

2017

Birch Hills County

Municipal  
Development  
Plan



# COMMUNITY SURVEY REPORT

Prepared by Mackenzie Municipal Services Agency



## SURVEY OBJECTIVE

Birch Hills County is developing a Municipal Development Plan (MDP), which is a long-range strategic document intended to guide the growth and development of a municipality into the future. The objective of the community survey is to understand the attitudes and feelings of the residents about the present and future of the County.



## SURVEY PROCESS AND COMPONENTS

### *Consultation Reach*

The survey was developed in the fall of 2016 and launched to the public on October 27, 2016, via a general mail out to residences. Information about the survey was posted on the County's webpage, Facebook page, and Twitter feed. Responses were accepted from October 27 to December 15, 2016.

The survey was managed by the Mackenzie Municipal Services Agency through Survey Monkey, an online survey development company.

### *Public Survey Results*

A total of 75 surveys were completed, which represents 4.7% of the County's total population or 6.5% of the County's adult population, based on the most recent population count of 1,582<sup>1</sup>. Surveys were available both online and via hard copies received in the mail; 35 surveys were completed online and 40 hard copies were submitted to the County.

<sup>1</sup> Statistics Canada. Community Profile. 2011.

\*Note the total population numbers differed within the Stats Canada data and are inconsistent.

## SURVEY RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

### Who Responded

The demographic questions in the survey allow staff to determine if the responses are representative of the County's population. As Figure 1 shows, the survey attracted responses from primarily County residents along with some property owners who were not actual residents in the County. The majority of responses were from senior members of households (76.7%) while only 12.3% of respondents were property owners but non-residents. The Question 1 also asked business owners how many employees they had. Answers ranged from one to twenty, and on average employers had 4.6 employees.

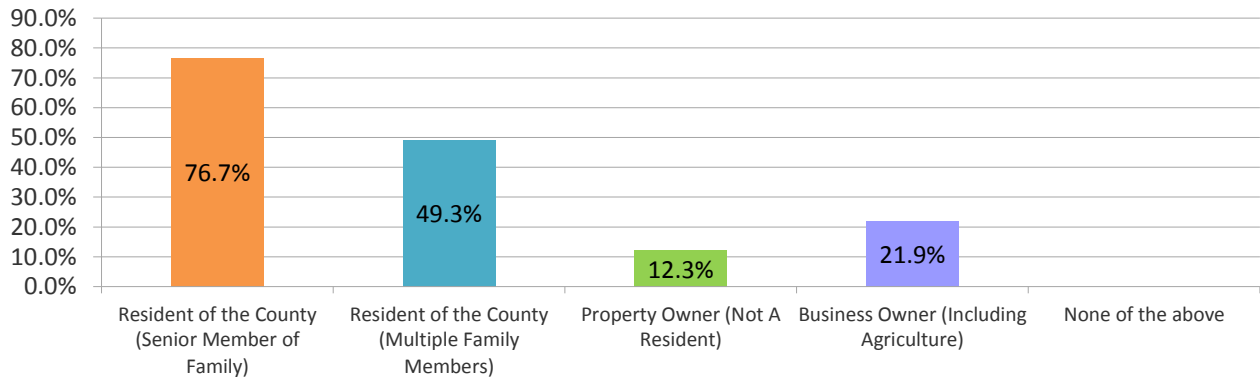


Figure 1 – Response to “Are you a (check all that apply):” (73 responses, 2 skipped)

Figure 2 shows that the overwhelming majority of respondents had lived in Birch Hills County for 21+ years (63.9%) while only 2.8% had lived in the County for 1 year or less. Indicating a high percent of longtime residents opposed to a low number of new residents.

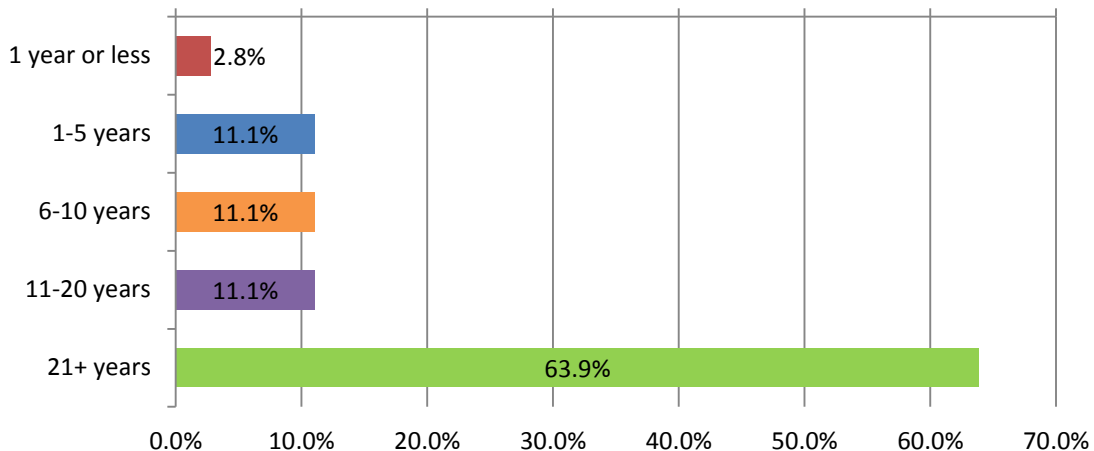


Figure 2 – Response to “How long have you lived in Birch Hills County?” (72 responses, 3 skipped)

Question 3 asked respondents where in the County they lived. The majority of respondents lived on a farmstead in the County (39.4%). The hamlets of Wanham and Eaglesham had the next highest number of respondents with 14 and 13 responses each respectively. Unfortunately, no responses were received from the hamlet of Watino. Two respondents wrote in they were from the Woking area. See Figure 3 for the full results.

