

**THE NCS**<sup>TM</sup>  
The National Community Survey<sup>TM</sup>

# Ashland, MA

Community Livability Report

2019



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# About

The National Community Survey™ (The NCS™) report is about the “livability” of Ashland. The phrase “livable community” is used here to evoke a place that is not simply habitable, but that is desirable. It is not only where people do live, but where they want to live.

Great communities are partnerships of the government, private sector, community-based organizations and residents, all geographically connected. The NCS captures residents’ opinions within the three pillars of a community (Community Characteristics, Governance and Participation) across eight central facets of community (Safety, Mobility, Natural Environment, Built Environment, Economy, Recreation and Wellness, Education and Enrichment and Community Engagement).

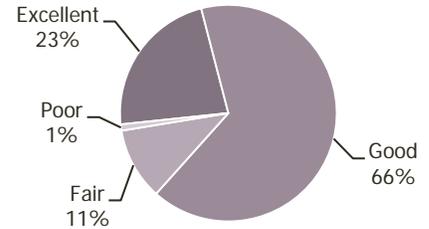
The Community Livability Report provides the opinions of a representative sample of 840 residents of the Town of Ashland. The margin of error around any reported percentage is 3% for all respondents. The full description of methods used to garner these opinions can be found in the *Technical Appendices* provided under separate cover.



# Quality of Life in Ashland

Most residents rated the quality of life in Ashland as excellent or good. This rating was similar to the national benchmark and increased over time since the last iteration of the survey (see Appendix B of the *Technical Appendices* and *Trends over Time* provided under separate covers).

Overall Quality of Life



Shown below are the eight facets of community. The color of each community facet summarizes how residents rated it across the three sections of the survey that represent the pillars of a community – Community Characteristics, Governance and Participation. When most ratings across the three pillars were higher than the benchmark, the color for that facet is the darkest shade; when most ratings were lower than the benchmark, the color is the lightest shade. A mix of ratings (higher and lower than the benchmark) results in a color between the extremes.

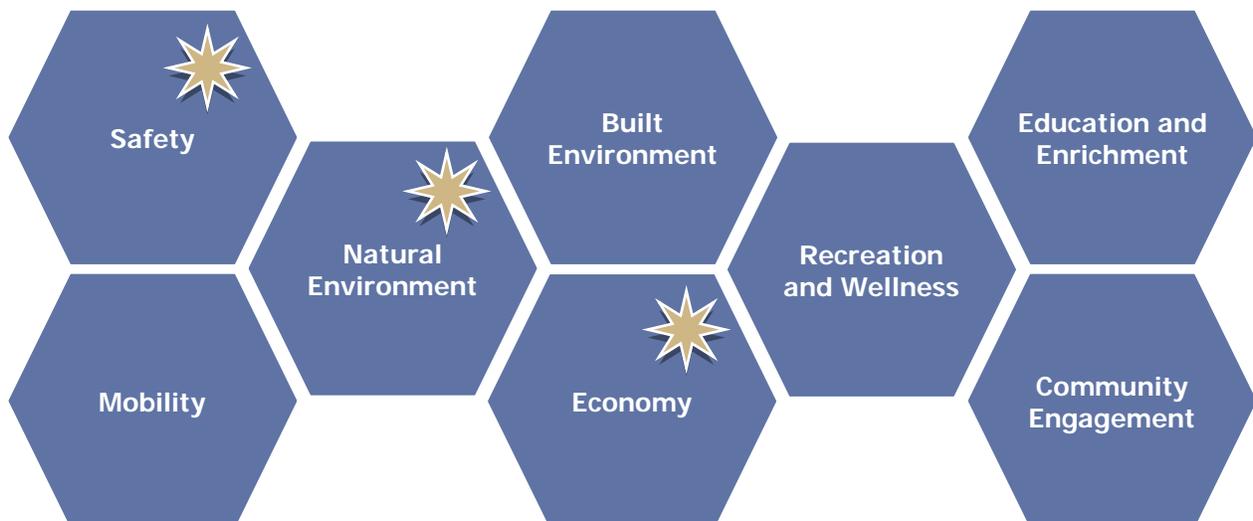
In addition to a summary of ratings, the image below includes one or more stars to indicate which community facets were the most important focus areas for the community. Residents identified Safety, Natural Environment and Economy as priorities for the Ashland community in the coming two years. Ratings for all eight facets of community livability were positive and similar to other communities across the nation. This overview of the key aspects of community quality provides a quick summary of where residents see exceptionally strong performance and where performance offers the greatest opportunity for improvement. Linking quality to importance offers community members and leaders a view into the characteristics of the community that matter most and that seem to be working best.

Details that support these findings are contained in the remainder of this Livability Report, starting with the ratings for Community Characteristics, Governance and Participation and ending with results for Ashland’s unique questions.

## Legend

- Higher than national benchmark
- Similar to national benchmark
- Lower than national benchmark

- \* Most important



# Community Characteristics

*What makes a community livable, attractive and a place where people want to be?*

Overall quality of community life represents the natural ambience, services and amenities that make for an attractive community. How residents rate their overall quality of life is an indicator of the overall health of a community. In the case of Ashland, 89% rated the town as an excellent or good place to live. Respondents' ratings of Ashland as a place to live were similar to ratings in other communities across the nation.

In addition to rating the town as a place to live, respondents rated several aspects of community quality. About 9 in 10 residents felt favorably about their neighborhoods as a place to live and Ashland as a place to raise children, while three-quarters gave high marks to the overall image or reputation of Ashland and its overall appearance. About half of residents positively rated Ashland as a place to retire. Evaluations of Ashland as a place to raise children remained stable over time, while all other aspects increased from 2016 to 2019 (for more information see the *Trends over Time* report under separate cover).

