



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

# River Falls, WI

Community Livability Report

2017



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# About

The National Citizen Survey™ (The NCS) report is about the “livability” of River Falls. 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 463 residents of the City of River Falls. The margin of error around any reported percentage is 5% for all respondents. The full description of methods used to garner these opinions can be found in the *Technical Appendices* provided under separate cover.

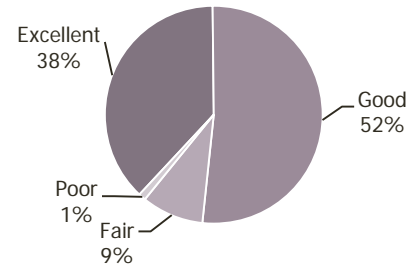


# Quality of Life in River Falls

A vast majority of residents rated the quality of life in River Falls as excellent or good. These ratings were similar to those given in comparison communities (see Appendix B of the *Technical Appendices* provided under separate cover).

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.

Overall Quality of Life



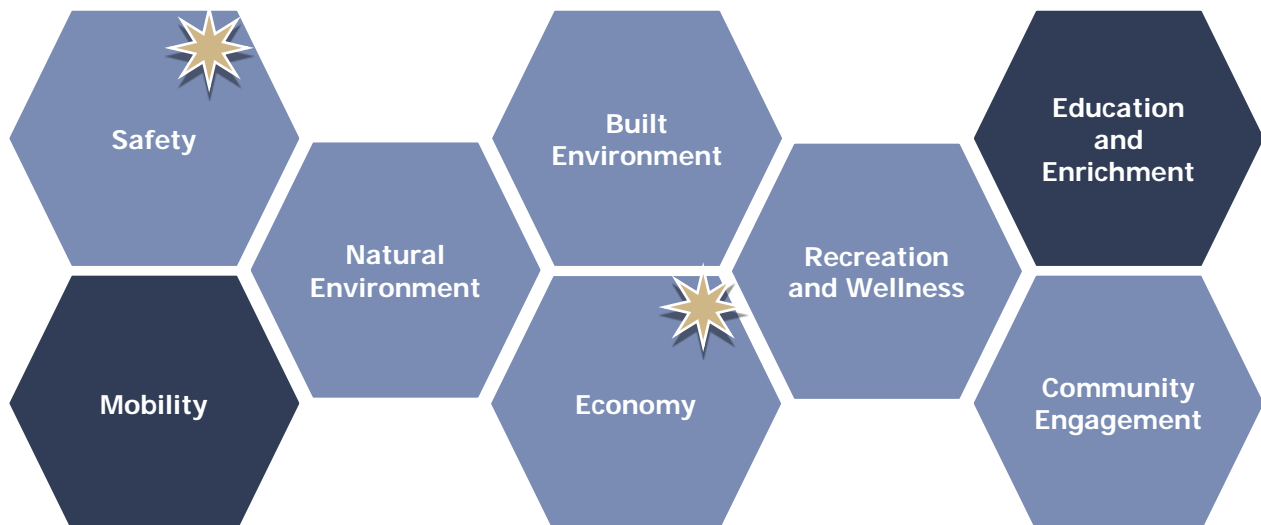
In addition to a summary of ratings, the image below includes one or more stars to indicate which community facets were the most important focus areas for the community. Residents identified Safety and Economy as priorities for the River Falls community in the coming two years, both of which were rated positively and similar to the national benchmark. Mobility and Education and Enrichment in River Falls were higher than average. 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 River Falls' unique questions.

## Legend

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

- Most important



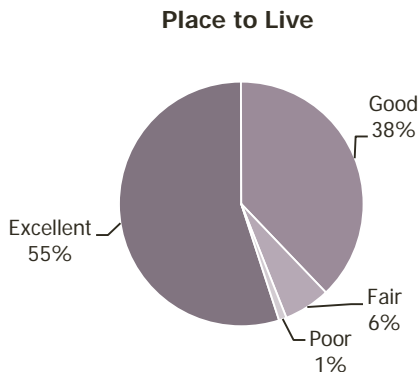
# Community Characteristics

*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 River Falls, 93% felt that the City was an excellent or good place to live. Respondents' ratings of River Falls as a place to live were similar to those in other communities across the nation.

In addition to rating the City as a place to live, respondents rated several aspects of community quality including River Falls as a place to raise children and to retire, their neighborhood as a place to live, the overall image or reputation of River Falls and its overall appearance. A vast majority of residents positively assessed these aspects of the community, but gave particularly high marks compared to the nation to the City's overall appearance and to River Falls as a place to raise children, a rating that increased from 2015 to 2017 (see the *Trends over Time* report under separate cover). Additionally, resident evaluations for neighborhoods as a place to live increased between 2015 and 2017.

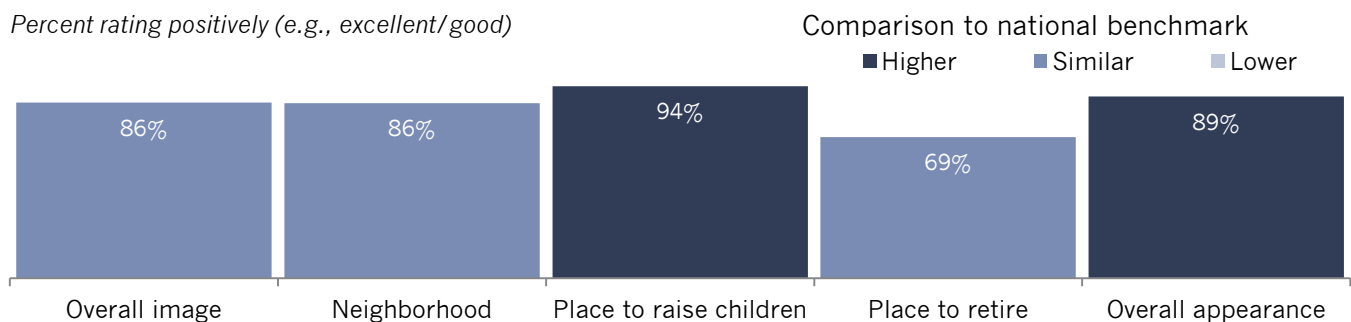
Delving deeper into Community Characteristics, survey respondents rated over 40 features of the community within the eight facets of Community Livability. Overall, ratings were strong and similar to or higher than the national benchmark. Nearly all residents favorably rated aspects of Safety and assessments of the overall feeling of safety and safety in the downtown/commercial area of the City were higher than elsewhere. Residents applauded Mobility in the City, frequently at levels higher than in communities across the nation. Traffic flow and paths and walking trails saw improvements in 2017 when compared to 2015.