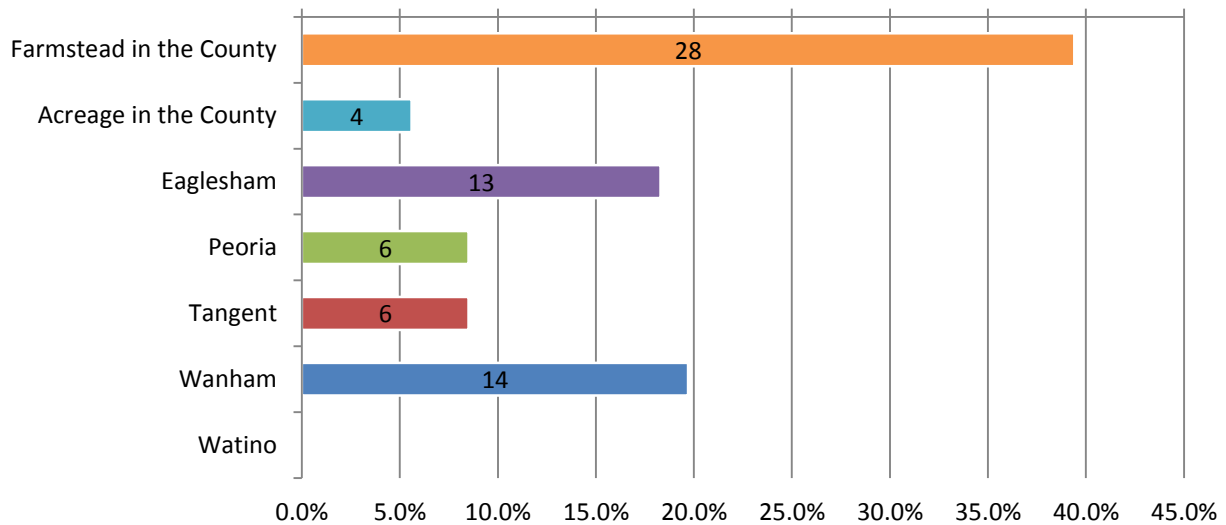


Figure 3 – Response to “Where do you live?” (71 responses, 4 skipped)

Question 4 asked respondents to mark all the ages of the members of their household. Figure 4 shows how the survey results correlate to the 2011 Census Report for the County. As seen in Figure 4, the majority of respondents indicated that members of their household were between 50 and 69 years old. This reflects the 2011 Census Report as the majority age range in the County, besides Children aged 0-9 years old.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, these results reflect an aging community with few young families.

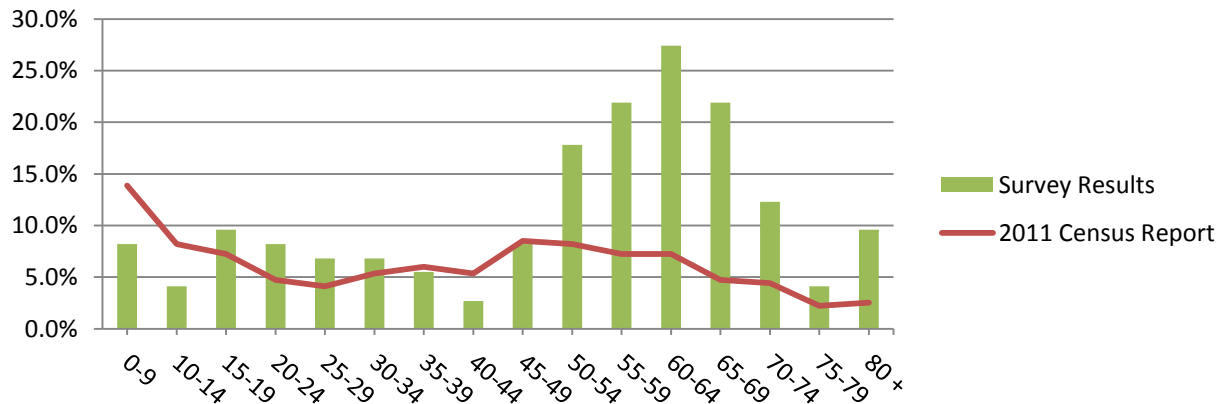


Figure 4 – Response to “What are the ages of members of your household? (Check all that apply)” (73 responses, 2 skipped)

Question 5 asked respondents to indicate their gender. The results were very similar to the results of the 2011 Census Report for the County.<sup>3</sup> The survey indicated 51.4% of respondents identified as a male which is slightly lower than the 2011 Census Report which indicated 53.2% of County residents were males. Alternatively, 48.6% of survey respondents indicated they were female compared to 47.2% from the 2011 Census Report.<sup>4</sup> Figure 5 shows the full results from the survey.

