

Planning Fairlee's Future Survey Report & Response of the Planning Commission

July 4, 2015

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BACKGROUND

In December 2014, the Fairlee Planning Commission contracted with Ginny Reed, PhD, MPH to develop and analyze a survey that would provide information designed to assist the Commission in its planning concerning the Village Center.

The purpose of this report is to describe the results of that survey.

EVALUATION DESIGN AND METHODS

Survey Development

The survey was informed by a review of instruments used to assess similar questions in other small towns. Draft questions were iterated back and forth between the evaluator and the Planning Commission until consensus was reached on a series of quantitative and qualitative questions. Topics covered included:

- The image of Fairlee to outsiders (open-ended question)
- Ways of improving the image of Fairlee as a four-season recreation destination (open-ended question)
- Pride in the Village Center (five-point Likert-type scale)
- What participants like most and least about the Village Center (open-ended question)
- Participants' rating of items many people in small town say they like about their town and participants' sense of whether those items are currently present in Fairlee (Likert-type scales)
- Participants' ranking of the types of business they believe are desirable and would like to see located in the Village Center in the next five years (rank listing)
- Participants' rating of the desirability of locating four specific types of business in Fairlee's Village Center (five-point Likert-type scale)
- Participants' concern about what the buildings in the Village Center look like or about the types of businesses they contain (four-option nominal data)
- Demographic information (age and type of residency)

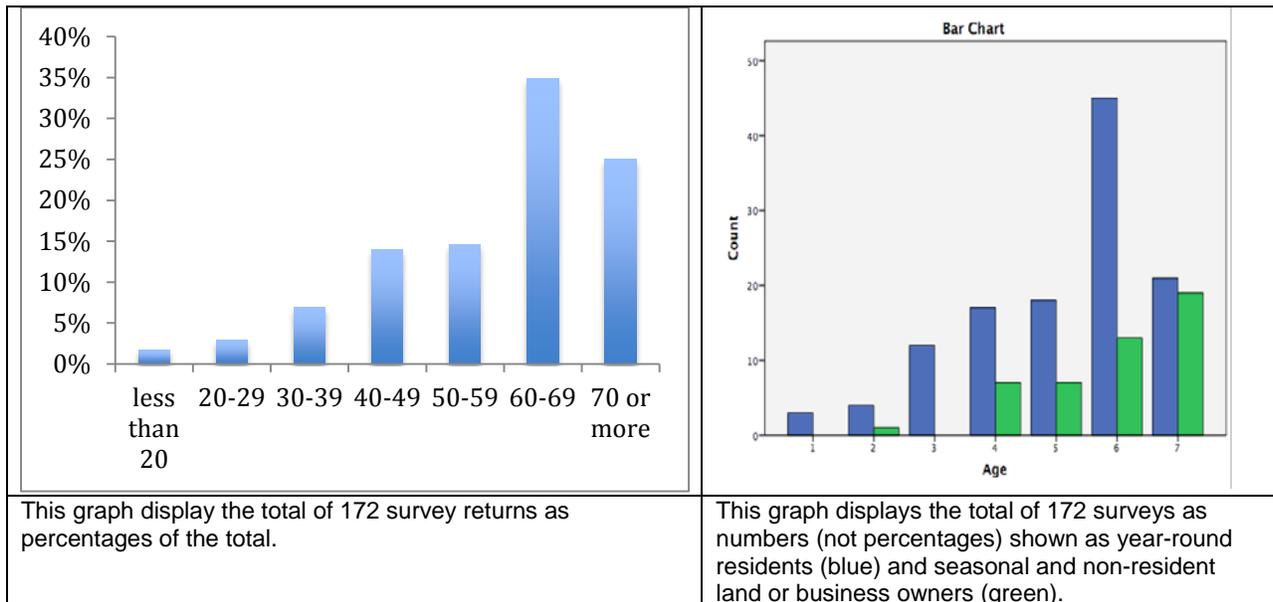
Survey Deployment

The survey was initially deployed at the Town Meeting on March 3, 2015. It was also made available at a variety of sites around the town – including the Library and the Fairlee Diner. The survey was mailed to residents and taxpayers of the town. The closing date for completed surveys to be submitted was May 28, 2015.

