PORTAGE TOWNSHIP TRUSTEE OFFICE

ST JOSEPH COUNTY, IN

Portage Township Riverside Community Center

Final Report

J2 Marketing

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The leadership of Portage Township engaged J2 Marketing to conduct a community-wide survey and explore the potential for a new community center along the St. Joseph River. 573 people started the survey with 427 completing it. There were no significant differences in perception of the community center across racial categories, resident location, or household income.

We identified:

- The majority of respondents support the development of the community center with 60.9% indicating at least somewhat supporting the concept and 76.6% anticipated using the community center at least a few times per year.
- Approximately 14.5% of respondents were strongly opposed to the idea (Chart 1).
- While there is a 2:1 ratio of support to opposition, there are some consistent themes from those opposed that would be worth consideration if the project is to move forward.
- Greater promotion of visiting downtown South Bend was associated with greater support for the community center project and one of the top perceived benefits of the project was the continued improvement of downtown South Bend. The types of events respondents were most interested in attending were those related to the arts or community building.
- Just 40.1% said they would be willing to pay a fee to rent the community center, while 3.8% said they would never pay a fee. The rest (56.1%) said that their response depended on the fee amount.
- A tiered rental fee was very important for supporters (see Chart 2), but non-supporters expressed that the cost was very unimportant. Cost to taxpayers was also the top concern among respondents.
- Having previously rented event space was not statistically associated with greater support for the project.
- 72.6% of the population have never personally rented a facility or community center for a non-wedding event.
- Concerns about cost and support do not appear to be driven by differences in economic status based on frequencies of income across levels of support.
- There is a statistically significant difference between those who are opposed and those who are supportive in their general affinity for downtown South Bend.

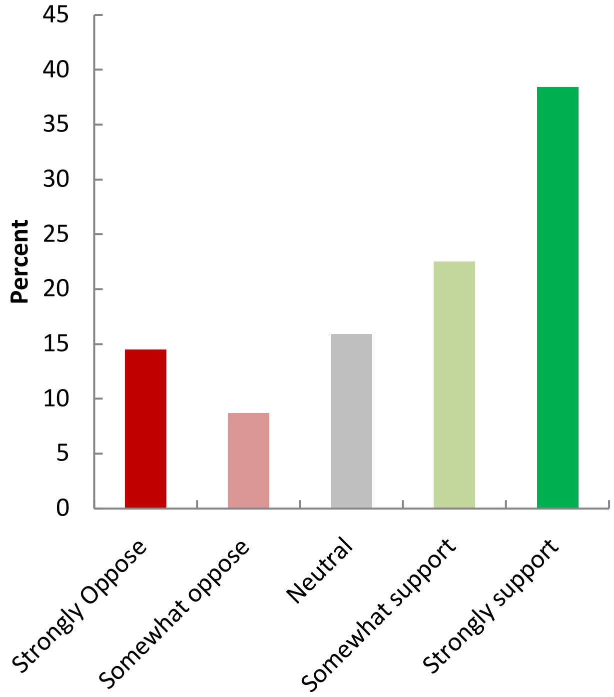
Among non-supporters, opposition to the project is not offset by reduced rental fees and is driven more by other factors. Most non-supporters were concerned about the use of taxes for this project when there appeared to be more pressing needs in the area (based on comments). However, a few of those most opposed did indicate they would still attend art or musical performance events.

Across all levels of support, there was little endorsement of paying a fee, and even among the strongest supporters, less than 50% stated they would pay. Most respondents indicated that it would depend on the fee. This question did have high non-response.

Taken together, these findings indicate that among supporters the perceived investment and benefit to the downtown community is worth any potential costs. For these respondents, the center could be an opportunity to create more community and connect with the arts.

Chart 1

Which of the following best describes your opinion on converting the riverside building into a community center?



Opinion	Percent
Strongly Oppose	14.5%
Somewhat Oppose	8.7%
Neutral	15.9%
Somewhat support	22.5%
Strongly support	38.4%

Chart 2

Which of the following best describes your opinion on the importance of a tiered rate system that provides a discount for residents?

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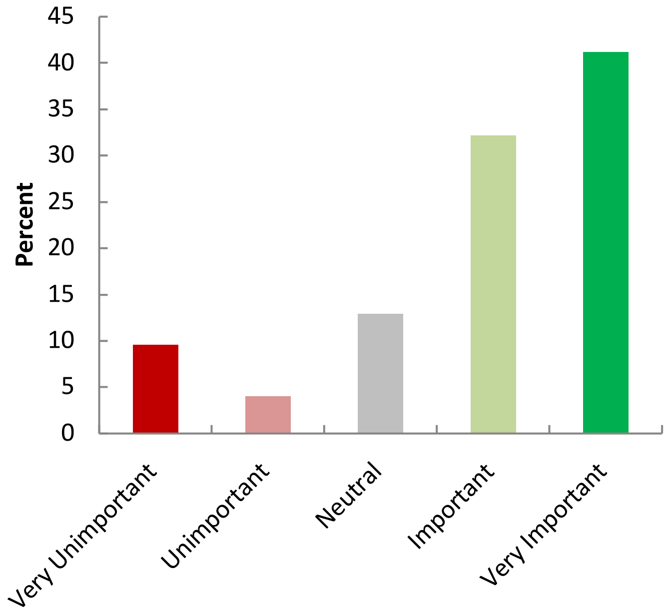

Opinion	Percent
Very Unimportant	9.6%
Unimportant	4.0%
Neutral	12.9%
Important	32.2%
Very Important	41.2%

A tiered rental fee was very important for supporters. There was little support for paying a fee without knowing what the amount would be.