Delving deeper into Community Characteristics, survey respondents rated over 40 features of the community within the eight facets of Community Livability. Overall, at least half of respondents reviewed most aspects of Community Characteristics positively and ratings tended to be similar to other benchmark communities.



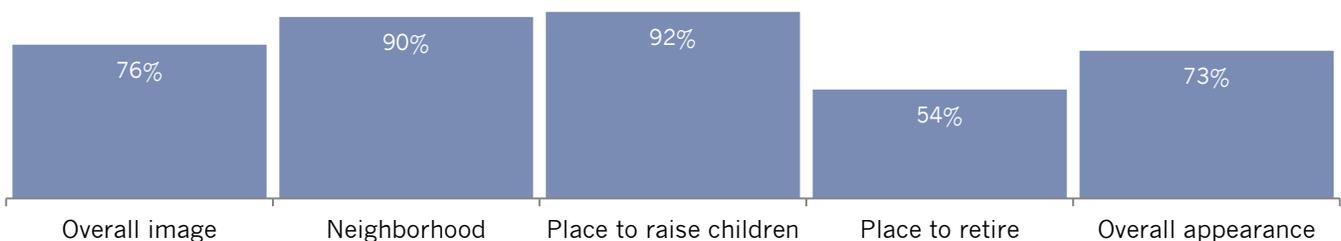
As a highlight within Community Characteristics, assessments of overall feeling of safety, variety of housing options, and openness and acceptance of the community toward people of diverse backgrounds were strong and higher than the national averages, with at least 7 in 10 residents giving high marks to these. Further, respondents' evaluations of 20 aspects of Community Characteristics improved from 2016 to 2019, with most increases occurring within the facet of Economy (such as employment opportunities, cost of living and overall quality of business and services establishments. Some of the largest increases in 2019 were for overall economic health, new development in Ashland and Ashland as a place to visit (with increases of 18%, 10% and 10%, respectively).

Residents' ratings for ease of travel by walking and by bicycle, the vibrancy of downtown/commercial area, shopping opportunities, Ashland as a place to visit, availability of affordable quality health care and preventive health services, and adult educational opportunities were lower than those observed in other communities. Compared to 2016, survey participants' marks for traffic flow on major streets, public parking, and education and enrichment opportunities declined in 2019.

Percent rating positively (e.g., excellent/good)