Residents also appreciated aspects of the Natural Environment in River Falls, with all items viewed positively by about 9 in 10 residents and higher-than-average ratings. Further, education-related community characteristics were highlighted as being particularly strong in River Falls.

While the majority of ratings for other Community Characteristics remained stable between 2015 and 2017, increases in evaluations were observed for shopping opportunities, the City as a place to work and opportunities to volunteer. New development in River Falls was the only item to decline during this time period.

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



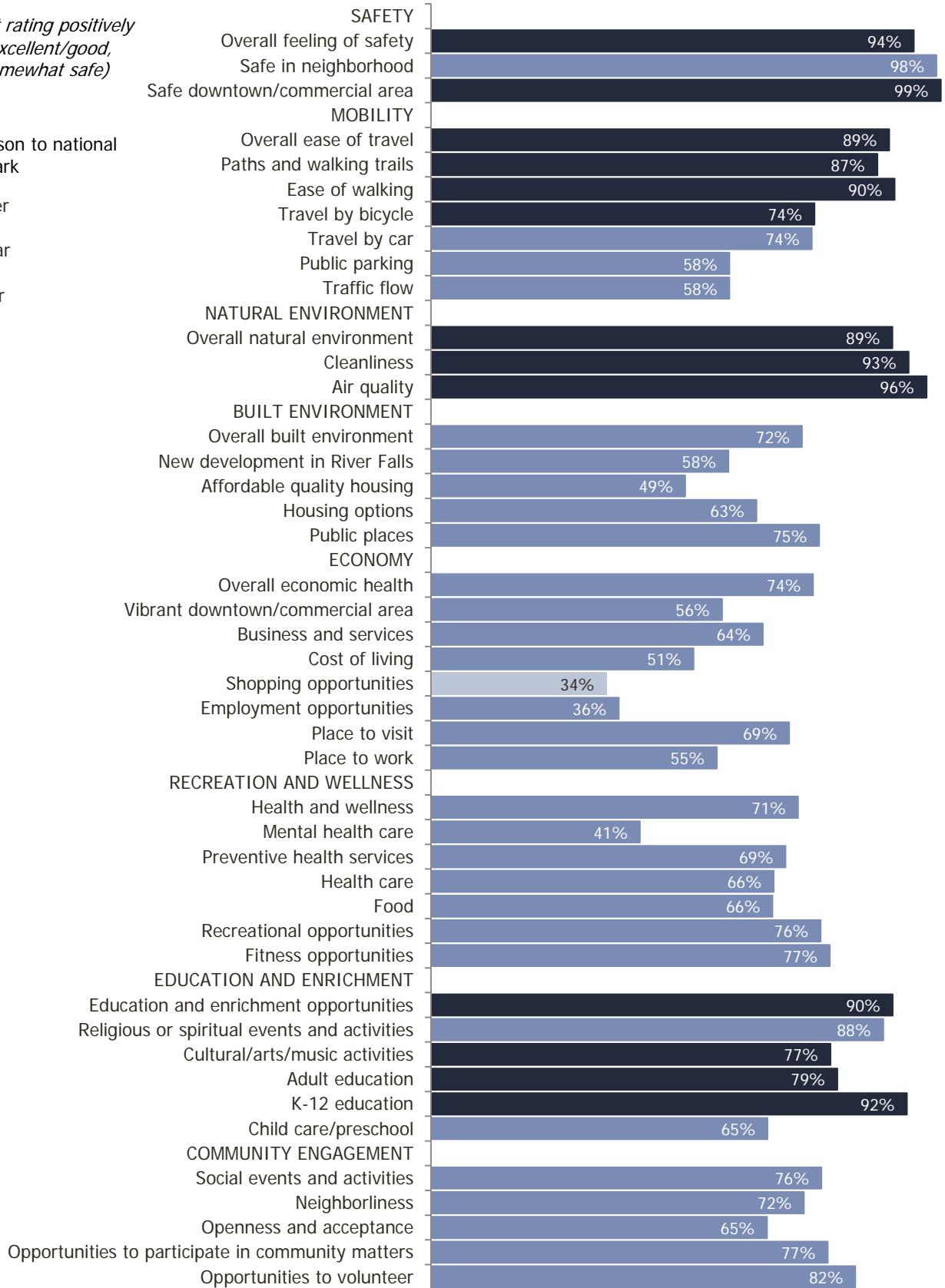
# The National Citizen Survey™

Figure 1: Aspects of Community Characteristics

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

Comparison to national  
benchmark

- Higher
- Similar
- Lower



# Governance

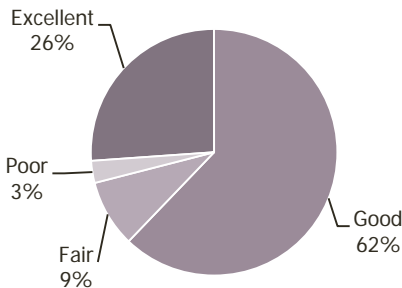
*How well does the government of River Falls meet the needs and expectations of its residents?*

The overall quality of the services provided by River Falls as well as the manner in which these services are provided is a key component of how residents rate their quality of life. Nearly 9 in 10 residents positively reviewed the overall quality of City services while less than half as many approved of the services provided by the Federal Government. Both of these ratings were similar to the national benchmark.