Survey Response

Since the Planning Fairlee's Future survey was deployed at the Town Meeting on March 3, 172 surveys have been returned.¹ Of these, 123 (72%) respondents indicated that they are year-round residents. This represents 16% of the year-round population that is 18 years of age and older.² This number also means that one can have 95% confidence that the numerical answers are within 8% of their true value, or 99% confidence that the numerical answers are within 11% of their true value.³

Age



To provide some context, extrapolated from the 2010 census data in the Fairlee Town Plan, the adult population (N=780) of Fairlee breaks down as follows:

- Age 18-19 = ~ 23 or 3%
- Age 20-29 = ~ 100 or 13%
- Age 30-39 = ~ 105 or 13%
- Age 40-49 = ~ 126 or 16%
- Age 50-59 = ~ 185 or 24%
- Age 60-69 = ~ 130 or 17%
- Age 70 and over = ~ 111 or 14%

1 Of these, 167 were received by the May 28 deadline. An additional 5 surveys received by July 1 were included to capture every voice.

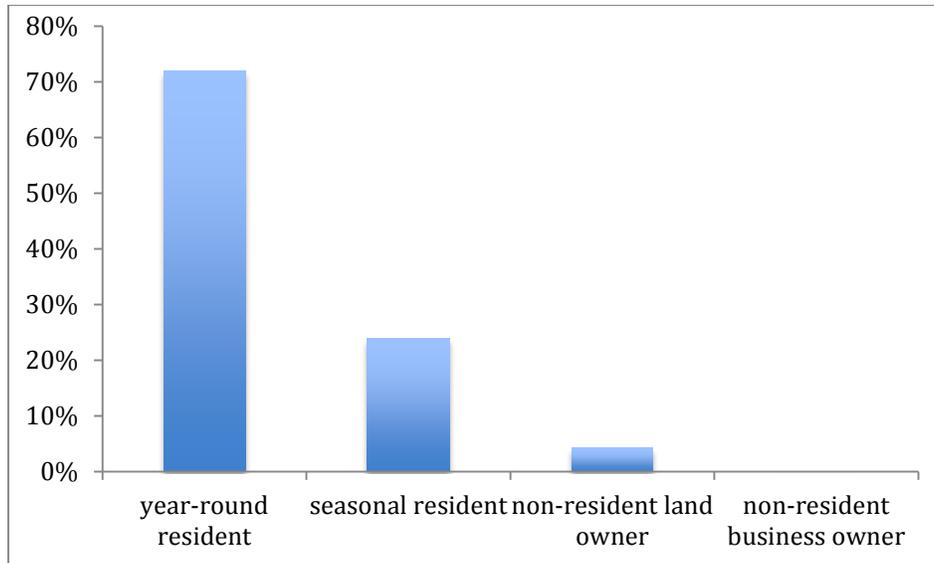
2 Based on the 2010 census that shows the population of Fairlee as 780 individuals 20 years of age or older.

3 <http://www.custominsight.com/articles/random-sample-calculator.asp>

This means that the youngest adult residents (ages 18-19) and those aged 40-49 are appropriately represented in this survey while those ages 20-29, 30-39, and 50-59 are under-represented. Those ages 60-69 and 70 and over are over-represented.

Residency

As shown in the figure below, 72% of the respondents identified themselves as year-round residents while 24% identified themselves as seasonal and 4% identified themselves as non-resident land owners.



Methods of Analysis

Quantitative data were entered into an Excel spreadsheet and were analyzed using descriptive statistics. These data were also entered into SPSS (statistical software) in order to conduct analyses that split the responses by type of residency. This allowed for the presentation of data as a whole (all respondents) and by showing the distribution of responses for year-round residents and seasonal residents and others separately.

In the instance where a respondent provided two responses to the same question (N=22), a standard protocol of noting the duplicates and alternately selecting the right or left answer was followed. In this way the maximum number of data points are preserved and bias towards maximizing or minimizing ambiguous responses is eliminated. Similarly, in the instances where respondents X'd or created a circle between the circle responses on quantitative questions, the same protocol was followed.

The written answers to the open-ended questions (qualitative data) were entered into an Excel database. Original spelling, grammar, and punctuation were preserved (and reported in quotes).

Once all surveys had been entered, the statements for each question were read in their entirety with the goal of looking for patterns and thinking about ways of grouping.

In analyzing any narrative coding task, there are a number of important decisions to be made about how best to organize the material in a useful way. Not surprisingly, the open-ended question responses contained not only individual statements that the respondents believed answered the questions, but also information that elaborated upon or explained the statements or that provided examples and context.

Narrative coding is an inherently subjective task. There are multiple ways of thinking about how bits of information may be grouped together. Pattern recognition occurs as a result of grouping and re-grouping the individual data points in multiple ways.

The approach to sorting the individual statements was to cluster them on the basis of inferred headings or categories suggested from reading the statements. In some cases, statements could fit into more than one category. In these instances, the statements were placed in all applicable categories; there was no attempt made to make the categories mutually exclusive. The analysis is designed to uncover general patterns and themes.