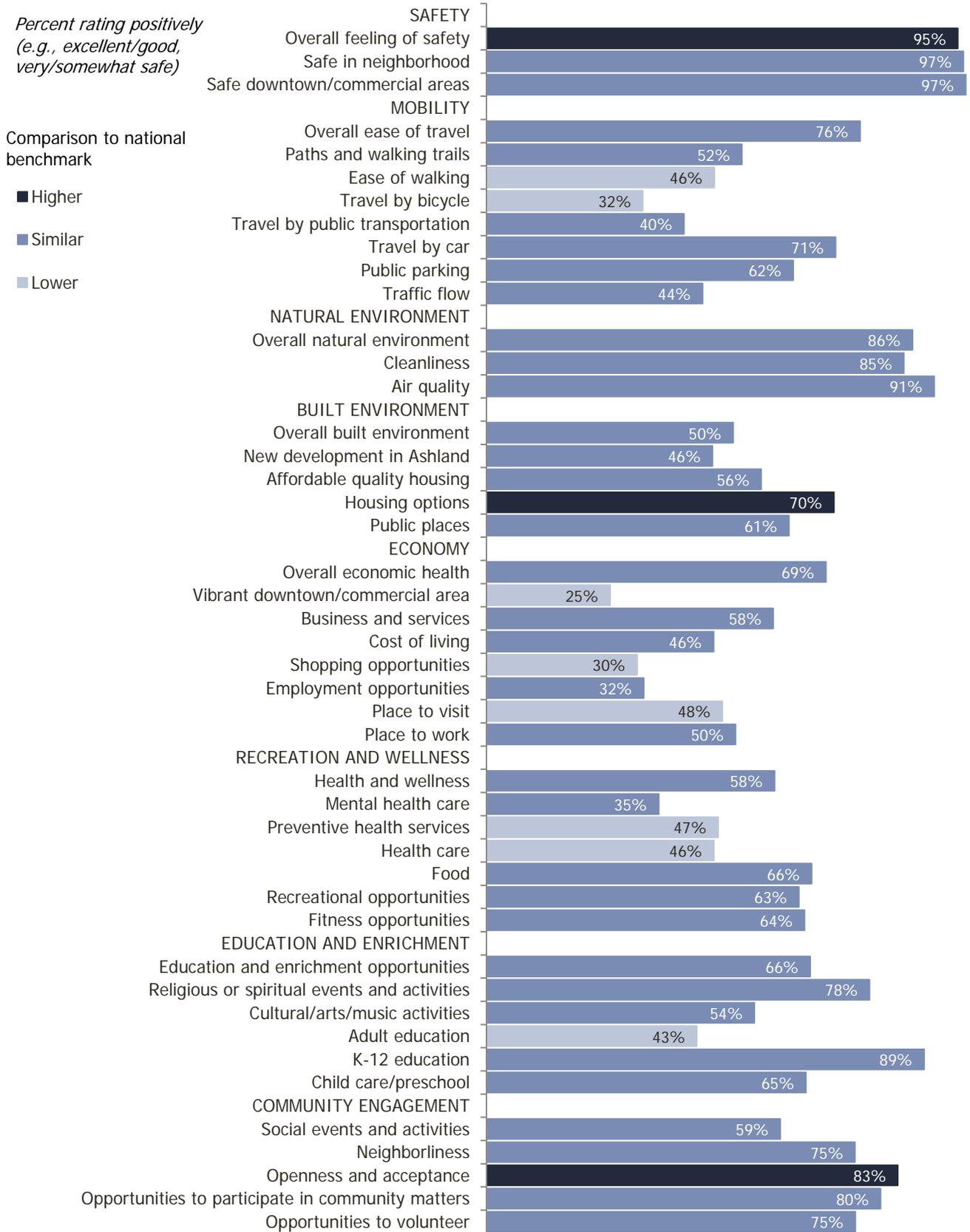
Comparison to national benchmark

■ Higher ■ Similar ■ Lower



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Figure 1: Aspects of Community Characteristics



# Governance

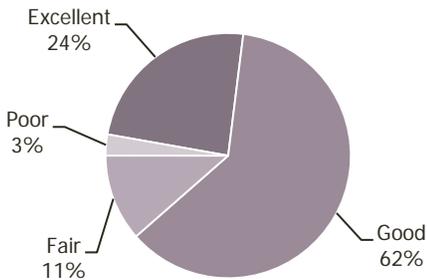
*How well does the government of Ashland meet the needs and expectations of its residents?*

The overall quality of the services provided by Ashland as well as the manner in which these services are provided is a key component of how residents rate their quality of life. About 8 in 10 residents gave favorable evaluations to the overall quality of services provided by the Town and these evaluations improved from 2016 to 2019, while about 4 in 10 were pleased with the services provided by the Federal Government.

Survey respondents also rated various aspects of Ashland’s leadership and governance. About 9 in 10 respondents gave excellent or good ratings to the overall customer service provided by the Town. About three-quarters of residents assigned high marks to the Town acting in the best interest of Ashland, being honest and treating all residents fairly; these ratings were strong and higher than the national benchmarks. About half or more residents gave positive reviews to all other aspects of government performance and these ratings were similar to those given in other communities. Additionally, respondents gave significantly higher marks to all aspects of Ashland government performance in 2019 compared to 2016.

Respondents evaluated over 30 individual services and amenities available in Ashland. Broadly, at least half of respondents reviewed most government services positively and ratings tended to be similar to those observed in other benchmark communities. The highest-rated services included police, fire, ambulance/EMS, crime prevention, fire prevention, garbage collection, recycling and public libraries, with about 9 in 10 residents assigning positive scores to these. Reviews for crime prevention, fire prevention, snow removal and cable television were exceptional and higher than the national benchmarks. Nearly half of ratings within the pillar of Governance improved from 2016 to 2019, with many increases concentrated in Natural Environment (garbage collection, yard waste pick-up, open space and natural areas preservation). Conversely, ratings for street repair declined from 2016 to 2019.

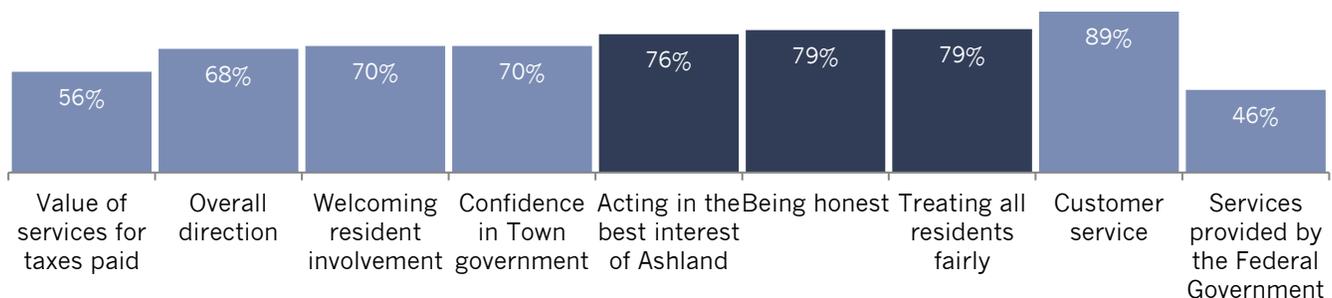
Overall Quality of Town Services



Percent rating positively (e.g., excellent/good)