Survey respondents also rated various aspects of River Falls' leadership and governance. Residents demonstrated an improved endorsement of many aspects of local government performance in 2017 compared to 2015 including an upturn in treating residents fairly and evaluations of honesty, among others. At least 7 in 10 emphasized River Falls' performance in treating all residents fairly, being honest, acting in the best interest of the City and demonstrated confidence in the City government overall, all of which were noted as being higher in River Falls than elsewhere.

Respondents evaluated over 30 individual services and amenities available in River Falls. All services provided by River Falls were given excellent or good ratings by around 6 in 10 respondents or more and were either similar to or higher than the U.S. average. Aspects of Mobility including, traffic enforcement, street lighting and traffic signal timing were all exceptional in River Falls and street lighting and traffic signal timing improved between 2015 and 2017. Residents also appreciated services related to storm drainage, utility billing and land use, planning and zoning, all of which were higher in the City than in comparison communities. City parks were another stand-out aspect of River Falls with evaluations higher than the national average.

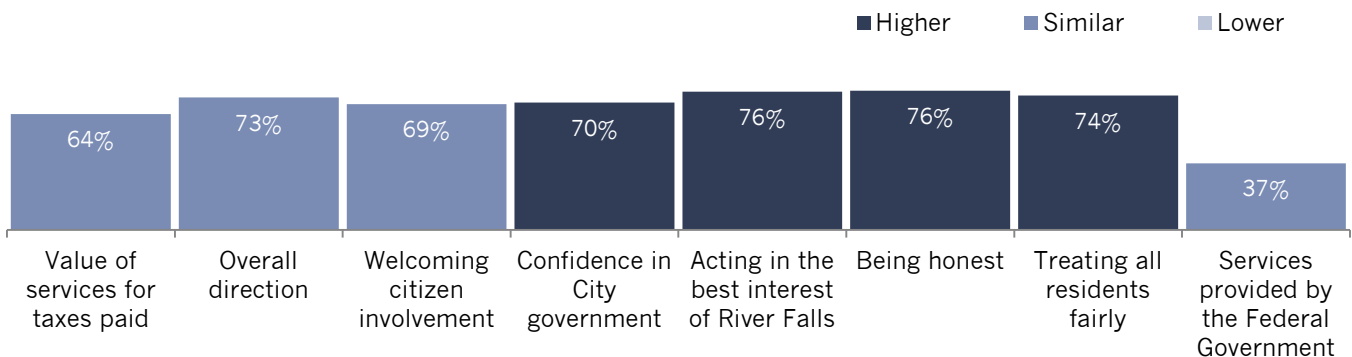
Overall Quality of City Services



Many features related to governance in River Falls increased from 2015. Safety aspects such as police, crime prevention and emergency preparedness all improved in 2017, as did economic development.