FINDINGS

The image of Fairlee

Responses to the question, ‘What do you believe is the image of Fairlee to outsiders?’ fell into three categories. The largest category consisted of negative descriptions, with over 30 different words or phrases used to describe respondents’ perceptions. The descriptors ‘tired/struggling/vacant with potential’ were used most often.

“A town with 2 lakes and a lot of potential but not a very attractive or vibrant downtown.”

“The current opinion of Fairlee is that it’s neglected... and failing to reach its potential.”

“ Small village neglected... but with a lot of potential.”

The next largest category consisted of references to particular aspects of the town. The lakes - Lake Morey and/or Lake Fairlee were mentioned most often. The Lake Morey Inn or the image of Fairlee as a resort were noted numerous times. Recreation – either summer or winter – was noted frequently while the summer camps were mentioned a number of times. Particular other aspects, including trails, the Fourth of July parade, the Fairlee Diner, Chapman’s, Whippi Dip, the golf course, and the flea market were identified numerous times. A small number of respondents mentioned the schools.

“ A quick on and off the interstate for gas and something to eat – a friendly town – picturesque for its palisades and lake. Unique with its Whippy Dip, drive in movies.”

“ Outsiders from local towns know Lake Morey Inn and golf course. Outsiders from outside VT maybe heard of the Inn or Aloha Camps.”

Descriptions of the town's character constituted the third category. Many respondents described Fairlee as a small Vermont town. The descriptors 'historic' and 'quaint' were mentioned a number of times. 'Nice,' 'pleasant,' and 'friendly' were used several times while 'quiet' and 'perfect' were noted by a handful of respondents.

"A quiet Vermont town with a fine resort and community lake."

"Small town that has nice people."

What would improve the image of Fairlee as a four-season recreation destination?

Survey respondents were presented with the statement, "One vision of Fairlee is that it be seen as a four-season recreation destination. How would you improve Fairlee's image as such a destination?"

Responses clustered into four main categories, the largest of which concerned the addition of businesses, services, and events designed to support four-season recreation.⁴ The need for restaurants in town was specifically mentioned many times. Adding small businesses – such as specialty stores, craft shops, equipment sales/rental – described by one individual as 'destination support' and by another as 'amenities that complement recreation' – was noted nearly as often. A related subset of items concerned improving the town's outdoor amenities and included adding trails for hiking, biking, cross-country skiing, and ATVs. Increasing the number of 'events' in town garnered the next most number of mentions. Ideas ranged from a winter sports festival to more joint projects with the Lake Morey Resort. Several respondents suggested that increasing lodging options – with an increased number of rental cottages and perhaps a B&B – would be helpful.

"12 month good sit down restaurant, needs architectural consistency and charm factor, healthier groceries. Create a stronger sense of a town center. Need to concentrate stores, restaurants, and civic buildings and turn other property along Main St. into park area."

"Build programs – fishing, hiking, x-country skiing, skating, biking. Add CT river access! Bring in a retailer committed to providing programs & rentals at 'reasonable' cost... Use the Fairlee Forest & X-Rivendell Trail!! Canoe rentals on the lake!"

A number of respondent comments were related to structures or natural resources within the town. Many participants mentioned enhancing public access to the river area and/or the lake. An equal number of individuals suggested improved use of the railroad station with ideas including a museum, visitor center, restaurant, or tourist train. Making use of the second floor of the Town Hall was also suggested.

"Promote and create public access to trails, forests, river and lakes (parking) (bike lanes) (signage) (supporting events and festivals townwide)."

⁴ It should be noted that a small number of participants reported disagreeing with the vision of Fairlee as a four-season recreation destination. They preferred to see the vision of Fairlee as 'a nice place to live'.

“ Have more water frontage park space. Access to river.”

An additional category of responses consisted of suggestions to improve the visual appeal and infrastructure of the town. Many respondents noted a need to clean up and fix up the streets and the businesses that line them. Participants suggested improving landscaping and rebuilding the Colby Block with historic architecture. These comments were in line with others that suggested enhancing the downtown by emphasizing ‘traditional New England architecture.’

“ An attractive village center that preserves its heritage buildings (train station, town hall, green) and keeps new construction/business fitting with the character of the village.”