Comparison to national benchmark

■ Higher ■ Similar ■ Lower



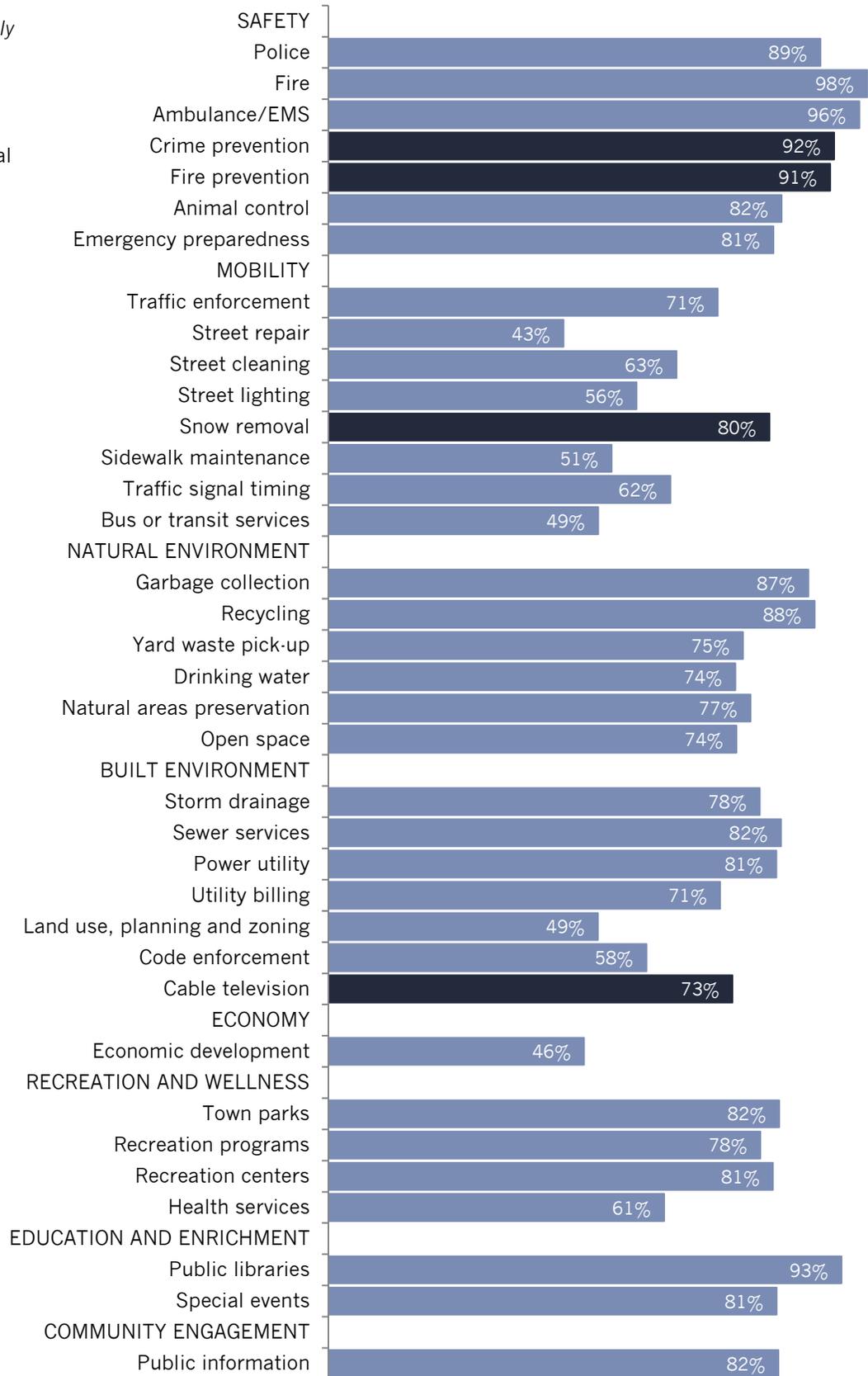
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Figure 2: Aspects of Governance

Percent rating positively  
(e.g., excellent/good)

Comparison to national  
benchmark

- Higher
- Similar
- Lower



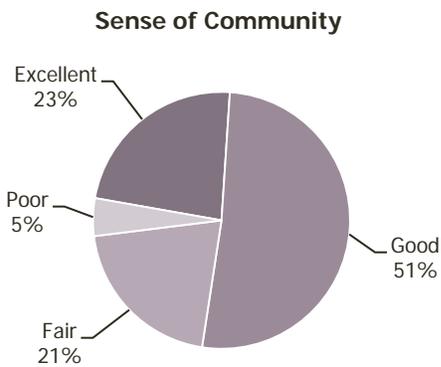
# Participation

*Are the residents of Ashland connected to the community and each other?*

An engaged community harnesses its most valuable resource, its residents. The connections and trust among residents, government, businesses and other organizations help to create a sense of community, a shared sense of membership, belonging and history. Similar to other communities in the U.S., about three-quarters of respondents gave excellent or good scores to the sense of community in Ashland.

About 9 in 10 survey respondents indicated they would recommend living in Ashland to someone who asked and planned to remain in the community for the next five years. Residents were more likely to recommend living in Ashland to someone who asked in 2019 compared to 2016. About half of residents reported they had contacted Ashland employees; this rating decreased from 2016 to 2019. These levels were similar to those reported across the nation.

The survey included over 30 activities and behaviors for which respondents indicated how often they participated in or performed each, if at all. Levels of Participation varied widely across the different facets, making the benchmarks comparisons, as well as comparisons to Ashland over time, useful for interpreting the results. About 9 in 10 respondents had recycled at home, purchased goods or services in Ashland or talked to or visited with a neighbor.



Ashland residents were more likely to have used public transportation instead of driving compared to residents in other benchmark communities and from 2016 to 2019. Furthermore, respondents in Ashland were less likely to report a crime or observe a code violation when compared to levels observed in other jurisdictions; these levels decreased over time.

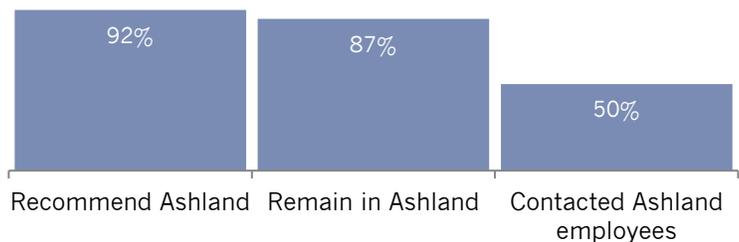
Compared to municipalities across the country, fewer Ashland residents reported stocking supplies in preparation for an emergency, carpooling instead of driving alone, walking or biking instead of driving, working in Ashland, using Ashland Recreation Department or their programs, or participating in religious or spiritual activities. In 2019, more residents were under housing cost stress than in 2016. Additionally, since the 2016 community survey, fewer residents had stocked supplies in

preparation for an emergency, conserved water, used Ashland Recreation Department or their programs, or watched a local public meeting, among others.