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

Comparison to national benchmark



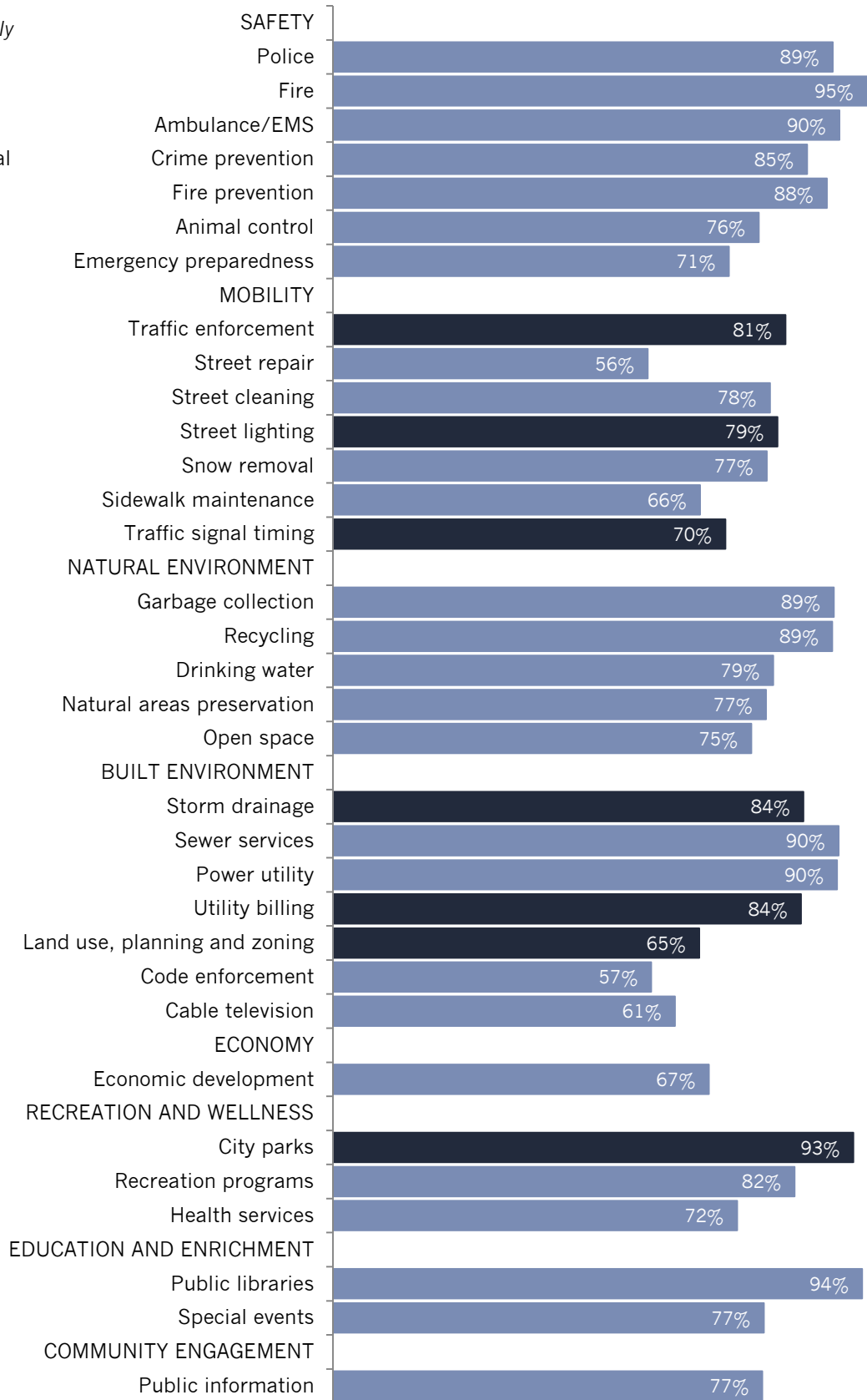
## The National Citizen Survey™

Figure 2: Aspects of Governance

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

Comparison to national  
benchmark

- Higher
- Similar
- Lower





# Participation

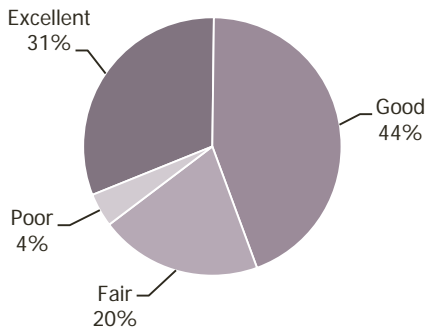
*Are the residents of River Falls connected to the community and each other?*

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. River Falls' residents reported a higher sense of community than other communities throughout the nation and resident loyalty improved over time, with more reporting in 2017 compared to 2015 that they plan to remain in River Falls for the next five years.

The survey included over 30 activities and behaviors for which respondents indicated how often they participated in or performed each, if at all. Engagement among River Falls residents varied from 15% to 96% and, with the exception of two items, was generally similar to or higher than engagement noted in the national comparisons.

City residents reported higher rates of walking or biking in lieu of driving than residents in other parts of the country and more River Falls residents had carpooled instead of drove alone in 2017 than in 2015. Additionally, fewer residents reported observing a code violation in River Falls than did residents elsewhere. Use of the public libraries was remarkably higher in the City compared to the national average as was the amount of residents reporting they volunteered in the 12 months prior to the survey. However, fewer River Falls residents had stocked supplies for an emergency or read or watched local news compared to their peers.