Chart 3

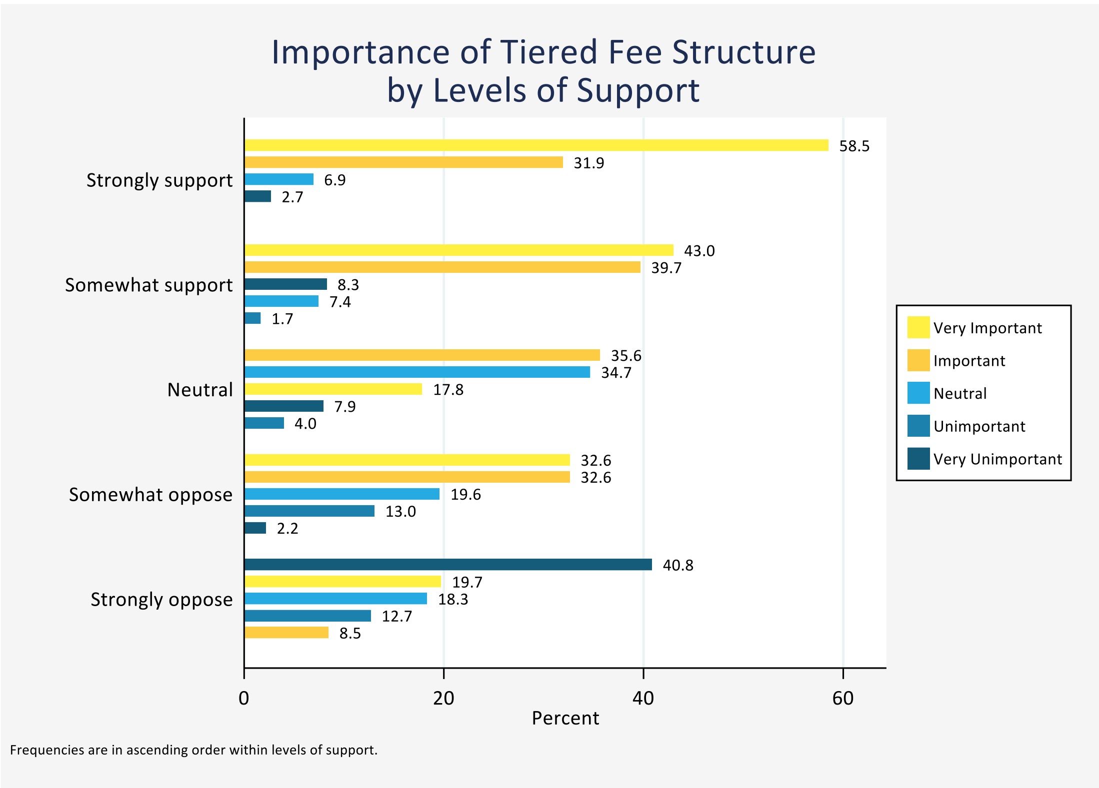

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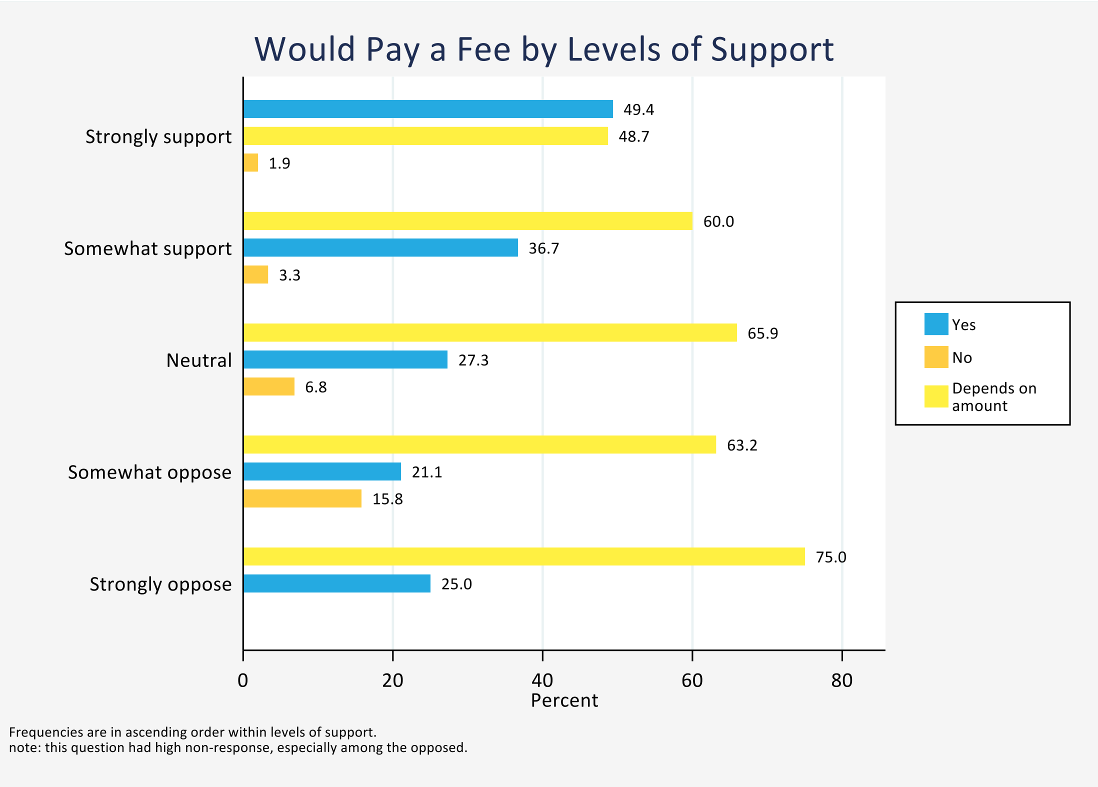
Chart 4



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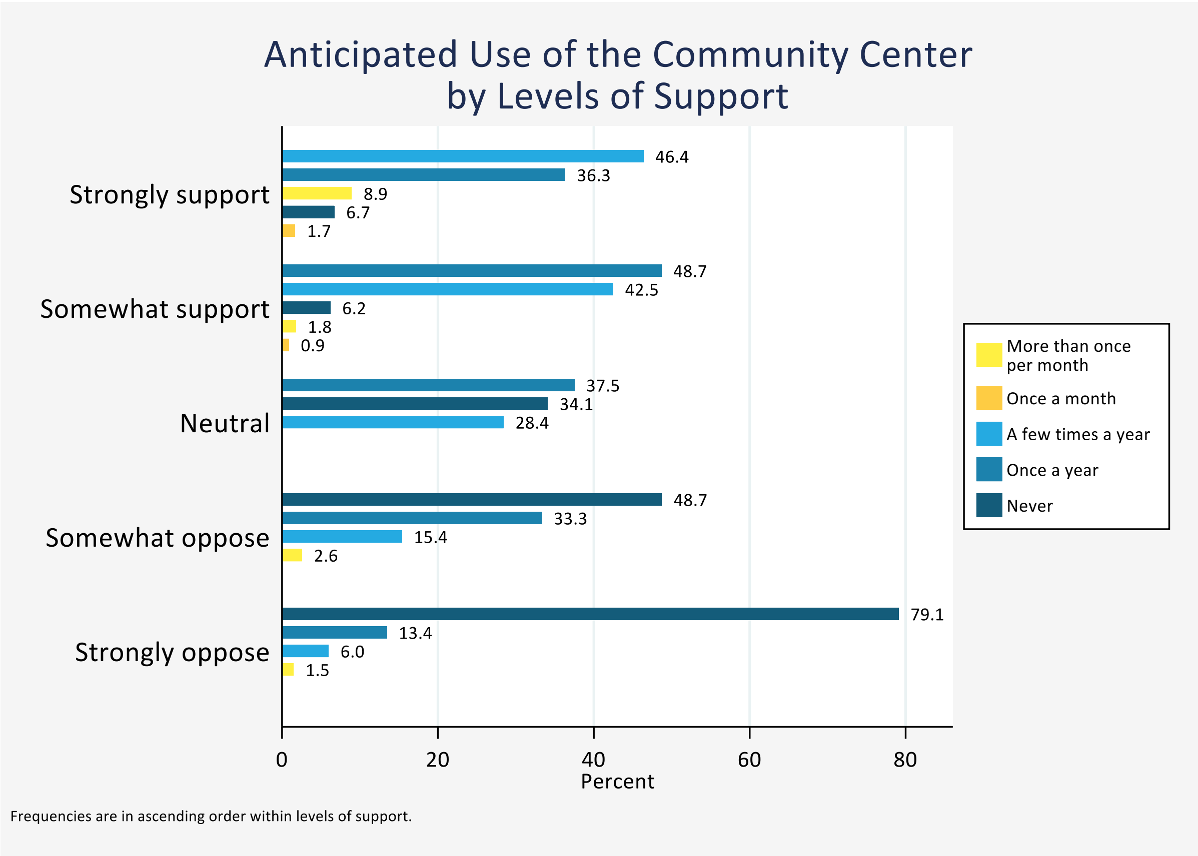
Support for, Potential Use, and Perceived Benefits of the Community Center

Support for the center is high, with 60.9% of survey takers supporting the project. Approximately 14.5% of respondents were strongly opposed to this idea. Many respondents indicated that they would rent a community center at least once per year. Only a majority (79.1%) of those who strongly opposed it indicated they would never use this facility. Even those who reported being somewhat opposed to the project still anticipated potentially using it at least once per year.

Chart 5



We asked an open-ended question about the community center and received responses from about half of the respondents (n=230). Among those who responded, a significant portion (n=89) were motivated by their opposition to the idea. In contrast, 42 responses were overtly positive or supportive of the community center.

The community response reveals complex and sometimes conflicting perspectives about the proposed event center. While there is some support for creating an affordable, accessible community space, there are significant concerns among those who answered the open-ended questions about fiscal responsibility and whether another event venue is truly needed, given the existing facilities in downtown South Bend. The strongest reservations pivot around using taxpayer funds for this purpose and potentially competing with private venues. Many respondents suggested alternative uses for the riverfront property, particularly housing, restaurants, or mixed-use development, that would create more consistent activity in the area.

The feedback also highlights important considerations for implementation if the project moves forward. Community members emphasize the need for robust security measures, true affordability through tiered pricing, and programming that serves diverse populations beyond just event rentals. There is particular interest in seeing the facility integrate well with existing outdoor spaces and trails while providing genuine community benefits through expanded services beyond traditional event space rental. The project's success may hinge on clearly differentiating it from existing venues, ensuring fiscal sustainability without increasing tax burdens, and demonstrating a compelling community need that isn't currently being met by other facilities.

The community feedback shows three clear connections in what people are worried about.

1. When people talked about spending taxpayer money, they almost always pointed to existing venues like Century Center as proof that we don't need another event space. They're essentially saying, "Why spend money on something we already have?"

2. The second connection is between location and safety - whenever people discussed developing the riverfront property, they brought up concerns about security, especially regarding parking lots, nighttime safety, and the homeless population in the area.

3. The third key connection is about who this center would really serve. People questioned whether putting an "affordable" community center on prime riverfront real estate makes sense, especially when many who need township services rely on bus transportation and might struggle to access the township office location. They're worried that the cost of developing and maintaining a riverside property could lead to higher taxes that would hurt the very people the center aims to help.

These connections show that this isn't just about building an event center - it's about balancing community needs, the use of public money, and choosing the right location that people can safely use.

At the end of the survey, we asked again for additional comments. Though the survey shows a clear 2-1 favorability for the project (and with few significant differences between those who support and those who express opposition), the open-ended questions were more attractive to those who opposed the project.

The supportive comments centered on (in order of frequency):

1. Community Development
    a. Support for downtown improvement
    b. Excited about riverfront development
    c. Potential economic benefits
2. Community Space
    a. Need for an affordable venue
    b. Support for public gathering space
    c. Interest in cultural programming
3. General Support
    a. Simple expressions of enthusiasm
    b. Looking forward to the development
    c. Congratulatory comments

The unsupportive comments had consistent themes (in order of frequency):

1. Government Role/Spending
    a. Opposition to township involvement in events business
    b. Concerns about tax increases
    c. Criticism of public funds usage
2. Competing Priorities
    a. Preference for funding low-income housing
    b. Need to address homelessness
    c. Infrastructure improvements needed first
3. Redundancy
    a. Already have Century Center
    b. Multiple existing event spaces
    c. No unmet need
4. Process Concerns
    a. Lack of transparency
    b. Poor planning process
    c. Limited community input

The remaining 35% were either neutral (focusing on naming suggestions or desired design features) or mixed (offering conditional support while raising concerns).

Figure 1

Word cloud from open-ended responses.