*Percent rating positively (e.g., very/somewhat likely, yes)*

*Comparison to national benchmark*

■ Higher ■ Similar ■ Lower



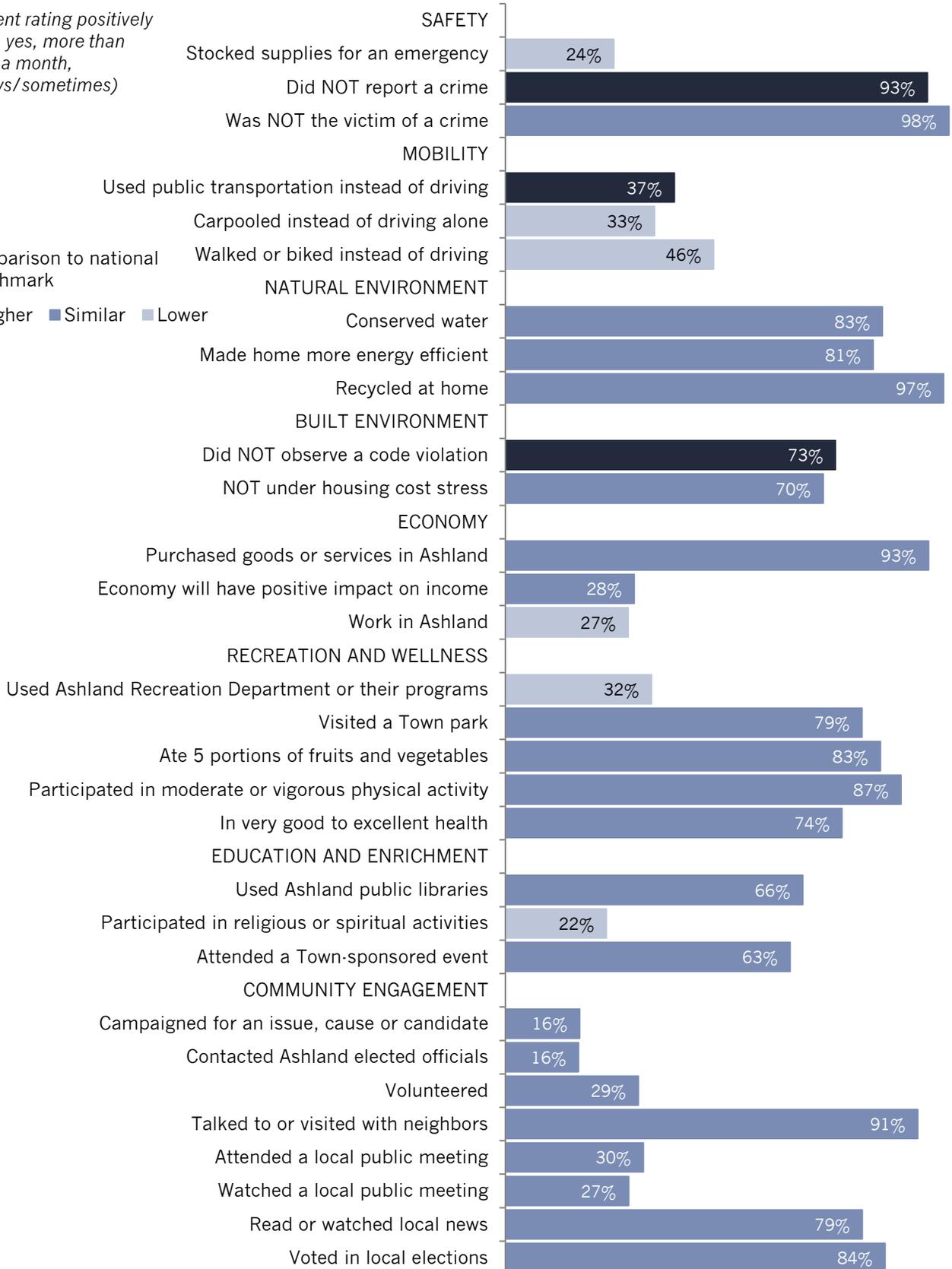
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Figure 3: Aspects of Participation

Percent rating positively  
(e.g., yes, more than  
once a month,  
always/sometimes)

Comparison to national  
benchmark

■ Higher ■ Similar ■ Lower

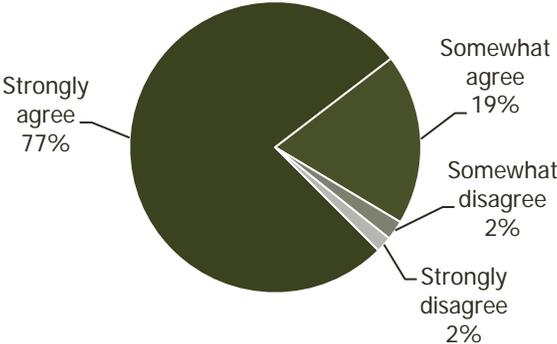


# Special Topics

The Town of Ashland included several questions of special interest on The NCS, with topics related to youth substance abuse, contact with Town employees, the importance of strategic planning areas, sources of Town information and the use of the previous 2016 community survey data.

The Town asked residents about youth substance abuse in Ashland. Almost all residents (96%) agreed that the community should try to prevent youth substance abuse, with about three-quarters of respondents strongly agreeing.

