

## Chapter 10: Public opinion

A random sample of resident voter households in Whatcom County were contacted to participate in a controlled sample survey concerning park, recreation, and open space planning proposals in August 2005.

Approximately 600 households agreed to participate in the survey and were mailed a copy of a summary description of the plan and a copy of the questionnaire. Survey results were compiled for the first 300 households who completed the surveys by follow-up telephone call - the number planned for in the original survey scope - of which 49% were male and 51% were female.

The resulting survey results are accurate to within +/-7% of the opinions of the general population (the statistics are rounded and may not add to 100% and do not list don't know responses). The statistics also account for undecided, did not know, or refused a response. Following is a summary of the results for the total sample group.

### 10.1 Respondent characteristics

#### Location of residence

The respondents home address generally reflects the current distribution of registered voter households:

1% live in the Port Roberts area	6% live in the Sumas/Nooksack area
1% live in the Lummi Island area	11% live in the Ferndale area
3% live in the Blaine area	57% live in the Bellingham area
2% live in the Birch Bay area	11% live elsewhere in the county
8% live in the Lynden area	

#### Length of residence

Most survey participants are very long time residents of Whatcom County:

1% resident 0-1 years,	11% resident 6-10 years, and
10% resident 2-5 years	78% resident 10+ years.

#### Type of housing

Most survey participants are homeowners:

96% own their home,	4% rent their home.
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#### Age group

Most survey participants are from older age households:

1% age 18-24,	40% age 50-64, and
5% age 25-34,	27% age 65+ years.
27% age 35-49,	

### 10.2 Recreation program priorities

Survey participants were asked if household members had participated in recreational programs provided by the county in the last year.

48% used program in last year,	52% had not.
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Survey participants were asked to rate the need for the county to provide recreation programs in Whatcom County in general on a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 was the least important and 5 the most important.

A choice was considered critical or very important if the participants selected ratings of 4 or 5 in high percentages, nice-to-have or medium if the participants selected a 3 rating, and not important if the participants selected ratings of 1 or 2 in high percentages. Following is a rank ordering of their selections.

	Ratings		
	1 + 2 Low	3 Medium	4 + 5 High
<b><i>Recreational program in priority sequence</i></b>			
Rental of campsites and cabins?	25%	16%	58%
Hosting of music, drama, art, and other festivals and special events in a park?	24%	20%	56%
Rental of picnic shelters and lodges?	24%	21%	54%
Historical, archeological, and heritage exhibits, walks, programs, and events?	22%	31%	47%
Wildlife habitat exhibits, walks, programs, and events?	25%	28%	47%
Youth volunteer park construction/work parties?	33%	20%	45%
Adult volunteer park construction/work parties?	31%	23%	42%
Rental of Roeder/Hovander homes for weddings, parties, and other special events?	39%	20%	40%
Roeder/Hovander home historical displays and tours?	31%	29%	39%
Environmental exhibits, walks, programs, and events?	35%	25%	39%
Youth day use and overnight summer camps?	38%	21%	39%
Youth hike, bike, or horse trail excursions?	35%	25%	38%
Outdoor skill and safety instructions in biking, boating, horseback riding, etc?	38%	23%	38%
Rental of bikes, canoes, boats, and other equipment?	37%	25%	37%
Family or group picnic and camping events?	38%	27%	32%
Family hike, bike, or horse trail excursions?	41%	27%	30%
Farm and agricultural exhibits, programs and events?	47%	26%	27%
Adult hike, bike, or horse trail excursions?	41%	28%	26%
Campfire social and entertainment programs?	60%	24%	16%

Note - the overall results indicate the relative rank-order importance the survey participants gave these needs as a general population - and therefore, which needs would likely receive the highest general population approval ratings where general funds, for example, to be used to finance program services.

Conversely, a low rank-order does not mean the need should or does not need to be provided. Rather, that the need may appeal to a more limited age or interest group (adult hiking and campfire programs, for example) and may need to be funded by special means or discretionary revenue sources rather than general monies.