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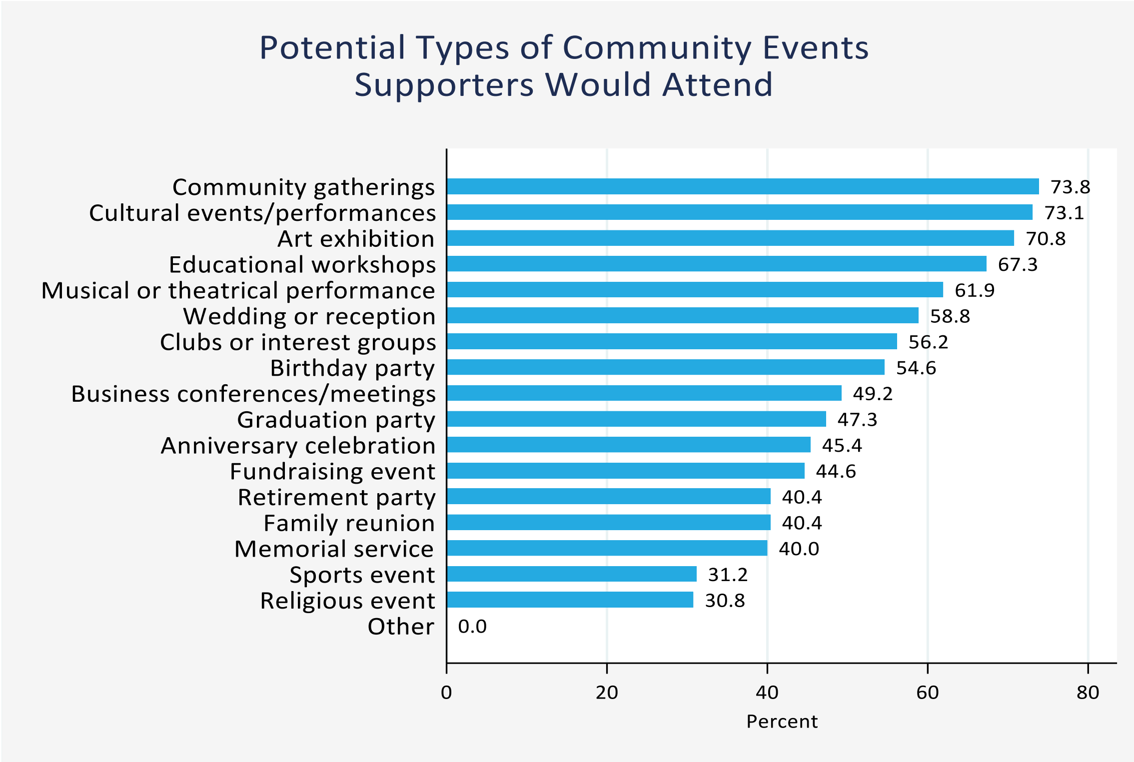
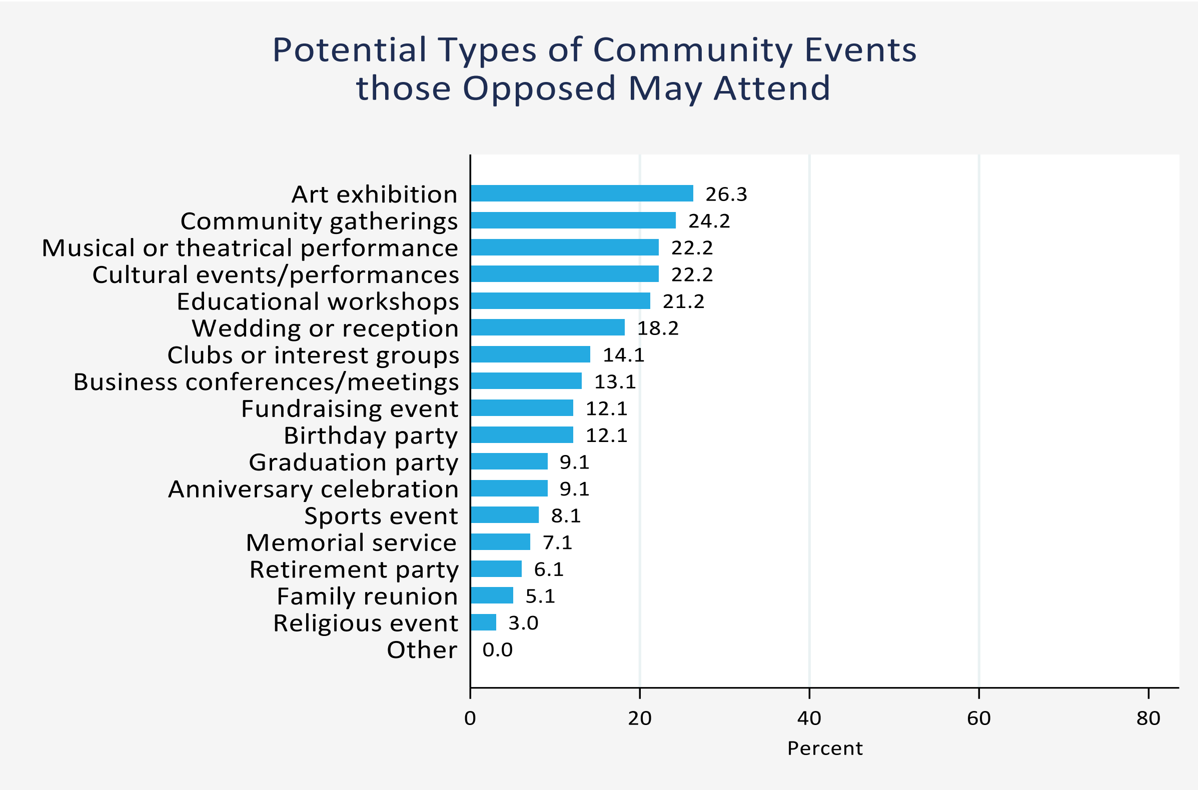
So, what events do people see themselves attending at the proposed community center? Due to a bias in how this would be answered, we divided the responses between the supporters and those opposed.

Chart 6



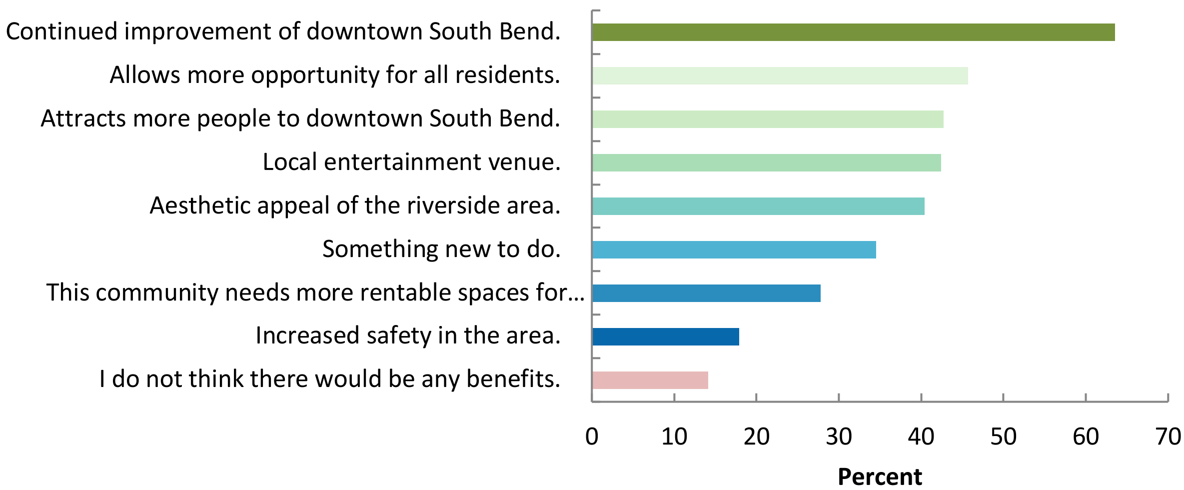
Those opposed did share what potential events they could envision themselves attending at a new community center.
Chart 7



When we return to the general survey population, the positive benefits and general overall support emerge again.

Chart 8

What potential benefits, if any, do you think the proposed riverside event center would provide? (Select all that apply).

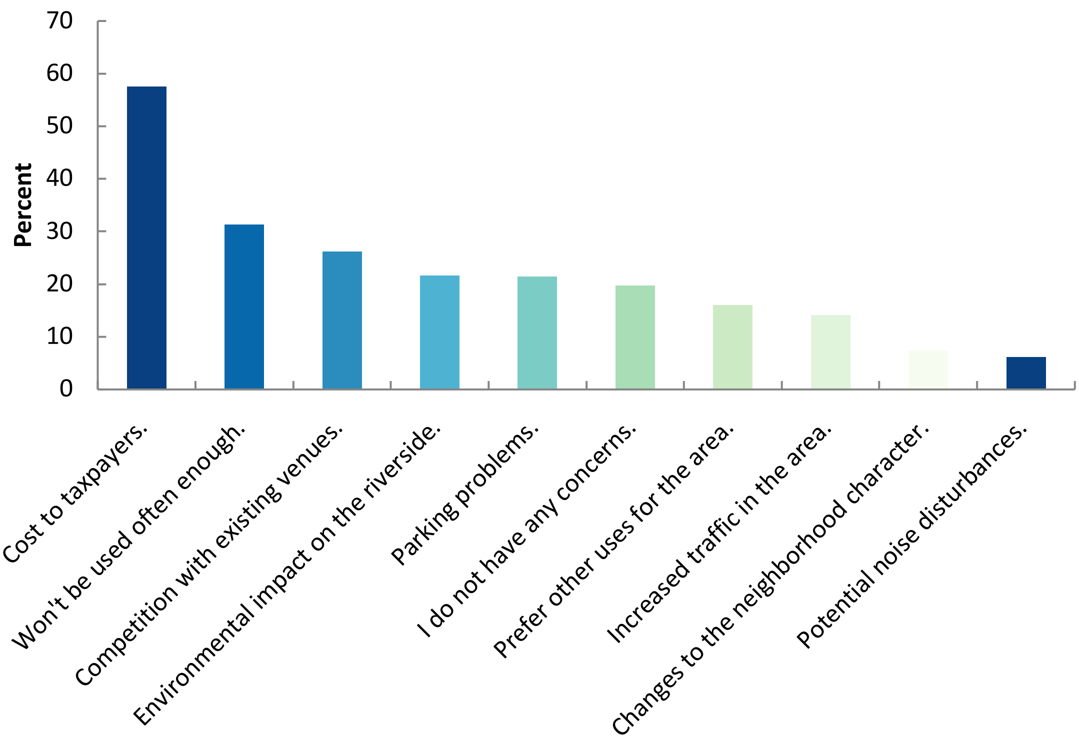


Anticipated Benefit	Percent
Continued improvement of downtown South Bend.	63.5%
Allows more opportunity for all residents.	45.7%
Attracts more people to downtown South Bend.	42.7%
Local entertainment venue.	42.4%
Aesthetic appeal of the riverside area.	40.4%
Something new to do.	34.5%
This community needs more rental spaces for events.	27.8%
Increased safety in the area.	17.9%
I do not think there would be any benefits.	14.1%

Chart 9 demonstrates that there is a strong and persistent perception that this will affect taxes and be a burden on taxpayers. Additionally, about 25% of concerns center on the perception that there are already enough available event spaces. The final major concern is that it won't be used enough.