Figure 4: Youth Substance Abuse  
*To what degree do you agree or disagree that as a community, Ashland should try to prevent youth substance abuse?*



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About 6 in 10 residents had contacted a Town employee in the 12 months prior to the survey. Of the residents who had indicated they had contact with an employee, more than 8 in 10 residents reviewed the knowledge, courtesy, overall impression and responsiveness of the employee as excellent or good.

Figure 5: Contact with Town Employee

Have you had any in-person or phone contact with an employee of the Town of Ashland within the last 12 months (including police, receptionists, planners or any others)?

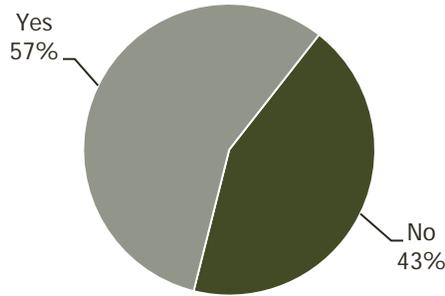
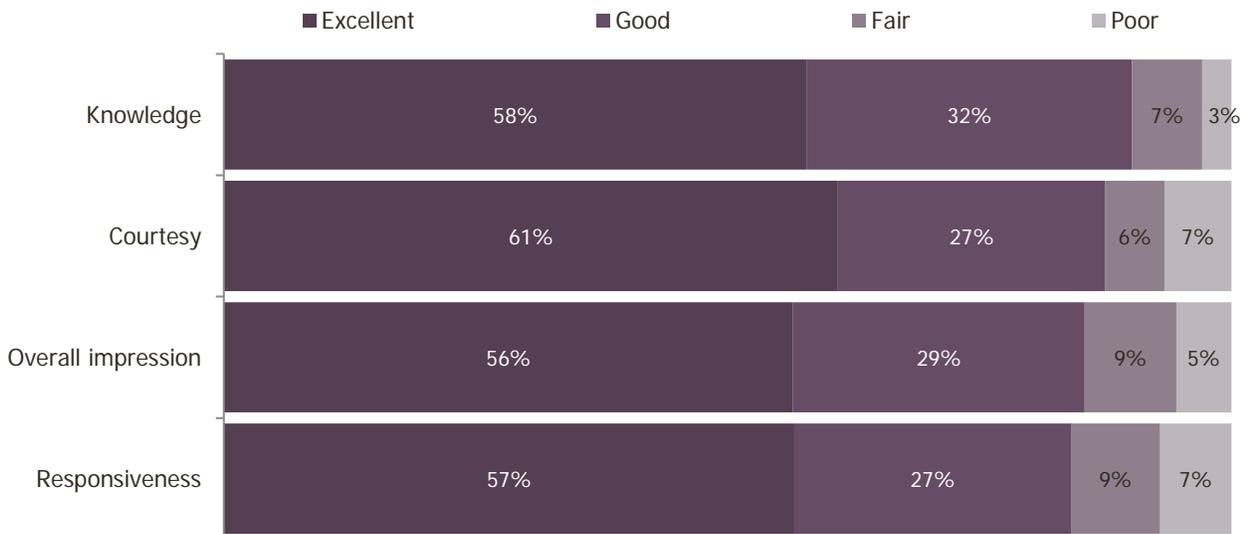


Figure 6: Impression of Town Employee

What was your impression of the employee(s) of the Town of Ashland in your most recent contact? (Rate each characteristic below.)