### **Program costs**

Survey respondents were asked to rate the following methods of paying for future recreational programs assuming that it would require more money to provide present or future services than can be budgeted at the present time.

	Ratings		
	1 + 2 Low	3 Medium	4 + 5 High
<b><i>Program cost option in priority sequence</i></b>			
<b><i>Increase user fees for non-residents</i></b> - to finance program services?	18%	16%	64%
<b><i>Reduce the number</i></b> - of programs to control costs?	31%	31%	36%
<b><i>Increase user fees for everyone</i></b> - to finance program services?	40%	25%	35%

	Ratings		
	1 + 2 Low	3 Medium	4 + 5 High
<b><i>Program cost option in priority sequence</i></b>			
<b><i>Reduce the content, variety, and duration</i></b> - of programs to control costs?	31%	33%	33%
<b><i>Increase county taxes</i></b> - to finance program services?	63%	18%	18%

### ***10.3 Facility priorities in general***

Survey respondents were asked how they rated the existing inventory of ***all*** park, recreation, and open space facilities provided in Whatcom County by the county, cities, school districts, port, state, and other park providers?

	Ratings		
	1 + 2 Low	3 Medium	4 + 5 High
<b><i>Quality</i></b> - of maintenance conditions and furnishings including parking, restrooms, trails, campsites, shelters, cabins, and other facilities in existing parks?	6%	26%	67%
<b><i>Quantity</i></b> - the number, size and location of existing park and trail sites to serve the existing population?	11%	27%	61%

In general, the respondents gave the existing countywide park, recreation, and open space inventory high ratings for quality and the quantity.

### ***10.4 Project priorities in general***

Survey respondents were asked to rate ***the need for the following additional facilities within the county in general*** whether provided by the county, cities, school districts, port, state, or another park provider.

	Ratings		
	1 + 2 Low	3 Medium	4 + 5 High
<b><i>Generic project proposals in priority sequence</i></b>			
Waterfront access and beach use sites?	12%	18%	69%
Old growth forestland conservation areas?	17%	17%	65%
Open space and scenic area preservation?	14%	22%	63%
Wildlife habitat and conservation areas?	15%	22%	61%
Water resources and watershed protection areas?	18%	20%	61%
Off-road cross-country walking and hiking trails?	18%	25%	56%
Picnic tables, play areas, and shelters	15%	29%	55%
Productive farmland conservation areas?	18%	25%	55%
Youth and teen activity centers?	20%	24%	54%
Senior activity centers?	20%	26%	52%
Historical buildings and sites?	21%	28%	50%
Soccer, lacrosse, baseball, and softball athletic fields?	26%	31%	42%
Tent, yurt, RV campsites, group camps, and cabins?	27%	30%	42%
Handicap accessible trails and facilities within parks?	23%	35%	41%
Cartop boat (kayak/canoe) launch sites?	29%	32%	37%
On-road cross-country bicycle routes?	35%	29%	35%
Off-road multipurpose (hike/bike/horse) trails?	32%	32%	33%
Off-road cross-country bicycle trails?	35%	29%	33%
Dog parks, exercise areas, and trails?	40%	27%	31%

	Ratings		
	1 + 2 Low	3 Medium	4 + 5 High
<b><i>Generic project proposals in priority sequence</i></b>			
Community classrooms and meeting facilities?	44%	29%	26%
Daycare facilities?	49%	27%	21%
Off-road snowshoe, skiing, and snowmobile trails?	46%	32%	19%
Powerboat launching and moorage facilities?	48%	33%	19%
Off-road cross-country horse trails?	49%	32%	17%
Off-road ATV, motorcycle, and ORV parks?	76%	13%	10%
Golf course and driving ranges?	68%	19%	11%

**Note** - the overall results indicate the relative rank-order importance the survey participants gave these needs as a general population - and therefore, which needs would likely receive the highest general population approval ratings where general funds, for example, to be used to finance program services.