<sup>2</sup> Statistics Canada. Community Profile. 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Statistics Canada. Community Profile. 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Statistics Canada. Community Profile. 2011.

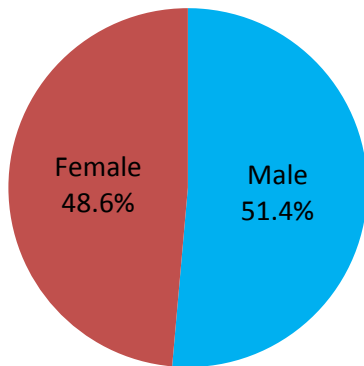


Figure 5 – Response to “What is your gender?”  
(72 responses, 3 skipped)

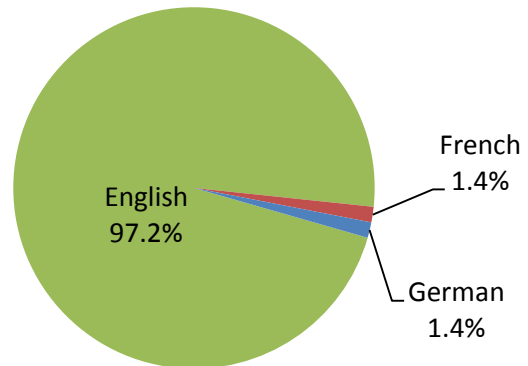


Figure 6 – Response to “What is your primary language?”  
(73 responses, 2 skipped)

The majority of survey respondents (97.2%) identified themselves as English speakers (Figure 6). These results varied greatly from the 2011 Census Report which indicated the County included a larger German population (21.6%) and a French-speaking population of 7.6%.<sup>5</sup> The absence of these groups could be explained by the fact that the survey was only released in English. Moreover, there was no option to choose multiple languages; therefore, bilingual speakers were not necessarily captured in responses to this question.

Question 7 asked respondents to indicate how many adults, seniors (65 and over) and children (17 and under) lived in their household. Results showed that 79.5% of households in the County had at least one resident aged 18-64 with an average of 1.8 adults. The results revealed 37% of respondents’ households had at least one senior with an average of 1.4 per household. Finally, 16.4% of respondents indicated there were children living in their household and on average there were 2.7 children per household. See Figure 7 for the full results.

Answer Options	Responses	Average Number	Percent of Households
Adults (18-64)	58	1.8	79.5%
Seniors (65 and over)	27	1.4	37.0%
Children (17 and under)	12	2.7	16.4%

Figure 7 – “How many people live in your household? (please respond with a number)” (73 responses, 2 skipped)

Respondents were asked why they decided to live in the County (Question 8) and the top 3 answers were employment, family, and cost of living. Alternatively, recreational opportunities and land availability were less popular reasons. “Lifestyle” was also written in a significant number of times as a reason for choosing Birch Hills County. Schools were considerably a lesser concern among respondents and this is evident in Figure 8.

<sup>5</sup> Statistics Canada. Community Profile. 2011.

