprint for all”. As outlined in the OCP, and based on the Social Determinants of Health, “quality of life is influenced by a broad range of personal, social, economic, and environmental conditions in which we grow, live, work, and age. It is defined as the standard of health, comfort and happiness by an individual or group”.

## FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS:

Forum Research Inc. has been contracted to undertake the 2024 Resident Survey. The annual cost to conduct the survey and analysis is approximately \$25,000

## ADMINISTRATIVE IMPLICATIONS:

Support for the Resident Survey is provided by the Corporate Services Department as part of its annual workplan.

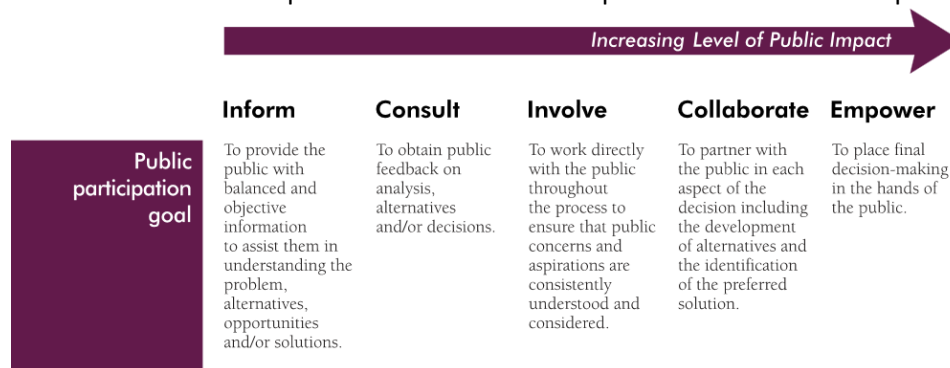
## STRATEGIC PRIORITIES REFERENCE:

This initiative addresses the following strategic priorities:

- Good Governance - Increase community engagement for all segments of the community: complete communication strategy, community survey, and community engagement strategy

## PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT:

Staff would inform the public based on the IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation:



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**RECOMMENDATION:** THAT Council receive the “Resident Survey, Your Courtenay, Your Voice – 2024 Results” briefing note.

## ATTACHMENTS:

1. 2024 Resident Survey Results
2. 2023 Resident Survey Results

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