Conversely, a low rank-order does not mean the need should or does not need to be provided. Rather, that the need may appeal to a more limited age or interest group (off-road ATV and golf course facilities, for example) and may need to be funded by special means or discretionary revenue sources rather than general monies.

### ***10.5 Development plan proposal priorities***

Survey respondents were asked to rate specific park plan proposals the county, cities, school districts, port, and other park providers may jointly conserve and develop as shown on attached preliminary concept graphics.?

	Ratings		
	1 + 2 Low	3 Medium	4 + 5 High
<b><i>Specific project proposals in priority sequence</i></b>			
<b><i>Conservancies wildlife</i></b> - protect the proposed wildlife habitat areas of the county in and around fresh and saltwater areas, wetlands, and woodland areas?	11%	16%	71%
<b><i>Conservancies watershed</i></b> - protect the proposed water resource and watershed areas of the county?	11%	17%	70%
<b><i>Conservancies forestland</i></b> - protect the proposed mature and old growth forested areas of the county from logging in and around urbanizing areas and in backcountry sites?	17%	13%	69%
<b><i>Conservancies scenic</i></b> - protect the proposed scenic areas, viewpoints, and vistas of the county along fresh and saltwater shorelines, farmlands, and wooded hilltop and ridgelines ( <i>see page 21</i> )?	13%	16%	69%
<b><i>Saltwater access</i></b> - acquire/develop the proposed additional saltwater access sites for fishing, beachcombing, and walking?	12%	22%	64%
<b><i>Conservancies farmland</i></b> - protect the proposed historical and productive farmlands of the county from subdivision and development?	15%	21%	63%
<b><i>Shoreline trails</i></b> - develop the proposed cross-country network of saltwater beach and shoreline walking areas and trails?	16%	22%	59%

	Ratings		
	1 + 2 Low	3 Medium	4 + 5 High
<b><i>Specific project proposals in priority sequence</i></b>			
<b><i>Hiking trails</i></b> - develop the proposed cross-country network of on and off-road day and backpacking cross-country hiking trails?	20%	22%	57%
<b><i>Freshwater access</i></b> - acquire/develop the proposed additional freshwater access sites for fishing, swimming, and boating?	18%	25%	55%
<b><i>Conservancies historical</i></b> - protect the proposed farms, sawmills, railroads, mines, and other heritage sites from demolition and development?	16%	30%	51%
<b><i>Picnic shelters and group activity sites</i></b> - develop the proposed additional picnic shelters and group picnic facilities at major regional park sites?	18%	31%	49%
<b><i>On-road bicycle routes</i></b> - develop the proposed cross-country system of on-road routes using road shoulders and designated bike lanes?	26%	23%	49%
<b><i>Athletic fields</i></b> - acquire and lease the proposed network of sites to athletic league organizations for the development of a regional system of public playing fields for youth and adults?	23%	28%	48%
<b><i>Non-motorized cartop (kayak/canoe) launch sites</i></b> - develop the proposed additional access and launch sites at salt and freshwater sites?	28%	27%	44%
<b><i>Water trails</i></b> - develop the proposed cartop boat put-in, take-out, and overnight campsites along navigable salt and freshwater paddling routes?	28%	29%	40%
<b><i>Campsites and cabins</i></b> - develop the proposed additional tent and RV campsites, yurts and cabins, and group camp sites at major regional park sites?	29%	30%	40%
<b><i>Scenic roads</i></b> - designate the proposed system of cross-country back-road scenic routes with viewpoints, interpretive signage, and other exhibits?	32%	27%	39%
<b><i>Meeting facilities</i></b> - develop and lease the proposed network of community facilities throughout the county to non-profit organizations for the operation of teen, senior, and other public activities and events?	27%	35%	37%
<b><i>Multipurpose trails</i></b> - develop the proposed off-road cross-country network of hike, bike, and horse trails?	30%	31%	37%
<b><i>Enterprise facilities</i></b> - where user fees and/or self help efforts will support, acquire and lease or develop the proposed gun ranges, equestrian facilities, conference facilities and retreats, at select regional properties throughout the county?	43%	31%	24%
<b><i>Off-road mountain bike trails</i></b> - develop the proposed cross-country network of riding trails?	47%	27%	24%
<b><i>Motorized boat launches - saltwater</i></b> - develop the proposed additional boat launching facilities at saltwater sites?	47%	29%	23%