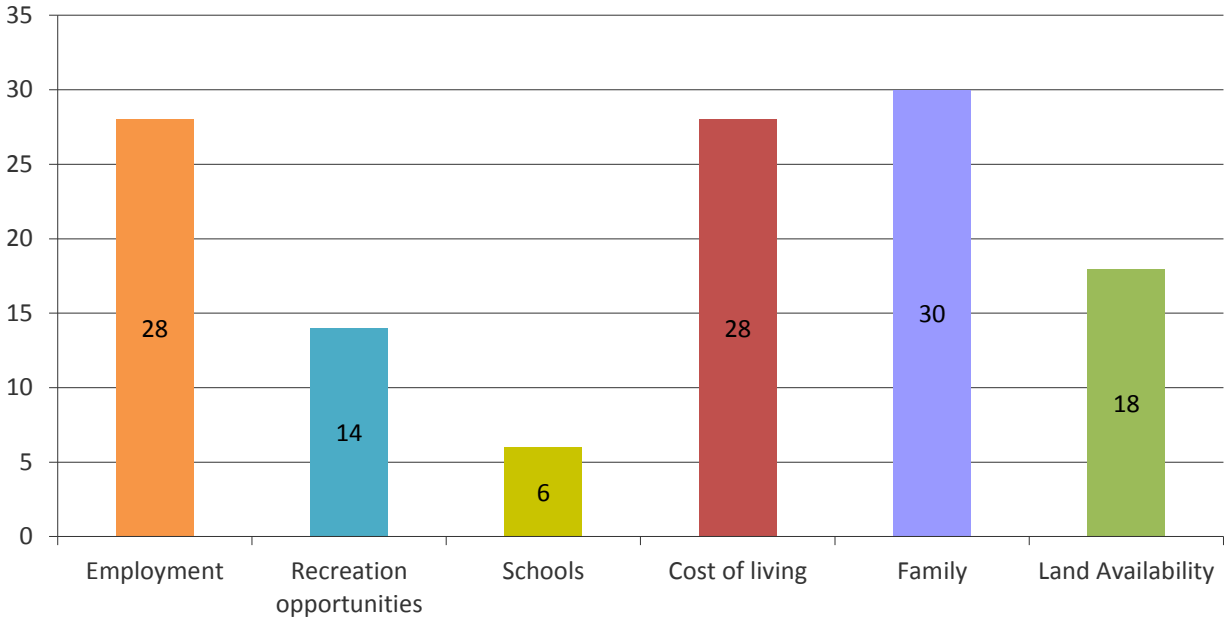


Figure 8 – “Why do you choose to live in the County? (Check all that apply)” (61 responses, 14 skipped)

Responses to Question 9 indicated that single-detached housing was the most common housing type (60.6%) in the County. This is also reflective in the 2011 Census Report which indicated 77% of residents lived in single-detached housing. The next most common housing types were manufactured/mobile homes (36.6%). While being separate and distinct uses, the difference is not common knowledge and therefore they were combined into one category. There was one write-in answer for a senior’s apartment. See Figure 9 for full details.

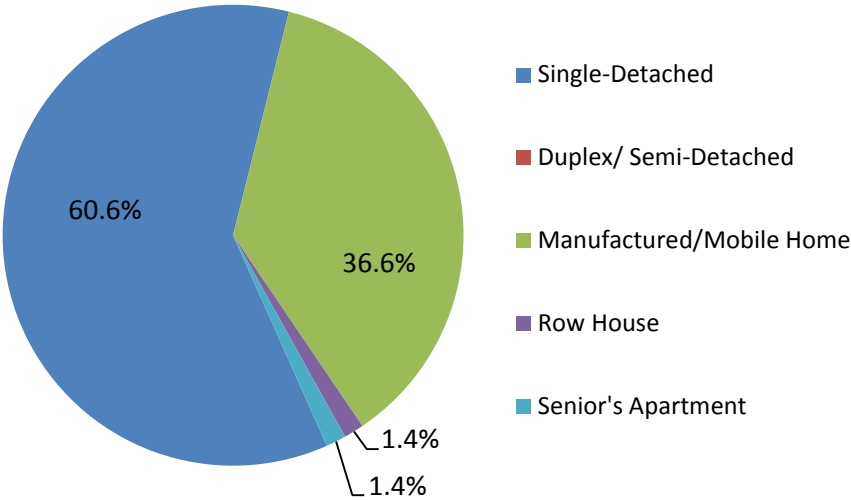


Figure 9 – “What type of home do you live in today?” (70 responses, 5 skipped)

Home ownership responses to Question 10 revealed that the majority of respondents owned their home (89%) in the County opposed to renting. See the results in Figure 10. The eight residents who responded they were renters all lived in the County’s hamlets including three in Eaglesham, two in both Wanham and Peoria and one in Tangent.

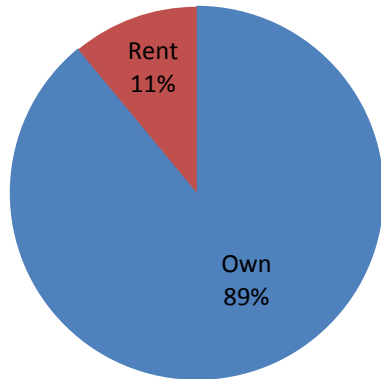


Figure 10 – “Do you own or rent your home?” (73 responses, 2 skipped)

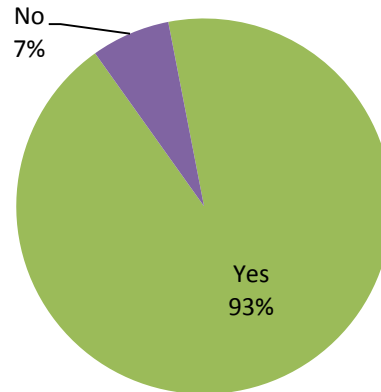


Figure 11 – “Does your home currently meet your housing needs?” (73 responses, 2 skipped)

As seen in Figure 11, most respondents’ felt their homes were currently meeting their housing needs. Written in answers as to why respondents’ homes were not meeting their needs included the need for upgrades to their home and physical size of their home not being large enough. Considering Questions 9 and Question 11, the majority of respondents (68.3%) predictably answered in Question 12, that a single-detached home would meet their housing needs in five years. Manufactured and mobile homes were the next most common answers (27%), possibly an implication of residents wanting to downsize their home as they get older. There was one answer written in stating they believe a senior’s apartment would best meet their needs. See Figure 12 for the full results.