Chart 9

What concerns, if any, do you have about the proposed riverside event center? (Select all that apply)



Concern	Percent
Cost to taxpayers.	57.5%
Won't be used often enough.	31.3%
Competition with existing venues.	26.2%
Environmental impact on the riverside.	21.6%
Parking problems.	21.4%
I do not have any concerns.	19.7%
Prefer other uses for the area.	16.0%
Increased traffic in the area.	14.1%
Changes to the neighborhood character.	7.5%
Potential noise disturbances.	6.1%

The Differences Between the Supporters and Those Opposed

As we state elsewhere, there were few statistically significant differences in the project. It would inappropriate to see a statistic and assume that various segments of the survey population were more likely to answer one way or the other. The statistics are as presented.

We did choose to explore the differences between those who were opposed (23.2%) to the project in relation to the supporters. Perhaps this motivation came from the fact that they were “louder” in the open-ended questions or that we wanted to make sure we learned from them as we think about designing and marketing the center. Knowing where the concerns are will help to shape future communication and presentations.

And there were some statistically significant differences.

In comparison to the survey’s general population, those who expressed opposition to the center are more likely to also be Detractors (42.2% of those opposed) in recommending visiting downtown South Bend. In contrast, those who support the project are more likely to be promoters (41.0% of supporters) of visiting downtown South Bend. There is a direct correlation between promoting downtown South Bend and opinion regarding the proposed center.

Those opposed were more likely to be downtown daily (33% of those Opposed), while those who were “Neutral” were downtown once a month or less (49%).

Those who are Supportive are more likely to dine downtown (49%), socialize with friends and family (32%), and attend community events (33%) downtown South Bend than those who are Opposed. Just about 10% of those opposed say that they socialize or attend community events downtown South Bend.

Safety concerns and driving/parking are more likely to be cited as concerns by those opposed than Supporters of the center. Supporters were less put off by safety concerns regarding downtown but shared the concern (held by a third of the population) that driving and parking problems are off-putting when considering coming to downtown South Bend.

In one of the more interesting statistically significant findings, just 5% of those opposed have rented an event center for a birthday party in comparison to 24% of Supporters. Those opposed are more likely to rent a facility for a business meeting (15%) than Supporters.

Supporters are less likely to have attended events in South Bend like the ones proposed for the new community center. This is why it will be important to understand the concerns of those opposed. The four areas of concern consistently revolve around these four themes:

1. Strong opposition exists to using taxpayer money for another event center, with respondents frequently citing existing venues like Century Center, Howard Park, and the library as sufficient for community needs.
2. Respondents expressed significant concern about government overreach, stating that operating an event center falls outside the core mission of the Township Trustee's office which should focus on helping those in need.
3. There is a clear preference for the riverside location to be used for other purposes, particularly housing, restaurants, or mixed-use development that would create consistent daily activity rather than occasional event usage.
4. Safety and accessibility concerns about downtown South Bend repeatedly emerge, with respondents mentioning issues about parking, uncomfortable empty spaces, and the need for more consistent foot traffic.

The analysis reveals a clear divide between supportive and opposed groups, with supportive visitors demonstrating more frequent downtown engagement through dining, events, and socializing while expressing fewer concerns about common barriers like safety and parking. Those who support downtown are significantly more likely to visit monthly rather than less frequently, and they consistently give higher recommendation scores for visiting the area. This supportive group's positive outlook is further evidenced by their excitement about downtown South Bend's developments and their perception of the area as easily accessible, suggesting a virtuous cycle where positive experiences reinforce continued engagement.

Naming the center

There wasn't a clear and definitive name that emerged, but the two top names were similar. Arguably, these were close to how the survey described the potential community center. The top answers will give leaders some direction for a potential name.

The top five most frequently selected names were:

Riverside Event Center (66.6%)*

Rivers Edge Event Center (53.5%)

Portage Pointe (32.3%)

South Bend Waterfront (26.9%)

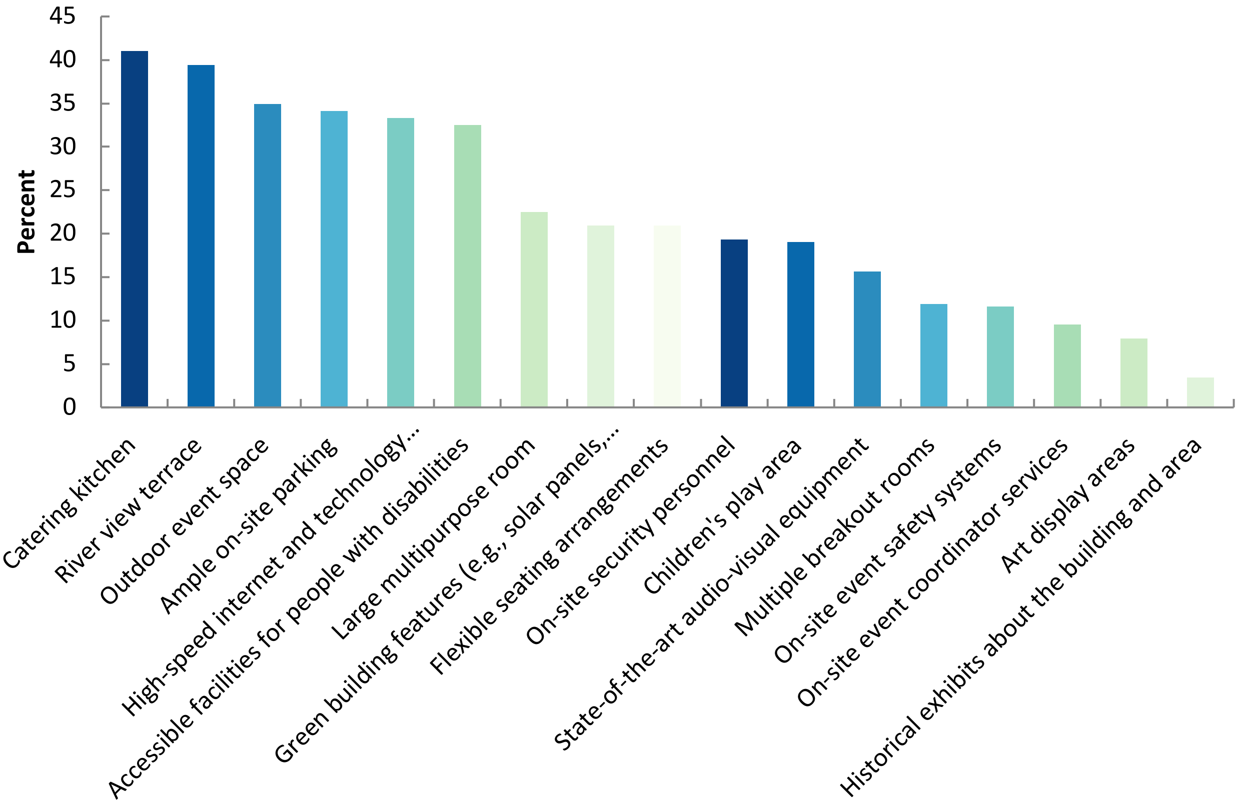
Portage Waterfront Pavilion (26.6%)

**Since "event center" was in place on the survey after it entered the field, we couldn't change a response to "community center."*

Important Features of the Community Center

Chart 10

Please review the following features for the proposed event center. Which four features would you consider most important? (Select up to 4 options)



Important Feature for Center	Percent
Catering kitchen	41.0%
River view terrace	39.4%
Outdoor event space	34.9%
Ample on-site parking	34.1%
High-speed internet and technology infrastructure	33.3%
Accessible facilities for people with disabilities	32.5%
Large multipurpose room	22.5%
Green building features (e.g., solar panels, Eco-friendly water solutions)	20.9%
Flexible seating arrangements	20.9%
On-site security personnel	19.3%

Downtown South Bend

The current perception of downtown South Bend reveals a community that recognizes recent progress (18 positive mentions of development) but faces significant challenges in achieving its full potential. Residents frequently mention the positive impact of developments like Howard Park (12 specific mentions) and appreciate ongoing revitalization efforts, yet they consistently express concerns about fundamental urban issues that affect their willingness to spend time downtown.

As we've noted before, safety emerges as a primary concern (42 mentions), not necessarily due to actual crime but rather from the combined effect of empty streets (15 mentions), visible homelessness (31 mentions), and aggressive panhandling (19 mentions).