	Ratings		
	1 + 2 Low	3 Medium	4 + 5 High
<b><i>Specific project proposals in priority sequence</i></b>			
<b><i>Winter trails</i></b> - develop the proposed cross-country network of snowshoe, skiing, and snowmobile trails?	48%	28%	22%
<b><i>Motorized boat launches - freshwater</i></b> - develop the proposed additional boat launching facilities at freshwater sites?	55%	26%	19%
<b><i>Horse trails</i></b> - develop the proposed cross-country network of horse stables, riding areas, and trails?	52%	32%	14%
<b><i>ATV/motorcycle riding areas</i></b> - support the continued private party operation of ATV/motorcycle riding areas?	69%	15%	14%

**Note** - Whatcom County, like all jurisdictions in Washington State, must restructure fiscal policies to reflect recently adopted restraints on the use of property, license, and other taxes for the financing of general governmental services. Survey respondents were asked to rate the following alternative methods for delivering park, recreation, and open space facilities and programs in the county. County Council could adopt some, most, or all of the following ways and methods for restructuring the way the county delivers and finances park and recreation facilities and services depending on the results of this survey, and in some cases subsequent voter approvals.

### ***10.6 Whatcom County role and responsibility alternatives***

County Council could deliver the park, recreation, and open space facilities and programs proposed above under different policy priorities. Survey respondents were asked to prioritize the ***following functions that could be provided by the county for the development of park facilities and operation of recreation programs.***

	Ratings		
	1 + 2 Low	3 Medium	4 + 5 High
<b><i>Park facilities</i></b>			
<b><i>Regional developer</i></b> - acquire and develop <b><i>regional</i></b> facilities, such as multipurpose trails, to be used by <i>all residents of the county on a countywide basis</i> ?	23%	24%	47%
<b><i>Regional coordinator</i></b> - create plans, financing strategies, and implementation programs regardless of who may develop the facilities?	32%	26%	37%
<b><i>Local developer</i></b> - acquire and develop <b><i>local</i></b> facilities, such as playgrounds, <i>to be used by residents of specific local areas in the county</i> ?	36%	24%	35%
<b><i>Recreation programs</i></b>	Low	Medium	High
<b><i>Local operator</i></b> - organize, schedule, staff, and conduct programs in <b><i>local</i></b> facilities?	31%	26%	36%
<b><i>Regional operator</i></b> - organize, schedule, staff, and conduct programs in <b><i>regional</i></b> facilities?	32%	29%	32%
<b><i>Landlord</i></b> - own, develop, and maintain facilities - but have other agencies conduct and operate programs?	49%	28%	16%

The results indicate survey respondents would prefer the county assume a role as a regional developer of facilities with less emphasis on the development of local facilities or programs of interest to localized areas within the county.

### 10.7 Joint venture opportunity and partner options

Besides Whatcom County – cities, school districts, athletic organizations, private operators, and a variety of other public and private agencies own and operate park facilities and recreational programs within the county. Survey respondents were asked to rate joint venture projects with the following organizations.

	Ratings		
	1 + 2 Low	3 Medium	4 + 5 High
<b><i>Park facility development</i></b>			
<b><i>With nonprofit organizations</i></b> – for the <i>conservation</i> of sensitive environmental areas or the <i>preservation</i> of historical areas or the <i>development</i> of athletic fields for public use?	12%	23%	62%
<b><i>With other public agencies</i></b> – like cities, school districts, and the port for the <i>development</i> of parks, trails, and athletic fields?	11%	31%	54%
<b><i>With for-profit organizations</i></b> – for the <i>development</i> of specialized facilities like campgrounds, marinas, and conference centers for public use for a fee?	39%	30%	28%
<b><i>Recreation program operation</i></b>	Low	Medium	High
<b><i>With nonprofit organizations</i></b> – for the <i>management</i> of sensitive environmental areas or the <i>operation</i> of childcare, teen, senior, or other community programs?	15%	23%	60%
<b><i>With other public agencies</i></b> – like cities, school districts, and the port for the <i>operation</i> of recreational programs at regional park sites for public use?	16%	25%	55%
<b><i>With for-profit organizations</i></b> – for the <i>operation</i> of specialized facilities like campgrounds, marinas, and conference centers for public use paid with a user fee?	40%	29%	28%