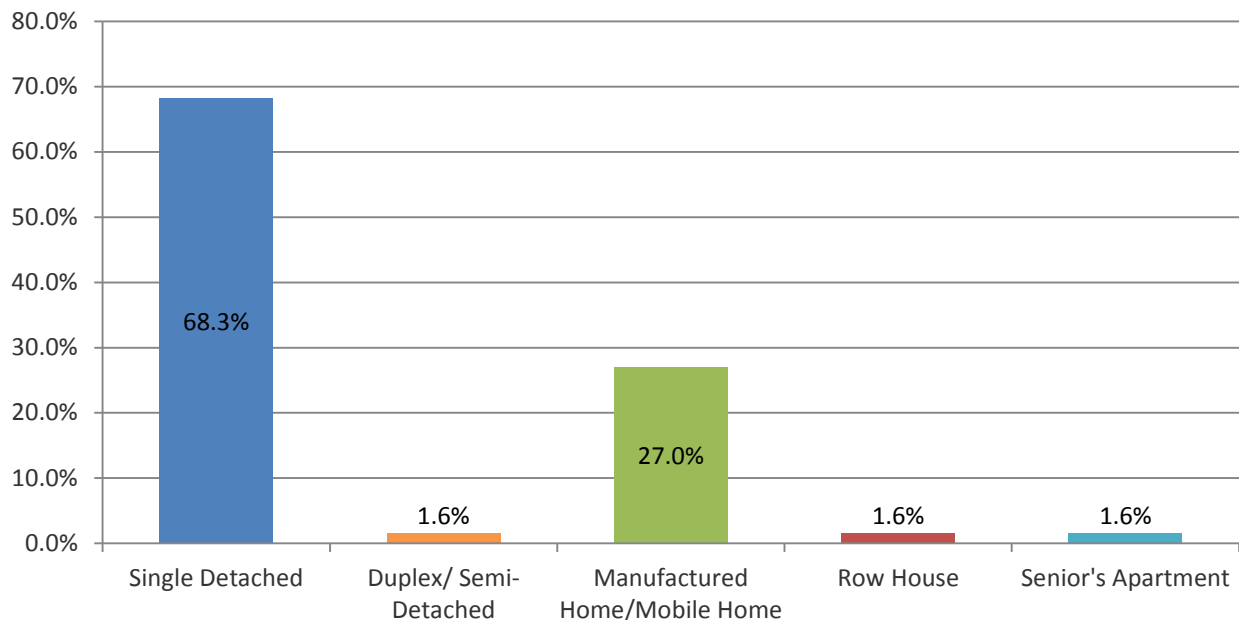


Figure 12 – “What type of home do you believe will meet your housing needs in 5 years?” (62 responses, 13 skipped)

Question 13 dealt with overland flooding. This can be defined as a type of flooding that typically results from high water levels in rivers caused by rain, extensive amounts of melted snow or overflow of dams and channels.<sup>6</sup> As seen in Figure 13, most respondents (93.2%) answered that their home had not been impacted by overland flooding. However, there were no responses from the hamlet of Watino which is within the Smoky River water basin, see Figure 3. In 1996, a Watino Flood Risk Mapping Study was released as a part of the Canada-Alberta Flood Damage Reduction Program (Figure 30).<sup>7</sup> This study revealed that most flooding occurred due to excessive rainfall and snowmelt, while the potential for ice jams was minor.<sup>8</sup>

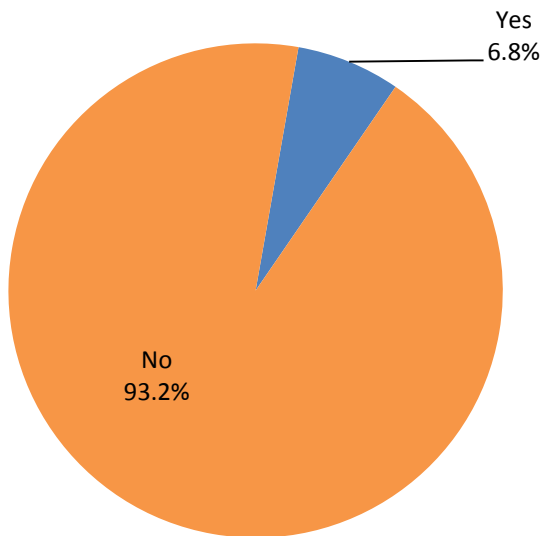


Figure 13 – “Has your home been impacted by overland flooding?” (73 responses, 2 skipped)

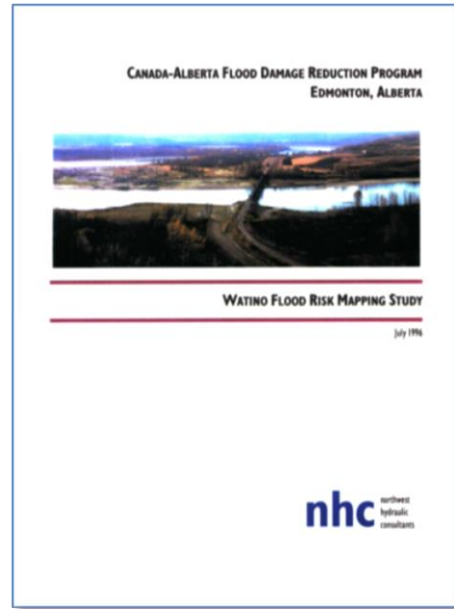


Figure 30 – Watino Flood Risk Mapping Study – Canada-Alberta Flood Damage Reduction Program (prepared by Northwest Hydraulic Consultants, 1996)