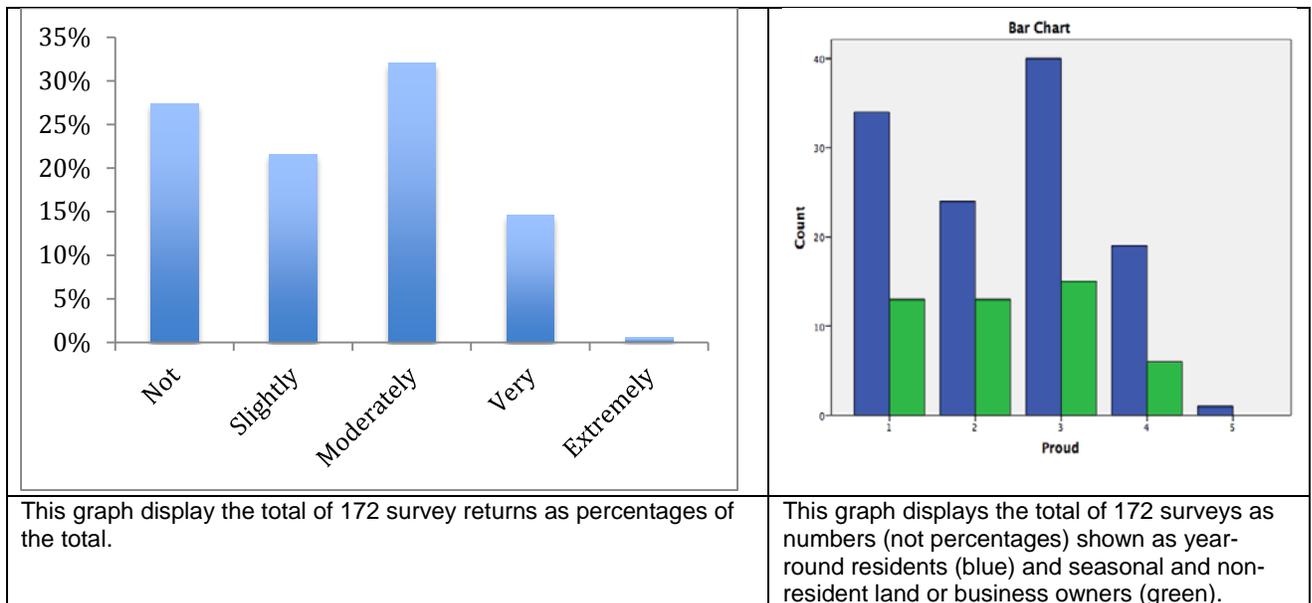
“ Make it a quaint Vermont village.”

Finally, a number of responses were related to the need to improve and increase advertising. A small number of respondents suggested that making Fairlee more affordable – specifically in terms of gas prices and taxes – would be helpful.

“ Expand advertisements so more people from outside our area come for these things and it becomes more recognized.”

Perceptions of the Village Center

The next question was a rating question for which participants were asked how proud they were of the Village Center, defined as the area bordered by the Fairlee Diner on the north end of Main St. and by Wing’s Market on the south end of Main St. The response options were on a five-point Likert-type scale consisting of ‘not proud’, ‘slightly proud’, ‘moderately proud’, ‘very proud’, and ‘extremely proud’. As shown in the figure below, only 15% of respondents reported being ‘very proud’ or ‘extremely proud’ of the Village Center.



The next two questions asked participants to describe what they like most and least about the Village Center.

Like most about the Village Center

Respondents overwhelmingly identified the Town Green/Commons/Square/Gazebo as the areas of the Village Center they liked most. Structures, including Chapman’s Store (“ a prime example of a service business with character, energy, and culture”) and the Town Hall, were mentioned many times. A number of participants reported that they most liked the Railroad Station⁵, the classic, well-maintained old homes and businesses on the west side of Main St., the Church on the Green, and the Library.

“ I love the Green, town hall, gazebo. The church also adds ambiance. Mostly I love the dedicated knowledgeable & professional town staff...Chapman’s really adds a Vermont flair.”

“ Railroad station, town commons, town hall, large trees on Route 5, bridge and palisades.”

The character of Fairlee – its quiet, simplicity, friendliness, community-oriented nature and reputation as a gathering place were frequently identified.

“ ...Authenticity. Programs/meals for the community on the Green.”

“ The potential – love the people who live and work there – it is very welcoming once you get past the front doors.”

Several respondents identified the Village Center’s convenience and close proximity and the amount of green space as the areas of the Village Center they liked most.

“ The green space on both sides of Route 5 – the Village Green and the train station. All the trees in both areas make a shady summer glade.”

“ Everything is in close proximity – the friendliness of the people.”

Like least about the Village Center

Respondents overwhelmingly identified the closed and empty stores and vacant lots as the characteristics of the Village Center they liked least. Other attributes identified in this category included poor maintenance with several specific businesses identified as having a run-down appearance.

“Empty store fronts & lots, lack of interesting shopping. Lack of interesting architecture.”

“ Empty run down buildings.”

“ US Rt. 5 and its many ... vacant buildings.”

Yet other specific businesses were disliked on the basis of the type of business they are. Of note is that a number of respondents commented here or in other comment spaces on their dislike of the proposed Dollar General store.