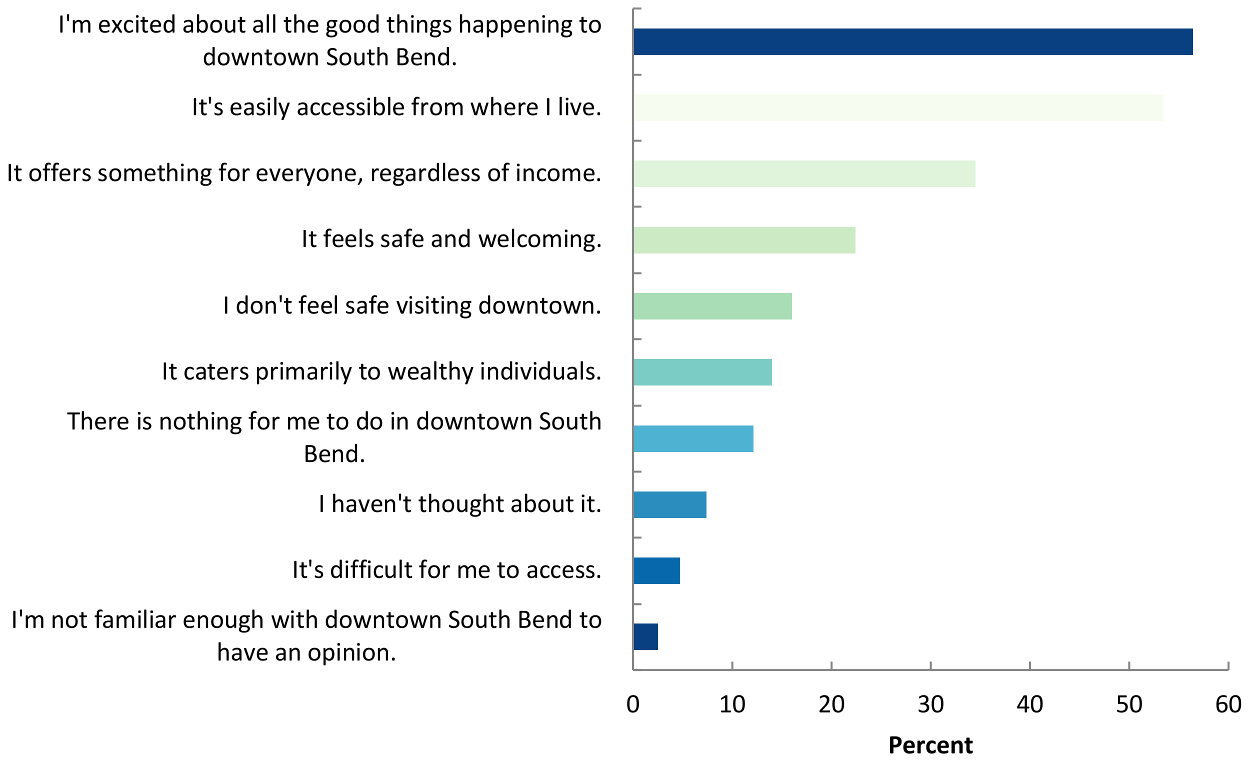
Infrastructure and accessibility continue to frustrate some residents, with particular emphasis on traffic flow problems (28 negative mentions of traffic/streets), parking difficulties (23 mentions), and challenging navigation through downtown (17 mentions).

The lack of retail diversity beyond restaurants is a concern (34 mentions of needing more retail), with many respondents lamenting the absence of shopping options, everyday amenities, and consistent business hours. This limited mix of businesses (26 mentions), combined with early closing times (21 mentions), creates a potential perception of a downtown that caters primarily to the workday crowd rather than serving as a vibrant urban center.

The community sees downtown's potential but feels it remains unrealized. There's support for increasing downtown housing density (22 mentions), with residents making the connection between a larger permanent population and improved safety, business viability, and overall vibrancy.

Chart 11

Which three of the following statements best describe your perception of downtown South Bend? (Select up to three)



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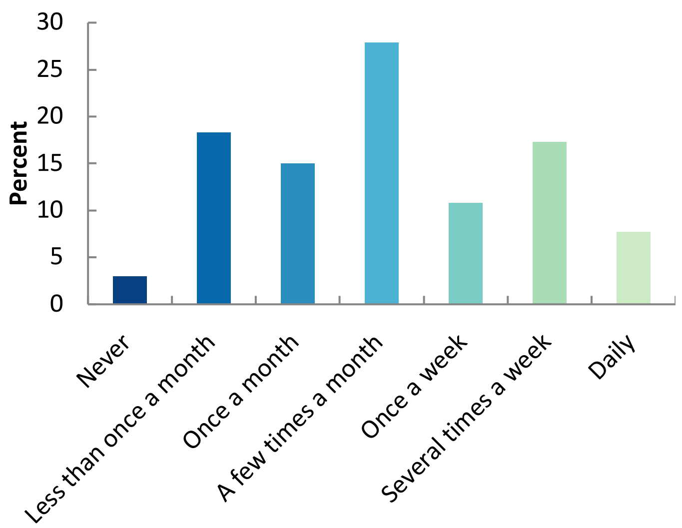
Perception	Percent
I'm excited about all the good things happening to downtown South Bend.	56.4%
It's easily accessible from where I live.	53.4%
It offers something for everyone, regardless of income.	34.5%
It feels safe and welcoming.	22.4%
I don't feel safe visiting downtown.	16.0%
It caters primarily to wealthy individuals.	14.0%
There is nothing for me to do in downtown South Bend.	12.1%
I haven't thought about it.	7.4%
It's difficult for me to access.	4.7%
I'm not familiar enough with downtown South Bend to have an opinion.	2.5%

Chart 12

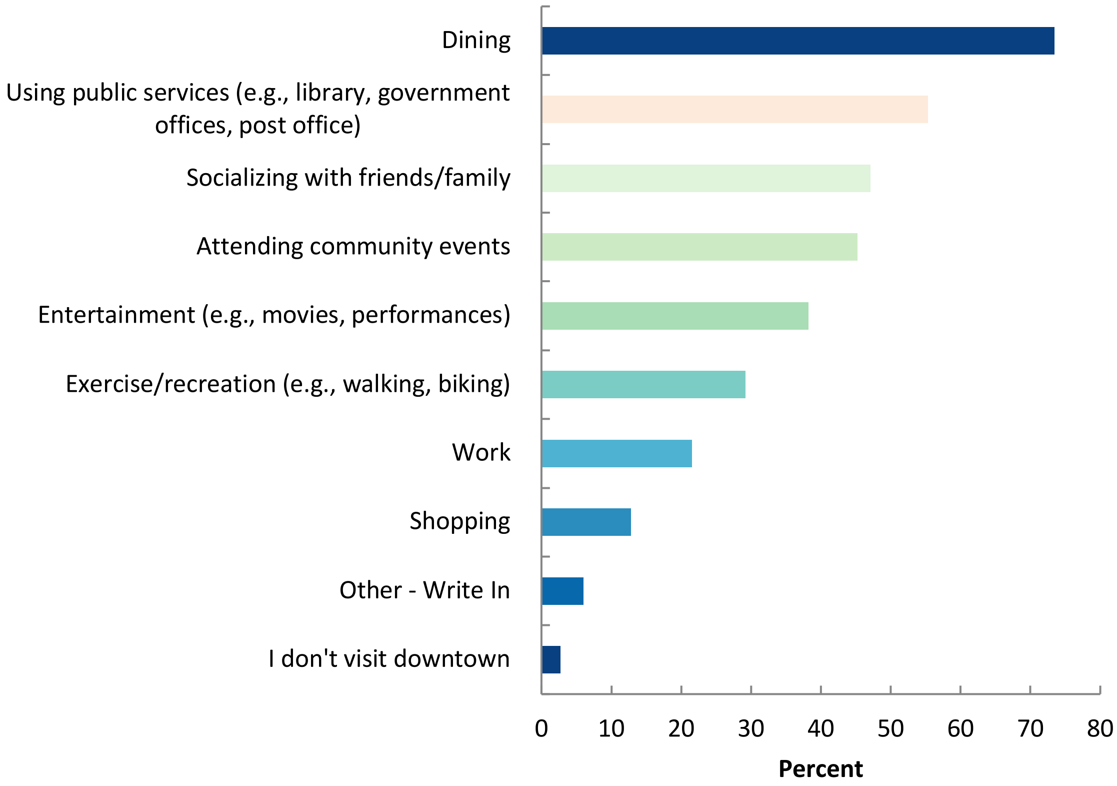
About how often do you visit the downtown South Bend area for something other than work?



Frequency	Percent
Never	3.0%
Less than once a month	18.3%
Once a month	15.0%
A few times a month	27.9%
Once a week	10.8%
Several times a week	17.3%
Daily	7.7%

Chart 13

What are your primary reasons for visiting downtown? (Select all that apply)



Reason	Percent
Dining	73.4%
Using public services (e.g., library, government offices, post office)	55.3%
Socializing with friends/family	47.1%
Attending community events	45.2%
Entertainment (e.g., movies, performances)	38.2%
Exercise/recreation (e.g., walking, biking)	29.2%
Work	21.5%
Shopping	12.8%
I don't visit downtown	2.7%

Because dining was such a significant reason for people to come to downtown South Bend, we asked participants to list their favorite places to eat. The list below is in frequency order.