Figure 14 displays where respondents' place of occupation is located. Almost half (47.5%), indicated they work within the County (e.g. agricultural operations), not including the hamlets. Nearly a quarter (23.7%) of respondents work outside of the County, however, these respondents did not specify where they worked beyond one who mentioned the Town of Beaverlodge. A little more than a fifth of respondents (20.3%) replied that they work in a hamlet; Eaglesham being the most common (10.2%). Other respondents indicated they operated a home-based business or were retired, while only one respondent answered they were unemployed. The Canadian Business Patterns statistics released by Statistics Canada for Birch Hills County, show that the majority of businesses are agriculture, forestry, fishing or hunting based.<sup>9</sup> Responses to this question were reflective of this as most respondents work in the rural parts of the County.

<sup>6</sup> insureye.com. Overland Flooding. 2017

<sup>7</sup> Northwest Hydraulic Consultants. Watino Flood Risk Mapping Study. July 1996

<sup>8</sup> Northwest Hydraulic Consultants. Watino Flood Risk Mapping Study. July 1996

<sup>9</sup> Statistics Canada. Canadian Business Patterns. 2011



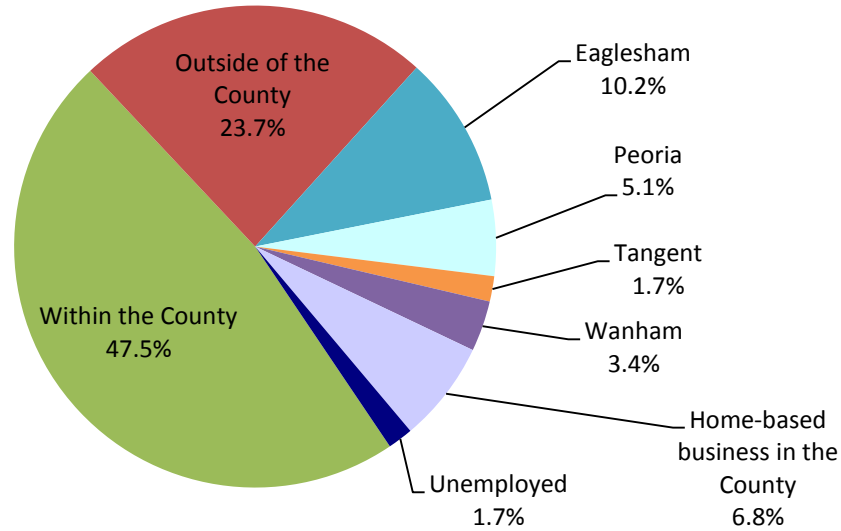


Figure 14 – “Where is your work mostly based?” (59 responses, 16 skipped)

Almost three-quarters of respondents answered that they expected to be living in the County five years from now (71.2%). While no one answered that they did not expect to be living in the County, over a quarter (28.8%) of respondents were unsure. Unsure respondents communicated concern regarding long commutes, high utility rates/taxes, lack of employment availability, and age concerns including mobility. Moreover, warmer weather and amenities in the Town of Spirit River may draw them away. See Figure 15 for the full results.

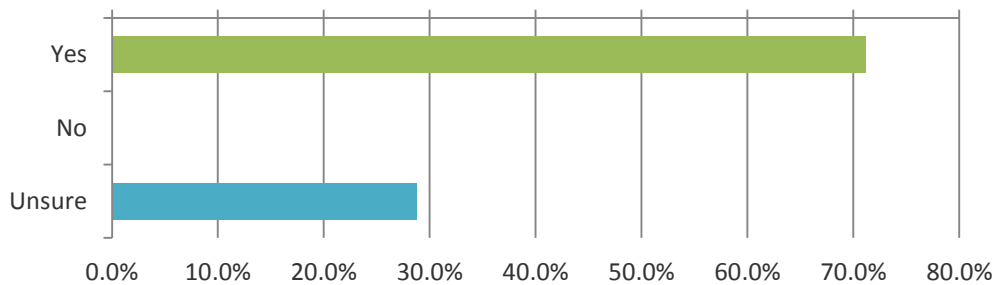


Figure 15 – “Do you expect to be living in the County 5 years from now?” (73 responses, 2 skipped)

Question 16 asked residents what they enjoyed about the County in both the summer and winter seasons. Respondents identified recreation, community buildings, scenery, neighbours/the people, low traffic volumes, privacy and local events as things they enjoy in the summertime. During the winter, respondents indicated they enjoy winter recreation, such as snowmobiling; children activities at the West Smoky Recreation Centre and views of the Northern Lights. Figure 16 shows a word cloud displaying prominent words that appeared frequently in the respondents’ answers. It is important to note that the word cloud displays words from answers to both the winter and summer portion of Question 16, with the top portion containing words related to the winter (blue) and the bottom portion related to the summer (green).