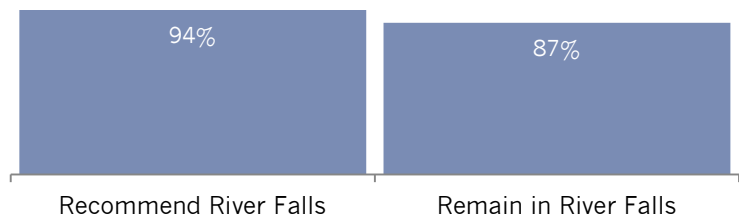
Sense of Community



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

Comparison to national  
benchmark

■ Higher ■ Similar ■ Lower



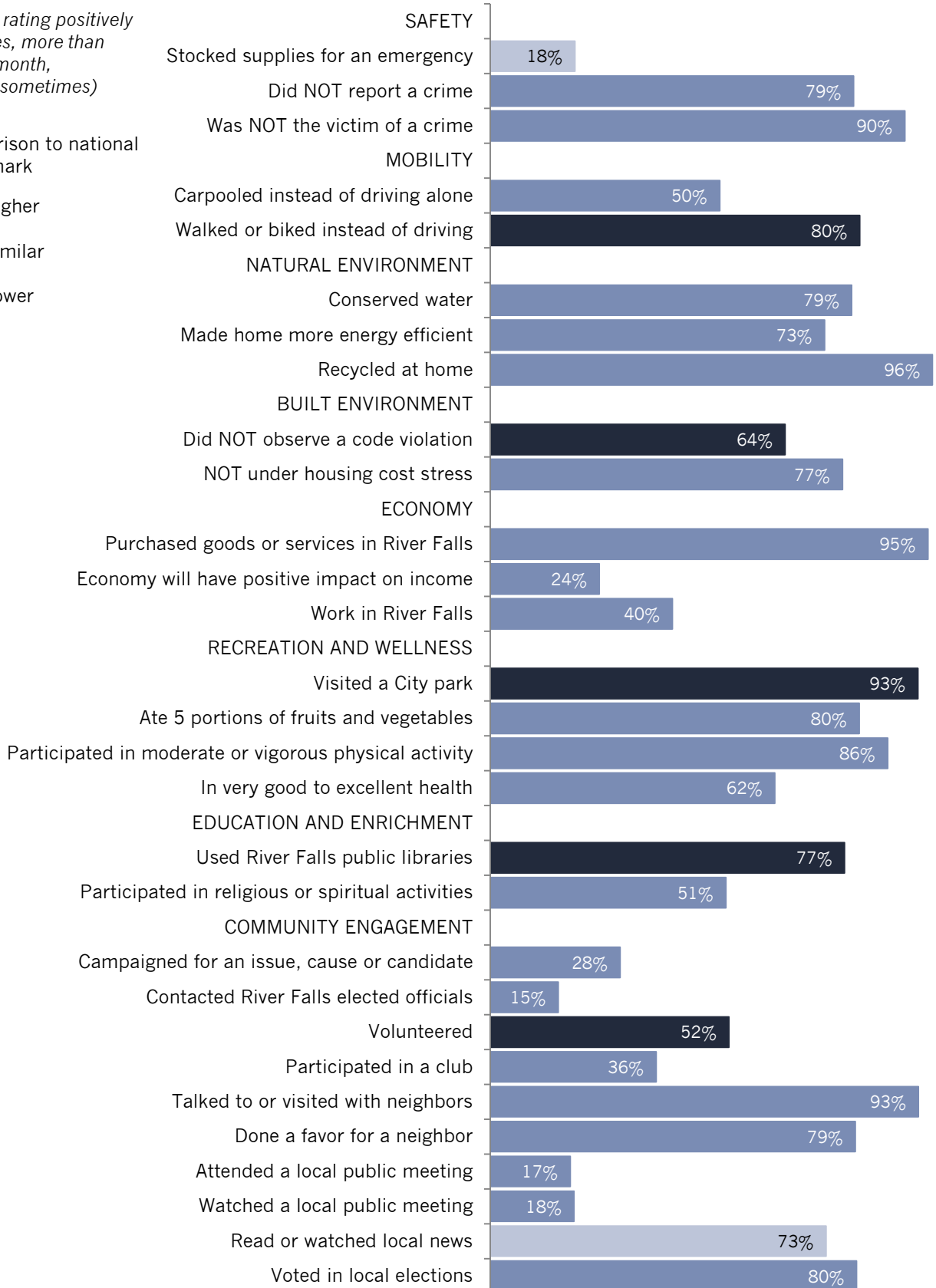
## The National Citizen Survey™

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

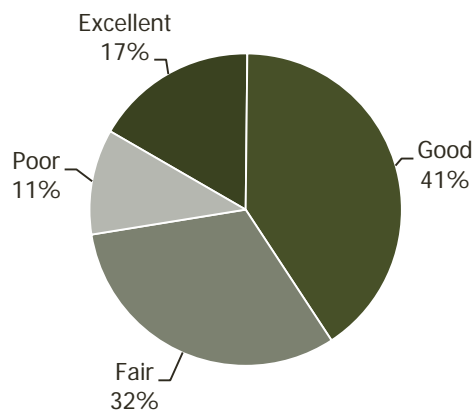


# Special Topics

The City of River Falls included several questions of special interest on The NCS. Topics investigated on the survey ranged from quality of special services and of services delivered by various levels of government to potential focus areas for the City in the coming three years, among others.

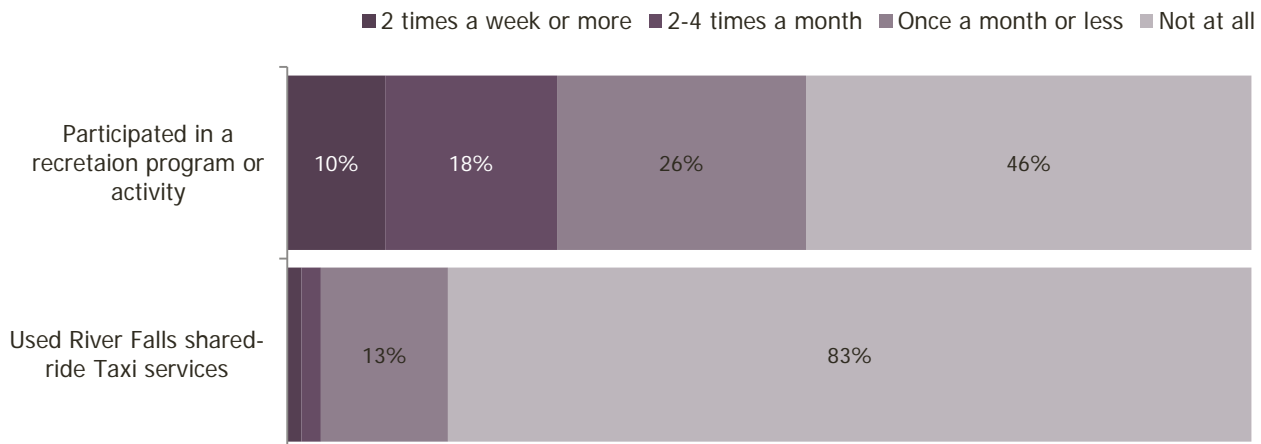
The City of River Falls sought to learn more about the ease of travel by the shared-ride Taxi service. Of all respondents, nearly 6 in 10 reported it was excellent or good; however, it is noteworthy that nearly half of respondents were not familiar enough with this service to provide an evaluation and selected “don’t know” (see *The NCS Technical Appendices Report: Appendix A* for full frequency responses to this question).

Figure 4: Ease of Travel by Shared-ride Taxi Service  
*Please rate the ease of travel by shared-ride Taxi in River Falls:*



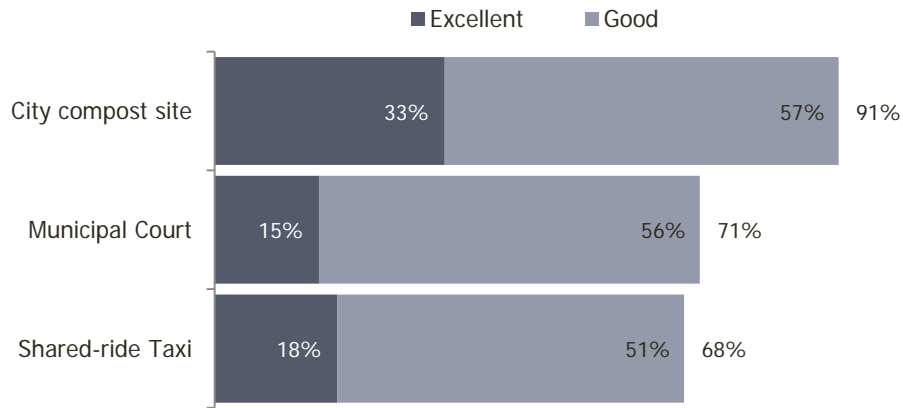
Another question asked residents how frequently they participated in a recreation program or activity or used the shared-ride Taxi services. Around half reported participating in a recreation program or activity at least once in the 12 months prior to the survey, with about 1 in 10 participating as frequently as 2 times a week or more. Alternatively, few residents had used the shared-ride Taxi service 2-4 times a month or more and around four in five reported they never use the service.