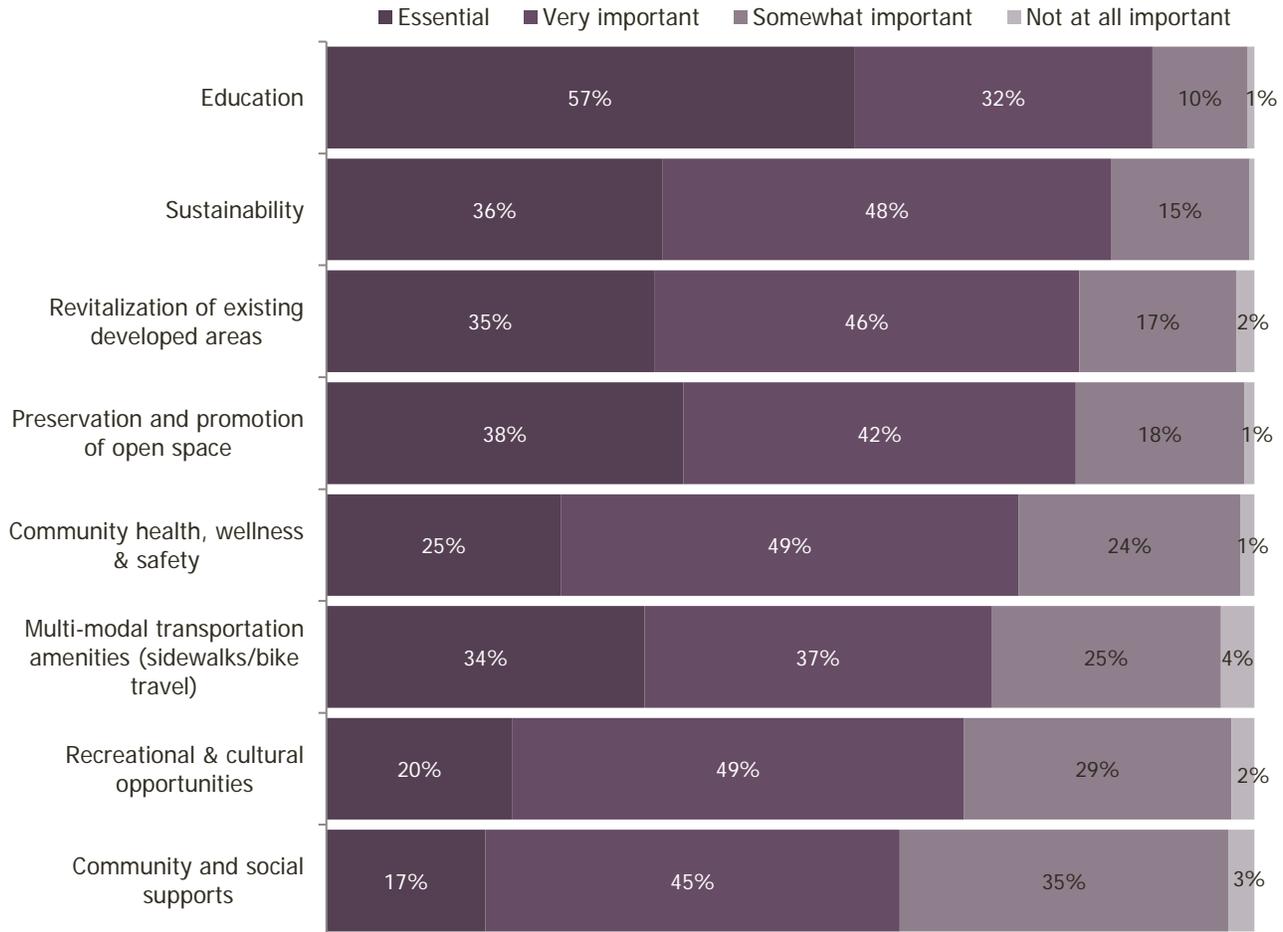


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Community members rated the importance of strategic planning areas to the overall quality of life in Ashland. About 9 in 10 residents reported that education was essential or very important to the overall quality of life, while about 8 in 10 indicated that sustainability, revitalization of existing developed areas, and the preservation and promotion of open space was essential or very important. At least 6 in 10 respondents indicated that community health, wellness and safety; multi-modal transportation amenities; recreational and cultural opportunities; and community and social supports were essential or very important strategic planning areas.

Figure 7: Importance of Strategic Planning Areas

Please rate how important, if at all, each of the following strategic planning areas are to the overall quality of life in the Town:

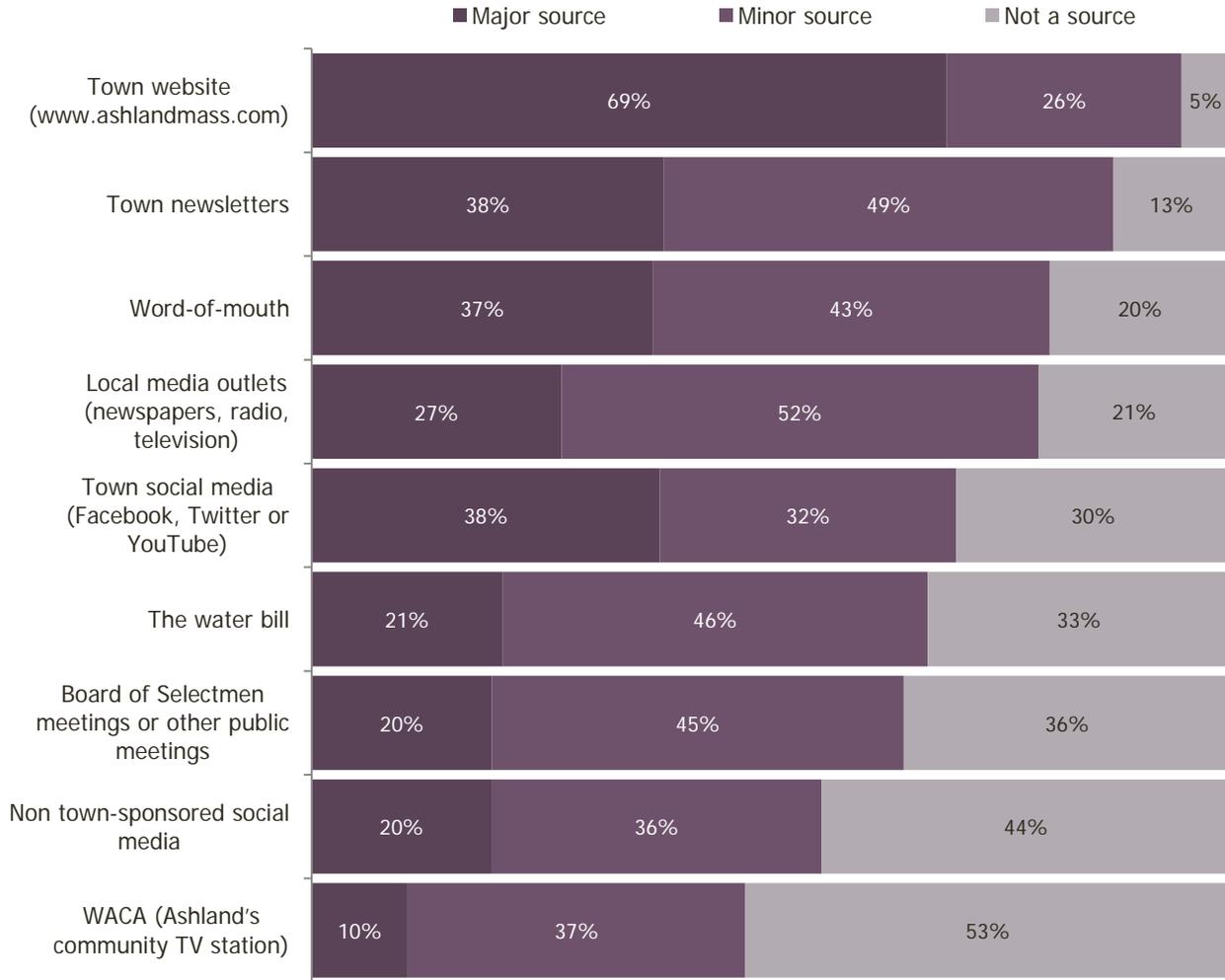


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When asked about sources utilized for obtaining information about the Town government and its activities, events and services, at least half of residents said they used each source as a major or minor source of information. The Town website and Town newsletters were utilized most, while non Town-sponsored social media and WACA (Ashland's community TV station) were the least-used sources.