Chart 14

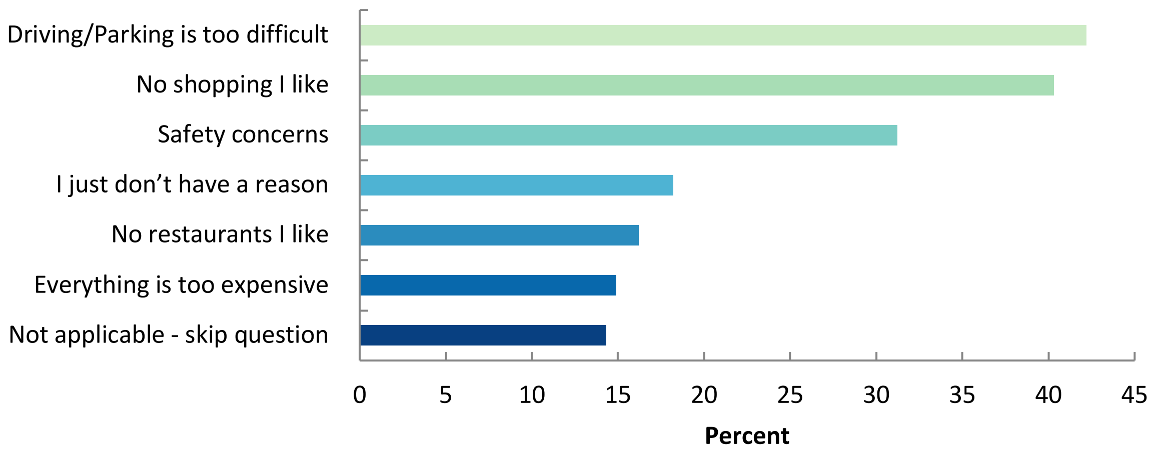
Top 15 Most Frequently Mentioned Downtown Restaurants

1. Cafe Navarre
2. Fiddler's Hearth
3. Chicory Café
4. Peggs
5. Cinco 5
6. The Lauber
7. L Street Kitchen
8. Cambodian Thai
9. Early Bird Eatery
10. Woochi's
11. Bruno's
12. South Bend Chocolate Café
13. Linden Grill
14. LaSalle Grill
15. The General

When we analyzed this for variances, Supporters of the community center idea had Peggs as their most frequented restaurant and L Street Kitchen was third. Fiddlers Hearth retained its place in second.

Chart 15

If you do not visit downtown South Bend often, what are some of the reasons? (Check all that apply)



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Reason	Percent
Driving/Parking is too difficult	42.2%
No shopping I like	40.3%
Safety concerns	31.2%
I just don't have a reason	18.2%
No restaurants I like	16.2%
Everything is too expensive	14.9%

Potential Events at the Center

We wanted to explore what people see as the potential uses of the new community center.

Chart 16

If you were to rent the new riverside event center in the next three years, which events would you be most likely to rent it for? (Select all that apply)

Event	Percent
Birthday party	35.2%
Community gatherings	24.1%
Club meetings or interest groups	23.0%
Family reunion	21.8%
Wedding or wedding reception	18.9%
Anniversary celebration	18.0%
Business conferences and meetings	16.9%
Graduation party	16.6%
Fundraising event	16.0%
Other - Write In	15.7%
Educational workshop or seminar	15.1%

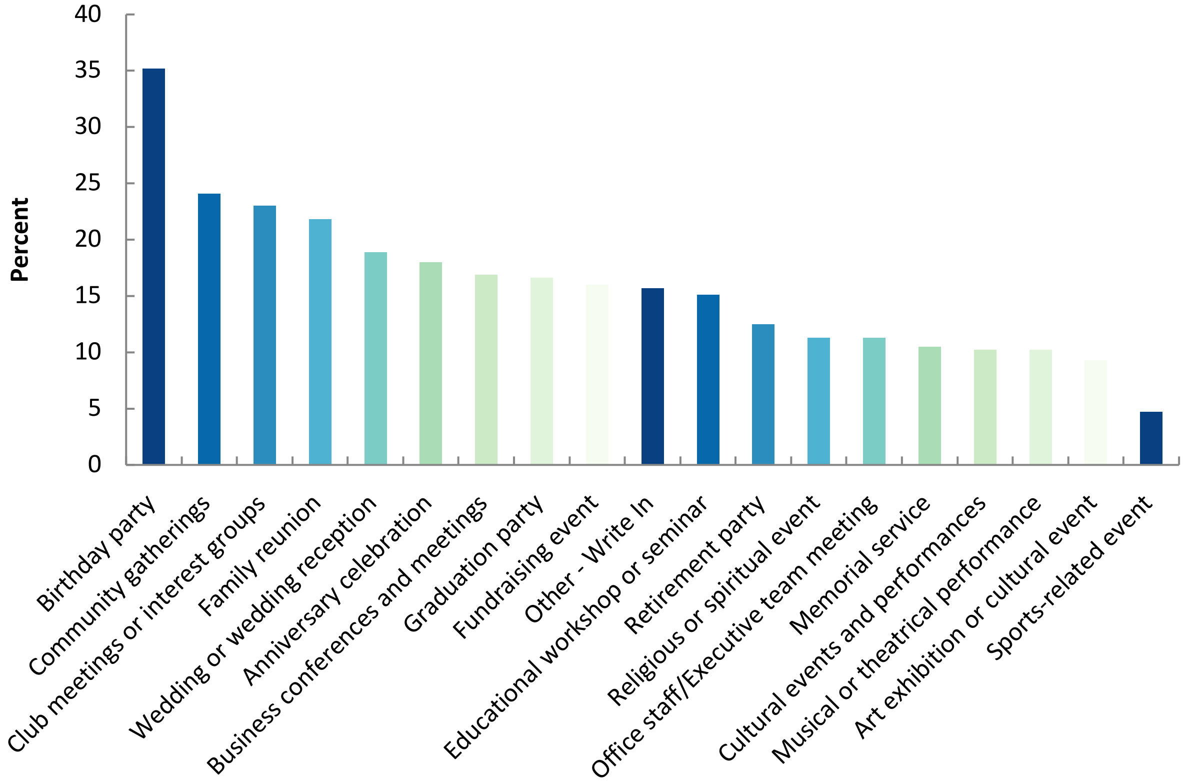


Chart 17

If the event center offered classes or workshops, which three of the following would you be most interested in? (Select up to three)

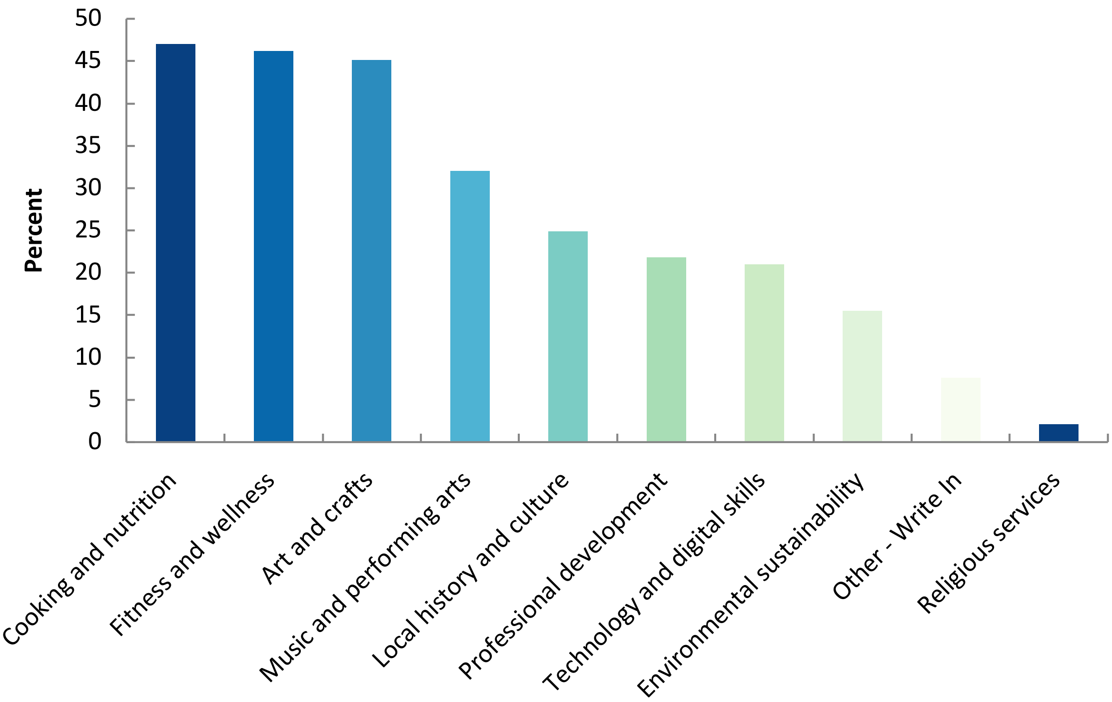
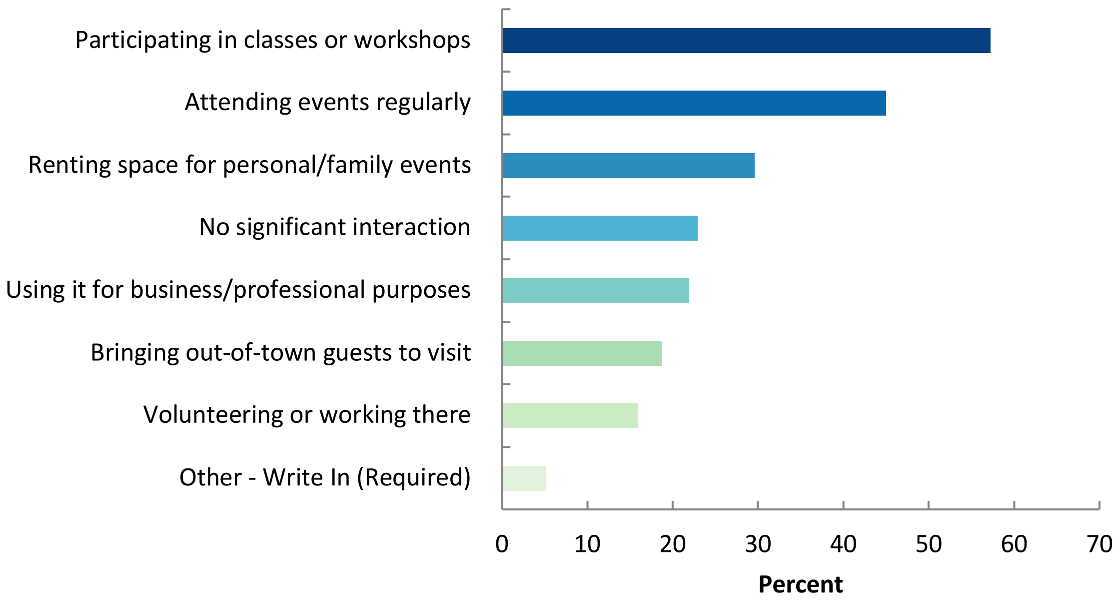