Survey respondents preferred the county joint venture with nonprofit organizations and other public agencies in the development of park facilities and operation of recreation program operations.

### 10.8 Organizational and financing alternatives

The County Council could institute alternative methods of organizationally managing and financing ***regional versus local*** park, recreation, and open space improvements within the county.

***Countywide approach to regional park facilities*** – subject to voter approval, County Council could institute a property tax levy as a means of financing the acquisition, development, and operation of ***regional*** park, recreation, and open space facilities and programs on a countywide basis. A countywide approach would share revenues between the county, cities, school districts, and/or other agencies that provide ***regional*** park facilities and programs. Survey respondents were asked to rate this method.

	Ratings		
	1 + 2 Low	3 Medium	4 + 5 High
<b><i>Countywide regional park approach</i></b> - where revenues are shared between county, cities, school districts, and/or other agencies that provide <b><i>regional</i></b> park facilities and programs?	26%	27%	43%
<b><i>Amount per year</i></b>			
If a levy were to be put on the ballot <b><i>to finance regional park facilities and programs on a countywide basis</i></b> , how much, if anything, would your <b><i>household</i></b> be willing to pay <b><i>per year</i></b> for this source of funding?	<b><i>Mean = \$79</i></b> <b><i>245 responses from \$0 to \$2,000</i></b>		

***Local park facilities using recreational service areas*** - County Council could institute a limited short-term (3-5 year) property tax levy as a means of financing the acquisition, development, and/or operation of ***local*** park, recreation, and open space facilities and/or programs within specified areas of the county. Recreation service areas can be established for a single facility for a single benefit area, such as scenic preservation for county waterfront areas - or for multiple facilities for a specified portion of the county, such as athletic fields and indoor gymnasiums for a city or an urban growth area (UGA).

Once proposed, the county residents within each ***local*** recreation service area ***vote to determine whether to assess a limited short-term property tax increment*** to finance acquisition, development, and/or operation of the proposed facilities and programs within the proposed ***local service area***. Survey respondents were asked to rate the following methods.

	Ratings		
	1 + 2 Low	3 Medium	4 + 5 High
<b><i>Specific areas</i></b> - organizing recreation service areas to provide a mixture of facilities and programs within a specific <b><i>local</i></b> area, such as a city or school district or urban growth area?	33%	26%	35%
<b><i>Specific facilities</i></b> - organizing recreation service areas to finance specific facilities and programs, such as the preservation of scenic areas?	38%	30%	25%
<b><i>Amount per year</i></b>			
If a levy were to be put on the ballot <b><i>to finance local park facilities and programs within your local area (which could include a city area)</i></b> , how much, if anything, would your <b><i>household</i></b> be willing to pay <b><i>per year</i></b> for this source of funding?	<b><i>Mean = \$63</i></b> <b><i>241 responses from \$0 to \$1,300</i></b>		

### ***10.9 Real estate excise and fuel tax, and license fee options***

Subject to voter approval, County Council could institute a variety of optional fees and taxes to be used ***instead of or in addition to*** the regional/local organizational financing approaches defined in the above (as a way of reducing the use of property taxes for park financing). Survey respondents were asked to rate each of the following optional approaches.