Figure 8: Sources of Town Information

Please indicate how much of a source, if at all, you consider each of the following to be for obtaining information about the Town government and its activities, events and services:

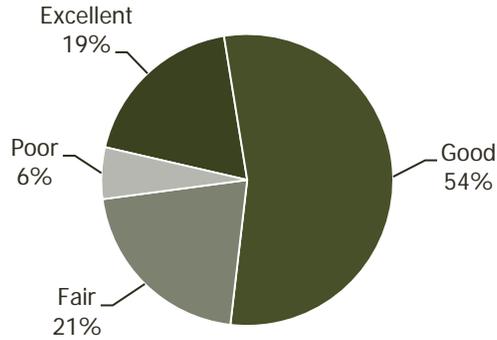


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The Town asked residents to evaluate how effectively they used the data from the community survey conducted in 2016. About three-quarters of residents felt the Town did an excellent or good job using the data. About 2 in 10 respondents felt the Town did a fair job, while only 6% indicated the Town did a poor job at using the data effectively.

Figure 9: Use of Previous Community Survey Data

*How would you rate the job the Town of Ashland did at effectively using the data collected from the previous community survey that was conducted in 2016?*



# Conclusions

## Ashland continues to be a desirable place to live, with Safety as a feature that contributes to quality of life.

About 9 in 10 community members gave high marks to the overall quality of life in Ashland, the town and their neighborhoods as places to live, and Ashland as a place to raise children. About three-quarters of residents favorably rated the town's overall image or reputation and its overall appearance. In 2019, more residents positively rated overall quality of life, Ashland as a place to retire, their neighborhoods as a place to live, Ashland's overall image or reputation and its overall appearance than in 2016. About three-quarters of community members gave high marks to the sense of community in the town. About 9 in 10 respondents planned to remain in Ashland for the next five years and were likely to recommend living in Ashland to someone who asked; ratings for the latter increased from 2016 to 2019.

As in 2016, residents indicated that Safety was an important focus area for the Town to address in the coming two years. About 9 in 10 residents assigned positive scores to the overall feeling of safety, an exceptional rating that was higher than the national benchmarks. Additionally, almost all residents felt safe in their neighborhoods (97%) and in the downtown/commercial areas (97%). Out of all Town services, police, fire, ambulance/EMS, crime prevention and fire prevention were given some of the most positive reviews. Compared to 2016, more people positively rated emergency preparedness and animal control in 2019, and fewer people had reported a crime. When asked how important various strategic planning areas were to the overall quality of life in Ashland, about three-quarters of residents felt community health, wellness and safety was essential or very important.

## Residents notice gains in the local economy, yet desire improvements to the downtown/commercial areas.

Survey participants highlighted the Economy as a priority for the Town in the next two years. Similar to other comparison communities, about 7 in 10 residents positively rated the overall economic health of Ashland (which increased from 2016 to 2019), while at least half assigned favorably reviews to Ashland as a place to work and the overall quality of business and service establishments. Residents' evaluations of several economy-related aspects improved from 2016 to 2019, including employment opportunities, Ashland as a place to visit and work, cost of living, vibrancy of the downtown/commercial area, overall quality of business and service establishments, economic development and new development in Ashland. However, compared to other communities across the country, Ashland residents gave lower ratings to Ashland as a place to visit, shopping opportunities and vibrancy of the downtown/commercial area. About 8 in 10 residents felt that revitalization of existing developed areas was essential or very important to the quality of life in Ashland.

## Natural Environment is an asset to Ashland residents.

In addition to Safety and Economy, residents also indicated Natural Environment as a top priority for the Town. At least 8 in 10 residents gave high scores to the overall natural environment, air quality, cleanliness, garbage collection and recycling services. More residents assigned positive reviews to overall natural environment, cleanliness, garbage collection, yard waste pick-up, open space and natural areas preservation in 2019 compared to 2016. Nearly all residents reported recycling at home (97%) and about 8 in 10 had made efforts to make their home more energy efficient and conserve water; these levels were on par with national averages. Additionally, about 8 in 10 residents felt that the preservation and promotion of open space was an essential or important strategic planning area that would impact quality of life.

## Residents are pleased with their local government and ratings are on the rise.

When rating various aspects of Ashland's leadership and governance, about 9 in 10 respondents gave excellent or good ratings to the overall customer service provided by the Town. About three-quarters of residents assigned high marks to the Town acting in the best interest of Ashland, being honest and treating all residents fairly; these ratings were strong and higher than the national benchmarks. About three-quarters of residents gave positive reviews to the overall direction of the Town, welcoming resident involvement and overall confidence in Town government and these ratings were similar to those given in other communities. Additionally, respondents gave significantly higher marks to all aspects of Ashland government performance in 2019 compared to 2016, with ratings increases ranging from 11% to 21%.