Chart 18

Imagine the community center is built and operating successfully. In five years, how do you envision your interaction with it? (Select all that apply)

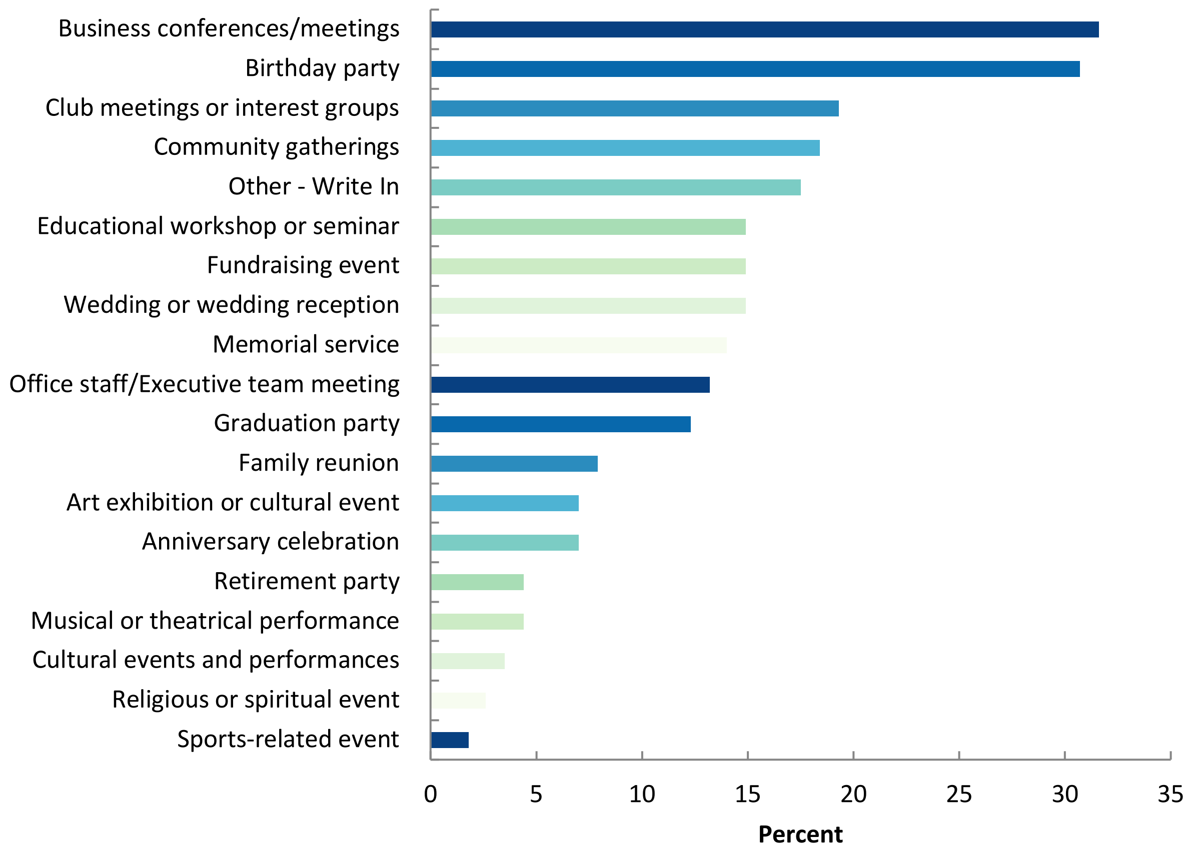


Interaction	Percent
Participating in classes or workshops	57.2%
Attending events regularly	45.0%
Renting space for personal/family events	29.6%
No significant interaction	22.9%
Using it for business/professional purposes	21.9%
Bringing out-of-town guests to visit	18.7%
Volunteering or working there	15.9%
Other - Write In (Required)	5.2%

Previous Users of Event Centers

Chart 19

For which events have you rented a facility or event center? (Select all that apply)



Previous Rental Event	Percent
Business conferences/meetings	31.6%
Birthday party	30.7%
Club meetings or interest groups	19.3%
Community gatherings	18.4%
Other - Write In	17.5%
Educational workshop or seminar	14.9%
Fundraising event	14.9%
Wedding or wedding reception	14.9%
Memorial service	14.0%
Office staff/Executive team meeting	13.2%
Graduation party	12.3%

There were not many instances of statistical significance in this project, showing that the population as a whole is representative of community sentiment. Having previously rented event space was also not statistically associated with greater support of the project (see Chart 20).

Chart 20

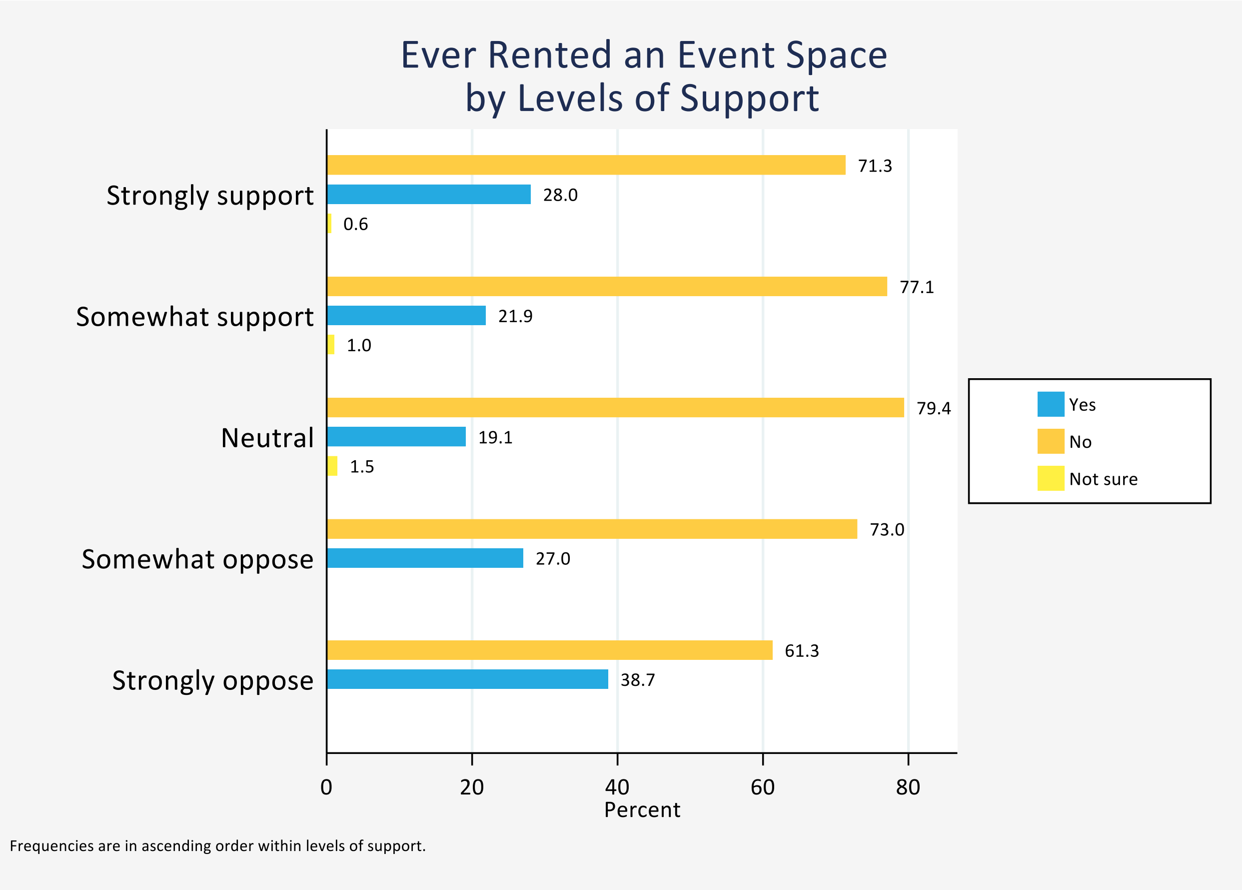


Chart 21

For your rental events, for how long did you rent the facility? (Check all that apply)

Rental Length	Percent
A half day	68.8%
A full day	42.0%
Multiple days	6.3%

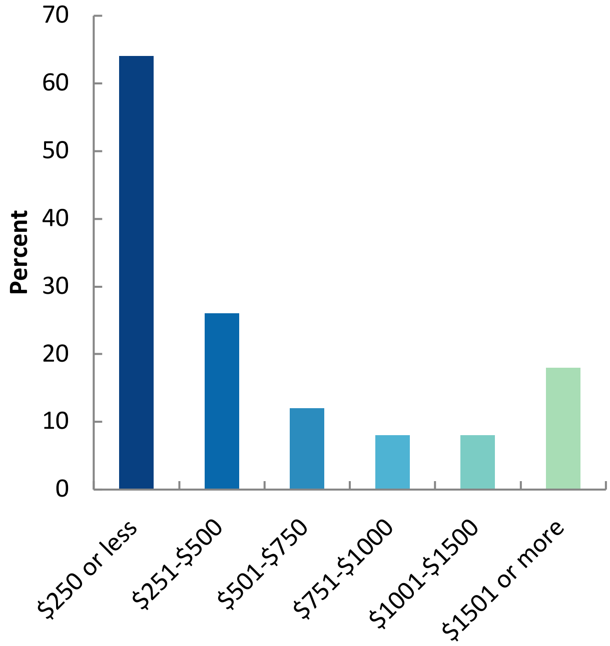
Chart 22

For your rental event(s), did you rent the entire event center or just a section/room? (Check all that apply)

Rental Scope	Percent
Entire event center	30.2%
Just a section or room	83.0%

Chart 23

For your rental event(s), approximately how much was the cost of the facility for your event(s)? (Check all that apply)



Amount	Percent
$250 or less	64.0%
$251-$500	26.0%
$501-$750	12.0%
$751-$1000	8.0%
$1001-$1500	8.0%
$1501 or more	18.0%

What local facilities were rented?