Other comments identifying what respondents liked least about the Village Center included the lack of architectural consistency, lack of curb appeal, and the need for downtown beautification. The lack of businesses, restaurants, and places to meet garnered many mentions.

“ Poor architectural consistency.”

“ ... stores are not in keeping with a desirable rural atmosphere.”

“Lack of other stores & restaurants. Too thinly spaced and elongated. Too many nondescript, non-essential businesses and under-used or un-used historic buildings.”

Characteristics of a Successful Small Town

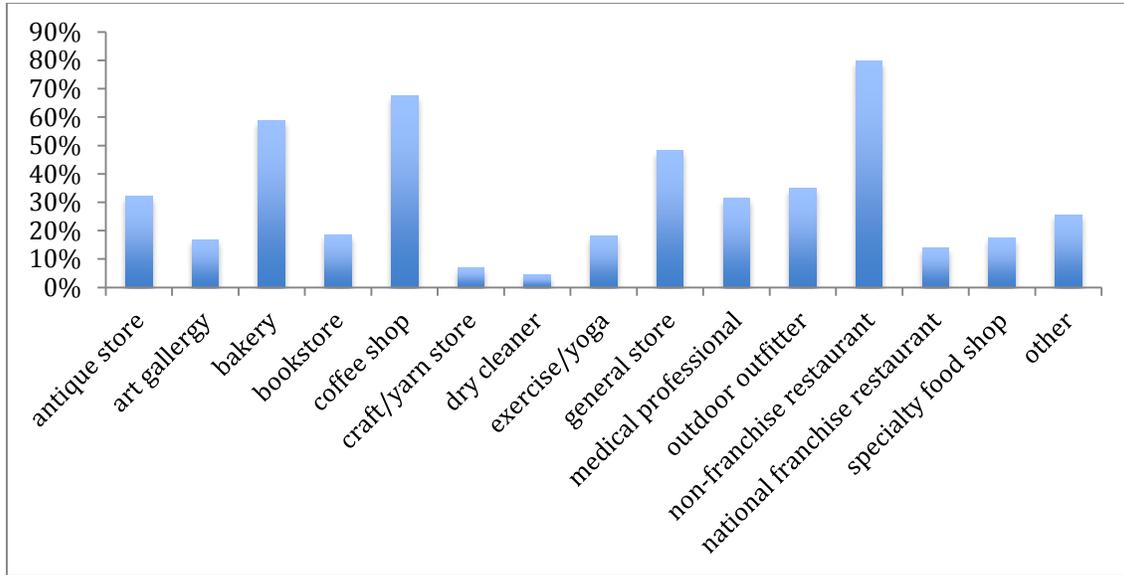
The next several questions provided a list of items many people in small towns say they like about their town. Participants were asked how important they believed each is to a successful small town and whether or not they believed it is currently present in Fairlee.

The items, in decreasing order of importance, and their presence (or lack) were:

- quality schools – ‘somewhat present’ to ‘present’
- attractive Main St. – ‘not present’ to ‘somewhat present’
- small town character – ‘somewhat present’ to ‘present’
- green spaces – ‘somewhat present’ to ‘present’
- parks & recreation – ‘somewhat present’ to ‘present’
- library – ‘somewhat present’ to ‘present’
- historic places – ‘somewhat present’ to ‘present’
- community center – ‘not present’ to ‘somewhat present’
- many tourist draws – ‘not present’ to ‘somewhat present’
- sidewalks – ‘not present’ to ‘somewhat present’