Figure 5: Use of Services in River Falls  
*In the last 12 months, about how many times, if at all, have you or other household members done each of the following in River Falls?*



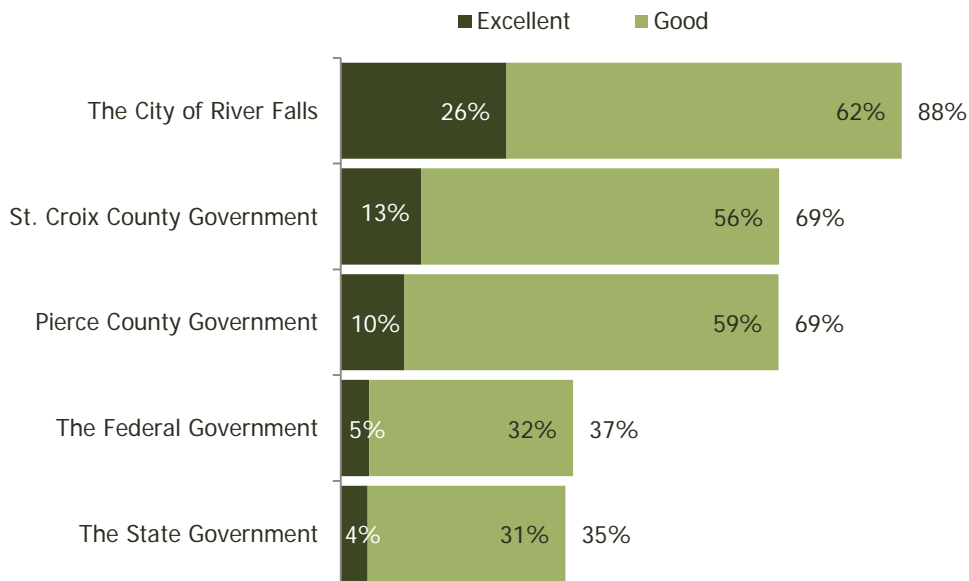
The City of River Falls asked about the quality of specific services including the compost site, municipal court and the shared-ride taxi service. Nearly all residents appreciated the City compost site while around 7 in 10 awarded excellent or good reviews to the municipal court and shared-ride Taxi service.

Figure 6: Quality of Services  
Please rate the quality of each of the following services in River Falls:



When asked about the quality of services provided by all levels of government, the City fared the best, with 88% giving high performance marks. Both St. Croix and Pierce County Governments received excellent or good ratings by about 7 in 10 respondents, while around 4 in 10 favorably reviewed the quality of services provided by the Federal and State Government.

Figure 7: Quality of Services Provided by Levels of Government  
Overall, how would you rate the quality of the services provided by each of the following?



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A set of questions on the survey asked residents if they had contacted the City of River Falls in the 12 months prior to the survey and if so, what their overall impression was of that contact. About two-thirds of residents reported they had contacted the city (64%) and of those, roughly 9 in 10 reported being impressed overall and pleased with the courtesy, responsiveness and knowledge of the employee with whom they interacted.

Figure 8: Contact with City of River Falls

*Have you had any in-person, phone, or email contact with an employee of the City of River Falls within the last 12 months (including police, utility, receptionists, or any others)?*

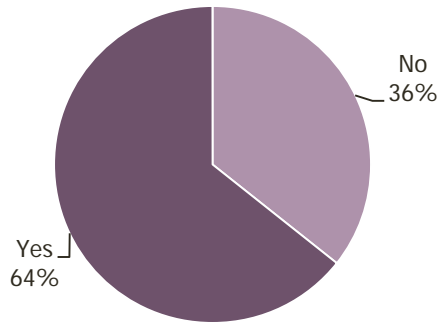
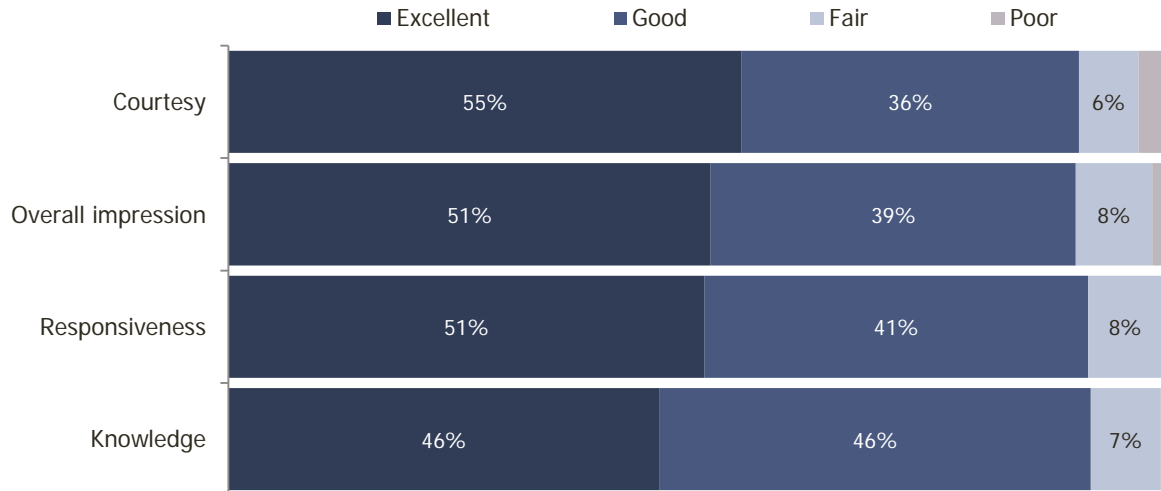


Figure 9: Impression of City of River Falls Employee(s)