Arena Snowshoeing Community Winter Activities  
Roads Quiet Skating Snowmobiling  
Low Population Density Snow Hunting Sledding  
Wildlife Recreation  
Nice Area Playground Riding Privacy Long Days  
Lots Gardening Tranquility Peace Climate  
Quiet Growing Recreation Outside  
Camping ATVing Summers Trails Water

Figure 16 – “What do you enjoy about living in the County?” (62 responses, 13 skipped)

Subsequent to Question 16, Question 17 asked residents what they disliked about living in the County. A recurring theme was poor road conditions, specifically the state of Highway 677; mud-covered roads, flooded roads due to frozen culverts, poor plowing of rural roads and sanding/salting issues in the hamlets. Other comments expressing discontent mentioned the smell of manure from confined feeding operations, bylaw enforcement (e.g. pet control, unsightly properties) and excessive tree removal resulting in loss of windbreaks. Figure 17 shows the prominent, frequently used words by respondents for this question.

Shopping Not Plowed Cold Highway Snow Services  
Roads Streets Distance Poor  
Mud Summer Events Streets Mosquitos Highway  
Shopping Services Roads Dogs  
County Potholes Distance to Travel Bugs

Figure 17 – “What do you dislike about living in the County?” (63 responses, 12 skipped)

*Thoughts on the County*

Next, Question 18 asked respondents if the County has all the basic services they felt a community should provide. This question resulted in a divided outcome with 52.2% answering the County did provide the basic services while 47.8% replied that it did not. Comments revealed that respondents believed the County could improve basic services by improving internet/cell service, road conditions, access to potable water, access to fuel and bylaw enforcement. Other comments mentioned the importance of health services and home support for those leaving the hospital after an extended stay. Figure 18 displays the split in the respondents' answers.

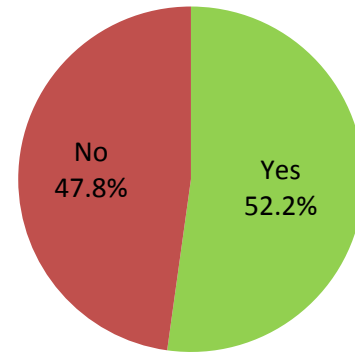


Figure 18 – “Does the County have the basic services you believe your community should provide you?” (69 responses, 6 skipped)

The next 4 questions in the survey asked respondents to rate different aspects of administration, development, services, recreation and environment based on a rating system with 5 options: Excellent, Good, Average, Poor, and No Opinion. If respondents rated a service as “Poor”, they were asked to elaborate on their opinion. All “No Opinion” responses were removed from the graphs.

Question 19 asked respondents what their opinion was of County administration, planning and development services, access to local government and communications from the County. Most respondents were generally satisfied with the County’s performance in this area; see Figure 19 for the full results. Respondents commented that better communication of local events and better advertising for the County is needed. Furthermore, respondents mentioned the lack of bylaw enforcement and the need for better communication in regards to complaints, specifically towards road conditions (i.e. Highway 677).

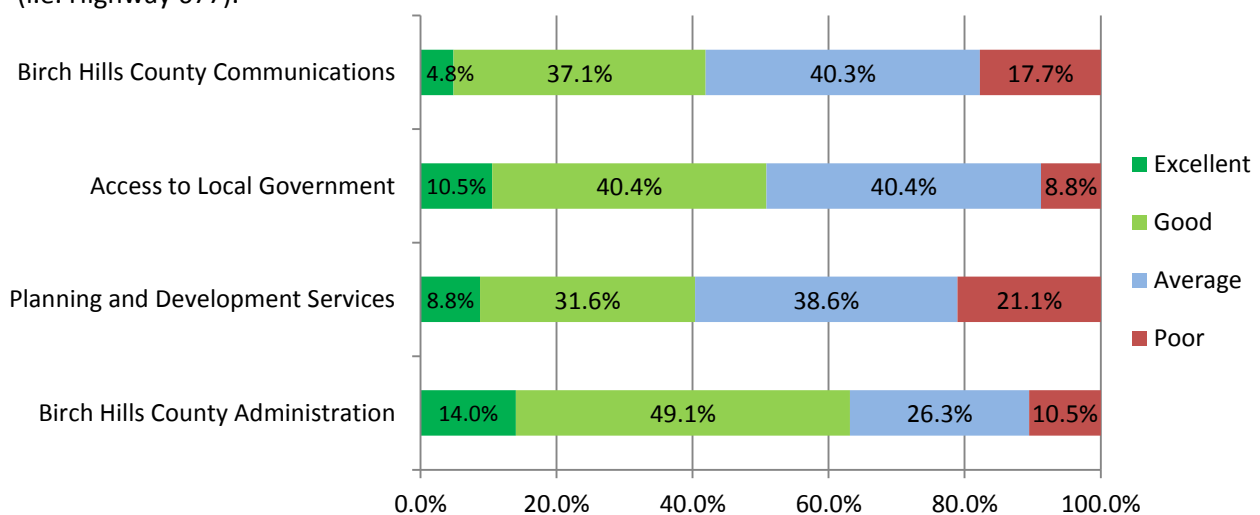


Figure 19 – “What is your opinion of the following aspects of Municipal Administration in the County?” (67 responses, 8 skipped)

Question 20 asks respondents about services within the County from access to telecommunications to garbage pick-up. Services that scored the best ratings from respondents included: recycling services, landfill service, protection services, municipal utility systems and garbage pick-up. Alternatively, access to telecommunications, road management/maintenance, and bylaw enforcement scored poorly. See Figure 20 for full details regarding respondents’ opinions of the County’s services. The most common complaint among the responses was a lack of bylaw enforcement in the County. These complaints generally were concerned with barking dogs and unsightly properties. Poor cell service and water quality were also mentioned. One respondent stated they were not aware of any recycling within the County. Another respondent cited that there was no light at the Wanham landfill which has created an unsafe environment.