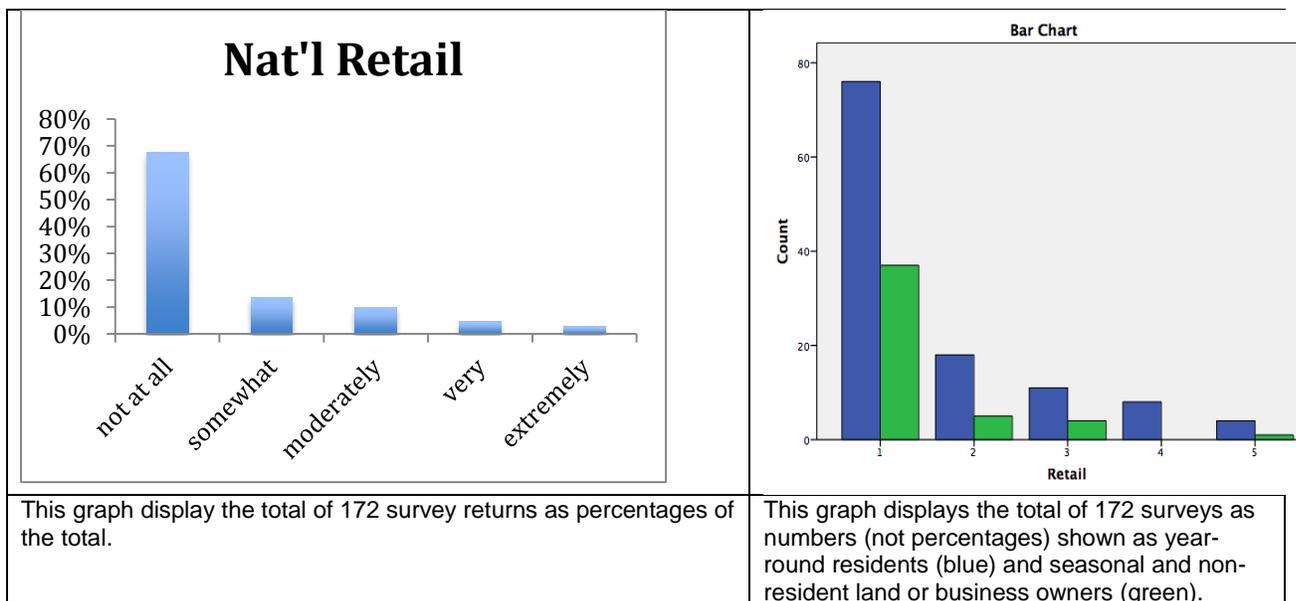
Types of Businesses Desired for the Village Center

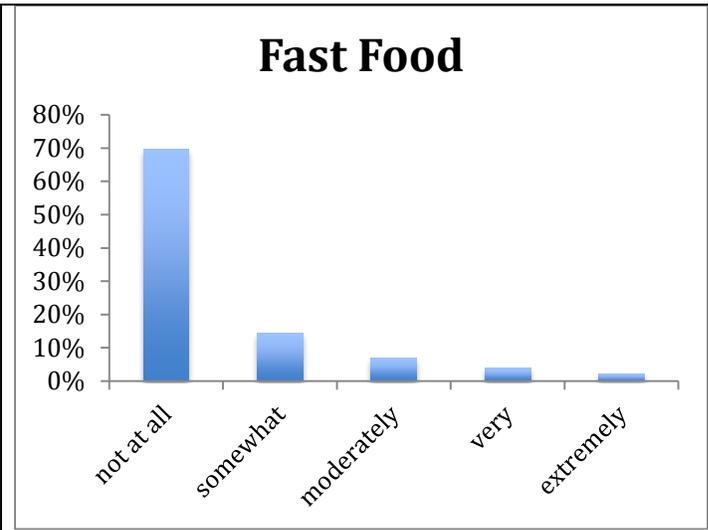
Respondents were provided with a list of businesses that some people in small towns have suggested are desirable and asked to choose no more than five they would like to see located in the Village Center in the next five years. As can be seen in the figure below, the top selections were for a non-franchise restaurant (selected by 80% of respondents), coffee shop (selected by 67% of respondents), bakery (selected by 59% of respondents), and general store (selected by 48% of respondents). A number of respondents indicated that some businesses could be combined, such as a bakery/coffee shop, or coffee shop/bookstore.



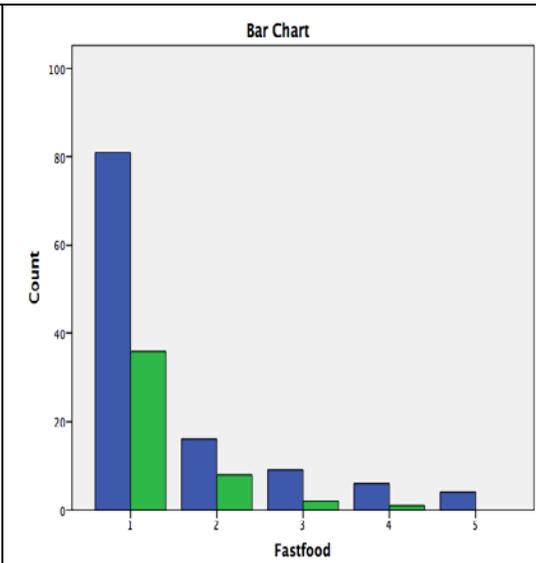
A number of respondents identified ‘other’ as a type of business they would like to see located in the Village Center. Businesses included a bowling alley, a teen center, an ECO center for lake and river education, a bar/music club, a car wash, ‘gaget’ store, and an event center.

Next, respondents were asked how desirable they believed it would be for four specific types of businesses to locate in Fairlee’s Village Center and to briefly explain their answer. The four types of businesses were chosen to represent categories that could be seen as opportunities or threats to Fairlee’s future. As can be seen from the figures below, the respondents do not believe any of the four choices are highly desirable.