	Ratings		
	1 + 2 Low	3 Medium	4 + 5 High
<b><i>Optional dedicated fees and taxes</i></b>			
<b><i>Real Estate Excise Tax (REET-3)</i></b> – an additional 0.25% assessment of the sales price of all real estate property (equal to \$250 per \$100,000 of sale price) paid by the purchaser to be dedicated <b><i>exclusively</i></b> to the acquisition and development of park and open space?	42%	14%	39%
<b><i>Local Option Vehicle License Fee</i></b> – an additional \$15.00 per vehicle license registered in the county to be dedicated <b><i>exclusively</i></b> to the acquisition and development of trail improvements?	57%	12%	28%
<b><i>Local Option Sales Tax</i></b> – an additional 0.1% sales tax (equal to \$0.10 for a \$100 purchase) to be paid by residents and tourists to be dedicated <b><i>exclusively</i></b> to the acquisition and development of park and open space?	52%	16%	29%
<b><i>Local Option Fuel Tax</i></b> – an additional \$0.023 per gallon sales tax to be paid by residents and tourists to be dedicated <b><i>exclusively</i></b> to the acquisition and development of trail improvements?	73%	6%	18%

### ***10.10 General obligation bond options***

Subject to voter approval, County Council could also propose a variety of optional bonds as a means of financing park, recreation, and open space improvements for specific projects. This option could be used ***instead of or in addition to*** the options defined in the above. How would you rate the following?

***General obligation bond*** - County Council could submit a general obligation bond for voter approval to finance ***acquisition and development*** of specific park, recreation, and open space improvements. The bond, which can not be used to finance operation and maintenance, would be financed over a 20-year period.

<b><i>General obligation bond</i></b>	<b><i>Amount per year</i></b>
If a bond were to be put on the ballot <b><i>to finance the highest priority projects</i></b> , how much, if anything, would your <b><i>household</i></b> be willing to pay <b><i>per year</i></b> for this source of funding?	<b><i>Mean = \$68</i></b> <b><i>240 responses from \$0 to \$2,000</i></b>

### ***10.11 Population growth impact management options***

In the next 20 years the county population is projected to increase by another 60,500 people or 34% more than the existing population of 179,500 persons.

In your opinion, will <b><i>existing park and recreation facilities (not including any of the plan's proposals)</i></b> within the county, cities, and school districts systems be enough to provide for this population increase?	<b><i>19% yes</i></b> <b><i>60% no</i></b> <b><i>21% don't know</i></b>
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The ***existing*** inventory of ***county*** park and recreational facilities is estimated to be worth about \$900 per person or \$2,000 for an average single family house. ***This amount is the cost required for additional park facilities for new***

**housing residents if the county is to maintain the same standards for park, recreation, and open space facilities that are currently provided existing residents.** Given this fact, survey respondents were asked to rate the following methods for dealing with the impact of new population growth on parks and the methods existing residents may be using to finance park improvements.

	Ratings		
	1 + 2 Low	3 Medium	4 + 5 High
<b><u>Growth management financing</u></b>			
<b><u>Collect a one-time growth impact fee from new housing development projects</u></b> - to pay for park improvements?	13%	11%	74%
<b><u>Lower standards</u></b> - for the number of park facilities provided to future populations?	67%	21%	9%
<b><u>Increase county taxes</u></b> - to acquire and develop park facilities to offset population growth impacts?	56%	26%	16%
<b><u>Growth impact fees</u></b>	<b><u>Amount per year</u></b>		
<b><u>If a park growth impact fee were to be collected from new housing development projects</u></b> , what percent of this cost would you recommend be charged for every new single family house to be developed in the county? <i>(The county does not currently charge growth impact fees.)</i>	<b>22%</b>		<b>\$2,000</b>
	<b>9%</b>		<b>\$1,500</b>
	<b>17%</b>		<b>\$1,000</b>
	<b>15%</b>		<b>\$ 500</b>
	<b>22%</b>		<b>\$ 200</b>
	<b>9%</b>		<b>\$ 0</b>

**Conclusion**

In general, the results of the telephone survey indicate resident county voters will support user fees, growth impact fees, general obligation bonds, and joint venture projects if the programs and projects are conceived along the lines indicated in the survey results.