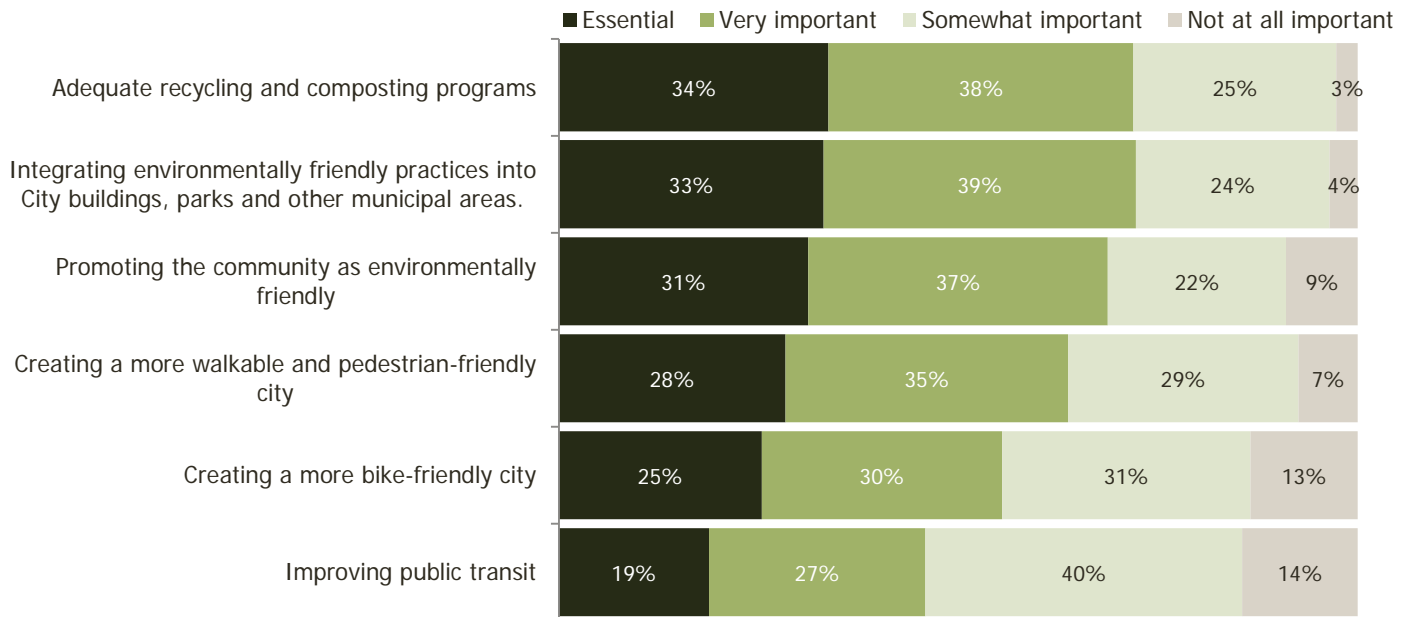
*What was your impression of the employee(s) of the City of River Falls in your most recent contact? (Rate each characteristic below.)*



A list of six potential focus areas was provided to residents and they were asked to evaluate the level of importance for each over the coming three years. Most focus areas were considered at least very important by at least half of residents, but environmental programs and practices were generally deemed more important than making improvements to mobility in the City.

Figure 10: Important Focus Areas

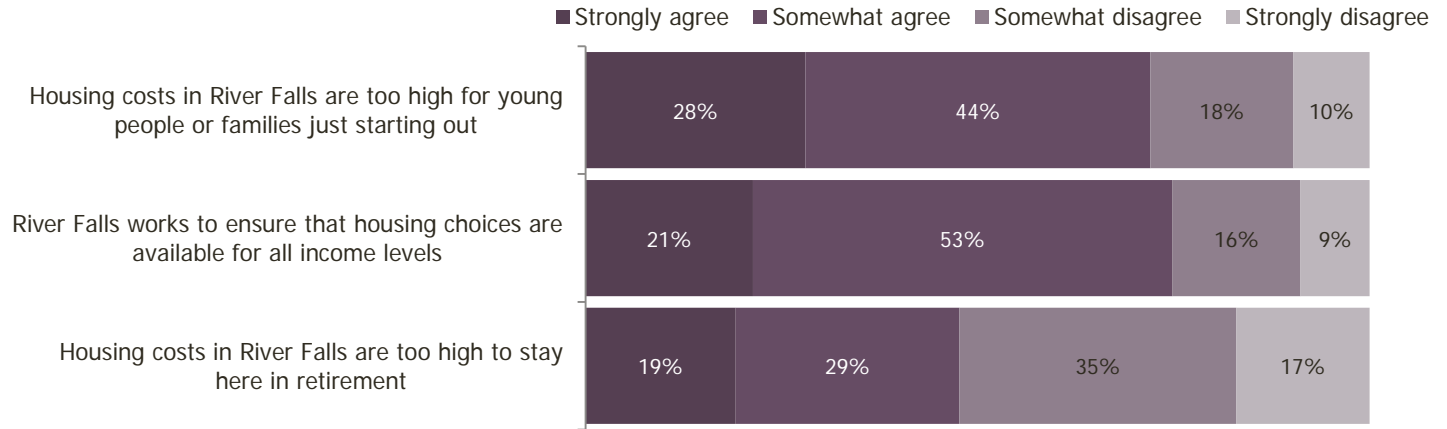
*Please rate how important, if at all, you think it is for the River Falls community to focus on each of the following in the coming three years:*



The City also pursued opinions on affordable housing for varying age groups and income levels. Nearly 3 in 10 strongly agreed that housing costs in River Falls were too high for young people and new families and another 4 in 10 somewhat agreed with that statement. About half of respondents at least somewhat agreed that housing costs in River Falls were too high to stay in the City during retirement. However, roughly three-quarters of residents agreed that the City works to ensure that housing choices are available for all income levels.