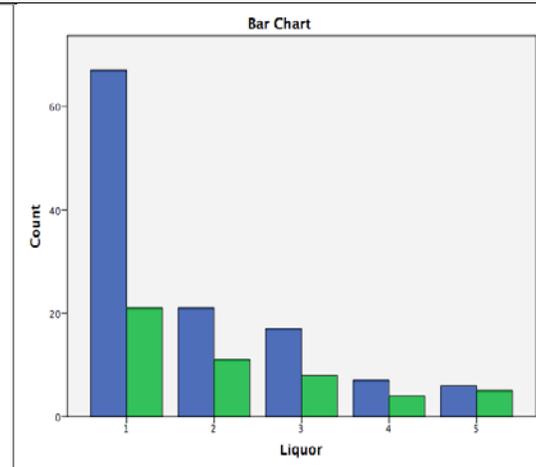
This graph display the total of 172 survey returns as percentages of the total.



This graph displays the total of 172 surveys as numbers (not percentages) shown as year-round residents (blue) and seasonal and non-resident land or business owners (green).

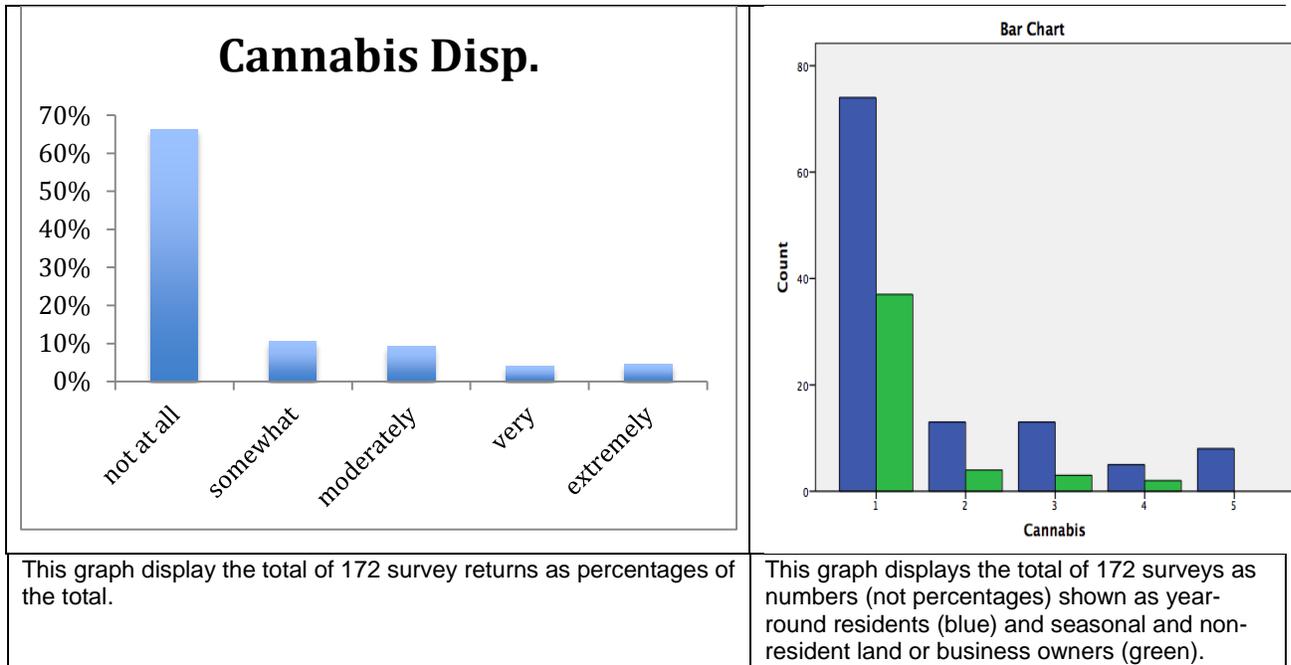


This graph display the total of 172 survey returns as percentages of the total.



This graph displays the total of 172 surveys as numbers (not percentages) shown as year-round residents (blue) and seasonal and non-resident land or business owners (green).

* A number of respondents commented that there is a liquor store 6 miles up the road in Bradford.



* Cannabis dispensary was included in the list since state law may change to make such a business legal. The question was included to seek the town’s response to this possibility.