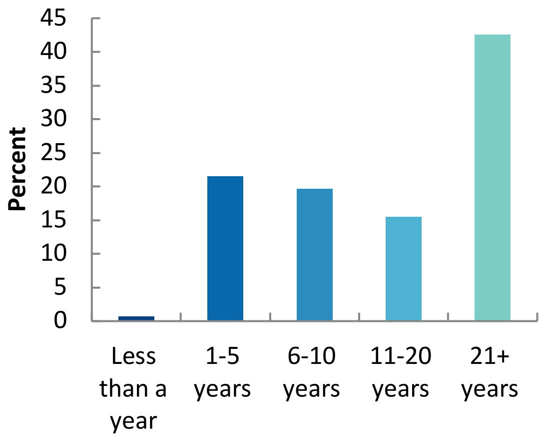
1. Century Center: 14
2. Howard Park: 14
3. Library/SJCPL: 14
4. The Brick: 7
5. Doubletree/Double Tree: 4
6. LaSalle Grill: 4
7. Armory: 4
8. Bar Louie: 3
9. Palais Royale: 3
10. Stockroom East: 3
11. American Legion: 3

DEMOGRAPHICS

We ran a complete analysis on the demographics and there were no statistically significant differences for <u>any</u> of the following population segments.

Chart 24

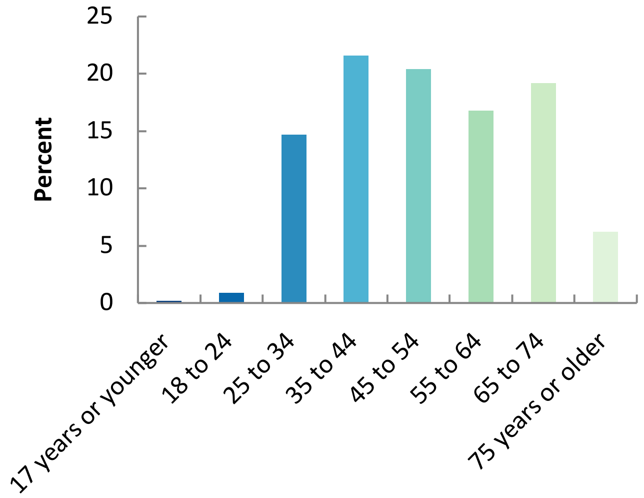
How long have you been a resident of this township?



Tenure	**Percent**
Less than a year	0.7%
1-5 years	21.5%
6-10 years	19.7%
11-20 years	15.5%
21+ years	42.6%

Chart 25

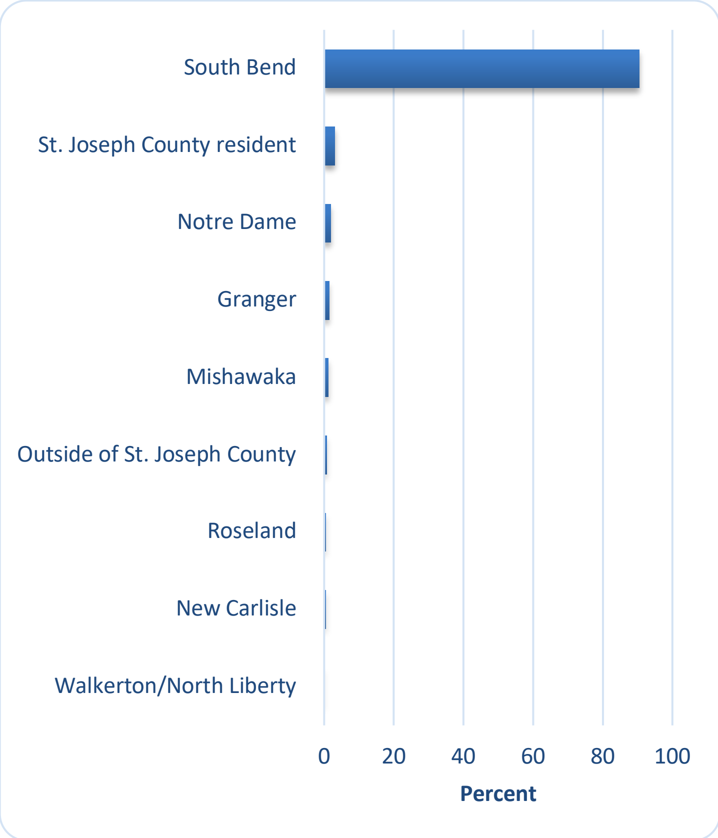
How old are you?



Age	**Percent**
17 years or younger	0.2%
18 to 24	0.9%
25 to 34	14.7%
35 to 44	21.6%
45 to 54	20.4%
55 to 64	16.8%
65 to 74	19.2%
75 years or older	6.2%

Chart 26

What best describes where you live?



Location	**Percent**
South Bend	90.5%
St. Joseph County resident	3.1%
Notre Dame	1.9%
Granger	1.4%
Mishawaka	1.2%
Outside of St. Joseph County	0.7%
New Carlisle	0.5%
Roseland	0.5%
Walkerton/North Liberty	0.2%

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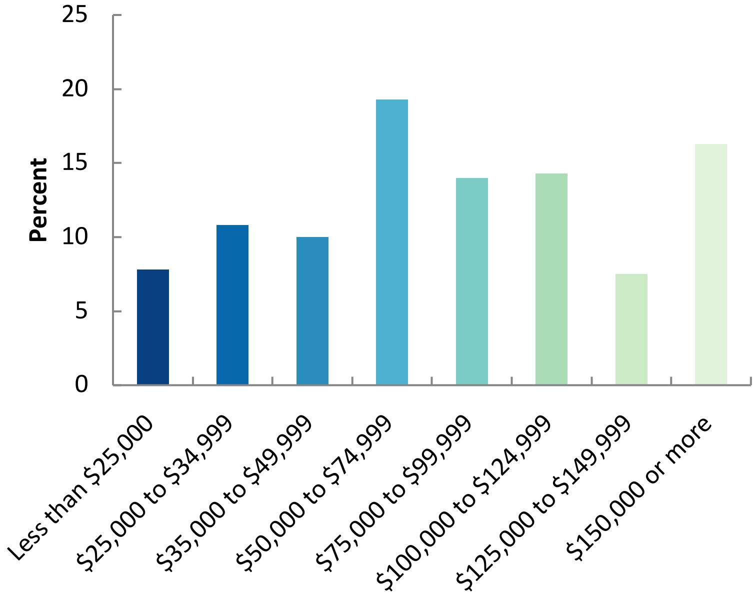
Chart 27

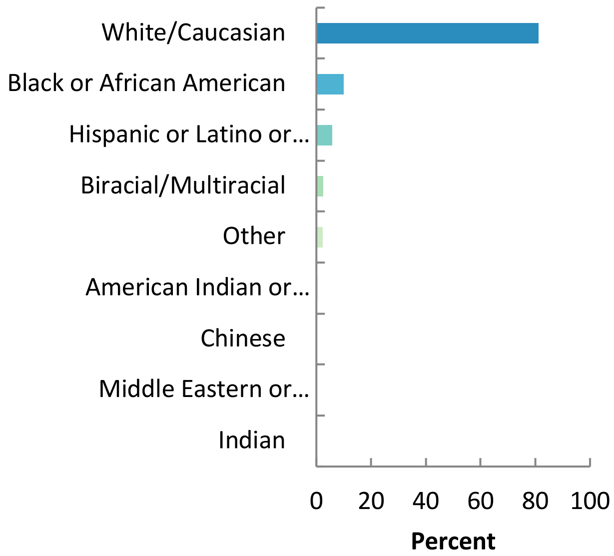
What is the annual income of your entire household?



Income Level	**Percent**
Less than $25,000	7.8%
$25,000 to $34,999	10.8%
$35,000 to $49,999	10.0%
$50,000 to $74,999	19.3%
$75,000 to $99,999	14.0%
$100,000 to $124,999	14.3%
$125,000 to $149,999	7.5%
$150,000 or more	16.3%

Chart 28

Which of the following best describes your racial or ethnic background? (Check all that apply)



Race/Ethnicity	**Percent**
White/Caucasian	81.1%
Black or African American	10.0%
Hispanic or Latino or Spanish Origin of any race	5.7%
Biracial/Multiracial	2.5%
Other	2.2%
American Indian or Alaskan Native	0.5%
Chinese	0.2%
Middle Eastern or North African	0.2%
Indian	0.2%