Figure 11: Affordable Housing in River Falls

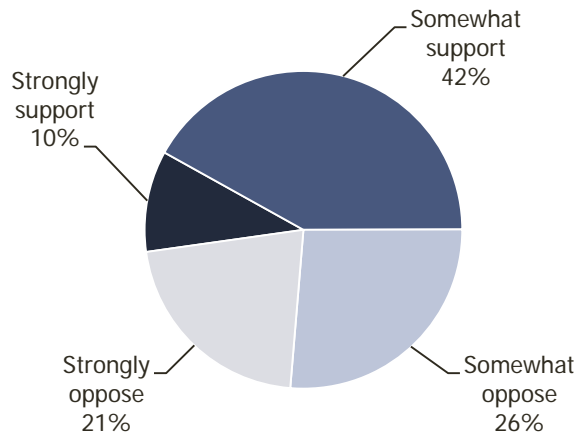
Please rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statements below about housing in River Falls:



When asked about Mayoral and Council term limits, residents were divided with 52% voicing support for extending the terms beyond the two-year limit. About 1 in 10 strongly supported extending both Mayoral and Council terms, while about twice as many strongly opposed the measure.

Figure 12: Level of Support for Longer Mayoral Terms

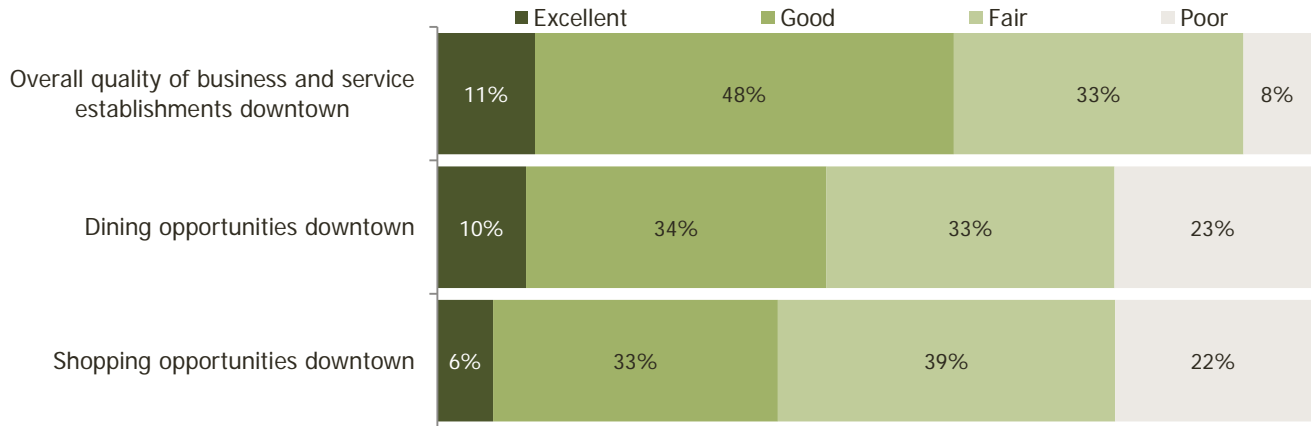
The current term for Mayor and Council is 2 years. Please rate to what extent you would support or oppose longer terms for the Mayor and Council:



Aspects of Downtown River Falls rounded out the special interest questions asked by the City. The overall quality of business and service establishments downtown was rated highly by about 6 in 10 residents, while dining and shopping opportunities were rated excellent or good by fewer than half of respondents.

Figure 13: Downtown River Falls

*Thinking about downtown River Falls, please rate the quality of the following:*





# Conclusions

## Residents are increasingly pleased with City government performance.

Nearly 9 in 10 respondents evaluated the quality of services provided by the City as excellent or good which was considerably higher than ratings given to either County Government and more than double the assessments provided for the Federal and State Governments. Further, more respondents in 2017 than 2015 felt River Falls' government was honest, fair, better at welcoming citizen involvement, acting in the best interest of the City and that the value of services for taxes paid was excellent or good. Many of these performance ratings were higher than the national average, as was resident confidence in City government.

The appreciation residents had for River Falls welcoming citizen involvement was corroborated by the high proportion of respondents who reported having contact with a City employee and the outstanding ratings given to their impressions of that contact.

While residents were happy with the local government performance, they had mixed feelings about longer terms for the Mayor and Council. When asked if they supported the extension of Mayoral and Council terms beyond two years, few residents voiced strong support and about twice as many strongly opposed the measure.

## Ease of Mobility contributes to quality of life in River Falls.

Across the board, Mobility-related ratings in River Falls were high and frequently exceeded ratings in comparison communities. Residents were particularly satisfied with alternate modes of transportation and demonstrated this by walking or biking instead of driving at a higher rate than communities across the nation. Additionally, more residents reported carpooling in 2017 than in 2015. Mobility services such as street lighting and traffic signal timing were not only higher in River Falls than elsewhere, they also improved between survey iterations. Staying connected via paths and walking trails also was appreciated by residents, with more positive assessments in 2017 compared to 2015 and ratings that were higher than other communities across the country.

When asked to evaluate the importance of six potential areas of focus for the City, more respondents felt that efforts related to the environment were more important than were mobility-related efforts. Still, about half of respondents felt that the mobility-related focus areas were at least somewhat important. Placing a lower priority on mobility may be indicative of the fact that it is already a highly rated aspect of the City.

In addition to more general mobility ratings, residents provided some context regarding the shared-ride Taxi service. A majority of respondents rated the ease of travel via share-ride Taxi service as excellent or good and a similar percentage gave comparable ratings to the overall quality of the Taxi service; however, four in five reported not using the service at all in the 12 months prior to the survey.

## Natural Environment continues to receive exceptional ratings from residents and most feel this is an important area of focus over the next three years.

Similar to 2015, the overall natural environment, cleanliness and air quality in River Falls received positive ratings by about 9 in 10 or more and were above the national average. Though similar to the national benchmark, at least three-quarters positively rated City services related to the Natural Environment and a vast majority reported conserving water, making their home more energy efficient and recycling at home. Additionally, about 9 in 10 residents gave positive reviews to the City compost site.

When asked about important focus areas for the City in the coming three years, the top-most cited items were all natural environment related: recycling and composting programs, environmentally friendly practices at the City and in other areas and promoting the community as environmentally friendly. Further, while the other potential areas of focus were related more to Mobility, creating a more walkable, bike-friendly city with improved public transit aim to improve and protect the natural environment.