Representative comments pertaining to the four above questions:

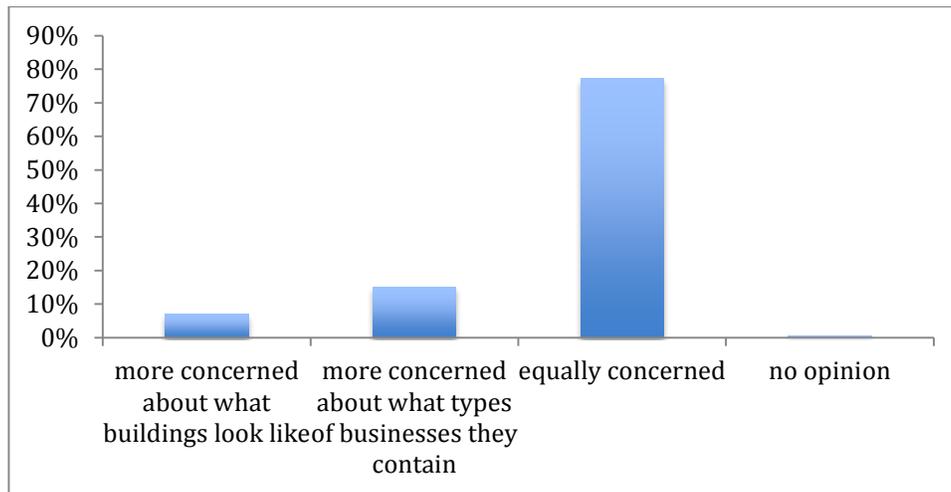
- Prefer local businesses, “mom and pop –type shops”.
 - “ Local first.”
 - “ Keep it small and local.”
- Prefer businesses that differentiate Fairlee rather than making it look like other towns.
 - “ Chains are destroying differences and that’s what makes a town special.”
 - “ An infestation of national retail & fast food chains and we would be any small highway exit”
- These types of businesses (national retail, fast food, liquor store, cannabis dispensary) do not exemplify or support small town values.
 - “ Wrong atmosphere for New England village.”
 - “ None of the above would make residents’ quality of life better. None of the above would offer meaningful jobs (or careers) for our kids.”
- While a few respondents noted that bringing any type of traffic into Fairlee would be beneficial, most noted that these types of businesses would bring the ‘wrong’ kind of business/traffic/people to Fairlee.

“At this point Fairlee needs almost any business it can get. It’s slip-sliding away.”

“National chains, liquor stores and cannabis dispensaries bring in people who will detract from a small town feeling where everyone knows each other.”

“I think Fairlee definitely needs another attraction (besides lake & resort). But the kind of people and type of spending attracted by national chains would be very different than the type of people & spending attracted by a more ‘local’ attraction like a fancy bakery, (or) Burdick’s chocolate”

The next question asked participants to describe whether they were more concerned about what the buildings in the Village Center looked like or about what types of businesses they contain. As can be seen in the figure below, respondents were equally concerned.



CONCLUSION

This report began with the notion that for the Fairlee Planning Commission to act on specific aspects of the newly-passed Town Plan, it is crucial that they have a deeper understanding of the views and perspectives of the residents and owners of Fairlee. Inherent in this understanding are three questions:

- How do residents and owners currently view Fairlee?
- What do they believe would improve the image of Fairlee?
- What types of businesses would they like to see develop (or not) in Fairlee?

Respondents to the Planning Fairlee's Future survey generally view Fairlee as a small town that is failing to live up to its potential. They note the town's many positive attributes – historical areas and structures and friendly character – while also identifying closed and empty stores, poor maintenance, and the run-down appearance of many areas of the Village Center as major impediments to the town's vitality.

Respondents believe that Fairlee's image as a four-season recreation destination could be improved by the addition of businesses, services, and events designed to support this vision. These include restaurants and other 'amenities that complement recreation.' Enhancing public access to the river area and/or lake and making enhanced use of the Railroad Station were frequently suggested. Finally, expanding advertising could help.

The type of business respondents would most like to see developed in Fairlee in the next five years is one or more non-franchise restaurants. This was followed by the desire for a coffee shop, bakery, general store, and antique store. When provided with four specific types of businesses that could be developed in Fairlee (national chain, fast-food, liquor store, cannabis dispensary), respondents were emphatic that they found none of these very desirable.

RESPONSE FROM THE PLANNING COMMISSION

The Planning Commission thanks everyone who has taken the time and energy to respond to the town survey. As we move forward with the effort to create effective zoning, the feedback we have received will be invaluable to us. The Commission is working hard to develop policy that will be beneficial to the town by promoting vibrant economic growth in Fairlee and encouraging businesses that will promote and enhance the character and charm of the village center. One clear message we received was to both protect and incorporate our valuable natural resources, including the lakes, trails and river that surround Fairlee, into the larger plan that we develop.

We look forward to presenting our work to the town in the coming months.

Respectfully submitted,

The Fairlee Planning Commission