

In the summer of 2013, the League of Women Voters of Waltham asked people living in Waltham what they liked and what they wanted to change about the city. Our goal was to get a sense of what the city's residents were thinking. From the data we collected, we wanted to discern patterns that would help us identify the issues that people in Waltham care about.

We interviewed 167 people at eight events, all at locations south of Main Street in Waltham.

The most heartening finding is how much people love Waltham. They believe that it is endowed with advantages: its diversity, downtown, history, location, two colleges, the Charles River, and green space. They say that it has the benefits of an urban area while maintaining a small town character, that it is safe and quiet. They like its friendliness and community spirit.

The respondents appreciate the community's activities and resources: the library and museums, parks and trails, recreation, and community events. They would like even more community activities, especially for families.

They wish for more business development, especially by locating businesses in the empty storefronts. There were seemingly contradictory comments about the businesses they would like to see in Waltham: some people like the small stores, but others would like a Walmart. People would like to see more variety in downtown shopping – fewer dollar stores and more cafes and bakeries and retail.

The respondents think that traffic is difficult, and that there are opportunities for improvement. They would like for the streets to be more bicycle friendly, although they think the streets are walkable (and want to keep them that way). They wish for better maintenance and cleanliness of streets and sidewalks and better signage. There are complaints about parking.

The respondents like the public transportation to Boston. They want the buses to run more often and between more locations within Waltham.

They are concerned that the city is being run without a vision for the future and wish for comprehensive city planning. However, they appreciate the low real estate taxes in Waltham, and the services that the city provides.

They are equally split between those who like the quality of Waltham's schools and others who think it needs to improve.

Many of the respondents cite the diversity of the population as one of Waltham's strengths, but are concerned that the groups remain in silos: that there is not enough connection or involvement among them. There was, however, little sign of unease or friction among the groups.

There are mixed responses regarding the "urbanization" of Waltham in its future: the respondents like the size of the city as it is. But they also want all the benefits of an urban culture, including better public transportation and a complete mix of stores. They want the city to be walkable and bicycle friendly, but also want available parking and better traffic.

Recommendations

We need to keep in mind that although there were many recommendations made in the report, many people love Waltham and are not looking for big changes. As with anything in life, there can always be improvements, but we should be wary of instituting major change in reaction to isolated incidents or comments or individual preferences.

However, the following areas stand out as issues that Waltham needs to tackle:

Waltham needs to have cleaner streets and sidewalks: as one participant noted, the people need to be taught to clean up after themselves. Perhaps block parties which include anti-litter and cleanup education and activities can be organized.

Waltham needs to re-evaluate the relationship between streets, cars, bicycles, and walking, especially in areas near the business district. This could also include a review of parking and public transportation policies.

We recommend that the City of Waltham initiate a professional city-sanctioned visioning process that includes renters, homeowners, students, and a sampling of residents from all parts of the city. Many visioning projects are dominated by business people, politicians, and homeowners. We recommend that the visioning includes a sample that is representative of all of Waltham's citizens.