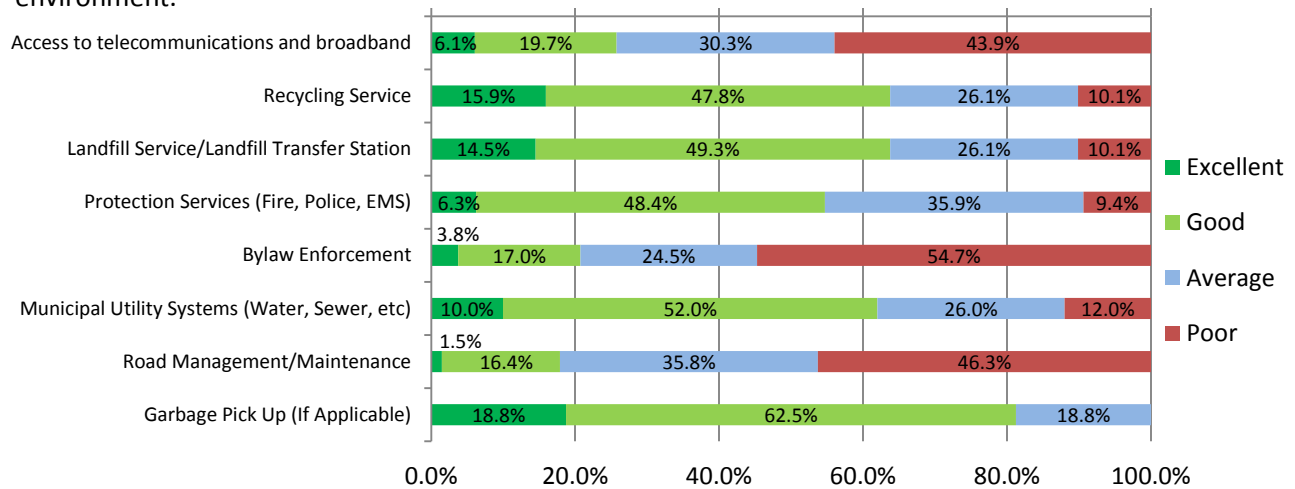


Figure 20 – “What is your opinion of the following services in the County?” (72 responses, 3 skipped)

Question 21 asked respondents about their opinion regarding aspects of development within the County. This question produced the highest percent of “Poor” ratings, specifically in the County’s ability to meet the everyday needs with goods and services. This was reflected in the comments which mentioned the lack of commercial buildings, grocery stores, and fuel service. Respondents commented on the lack of development as well, however, the location of new development and housing options received fewer “Poor” ratings. See Figure 21 for the full ratings.

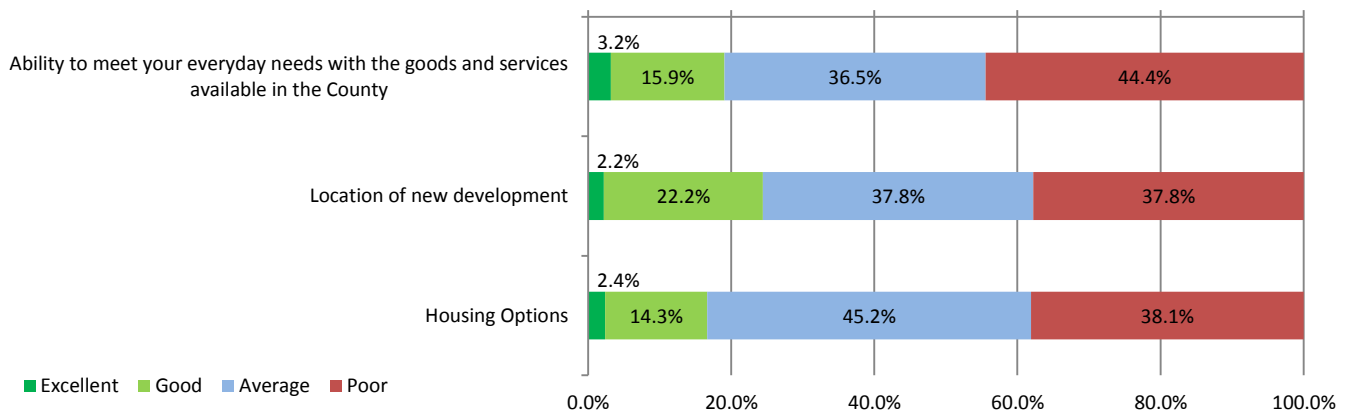


Figure 21 – “What is your opinion about the following aspects of development in the County?” (71 responses, 4 skipped)

Overall, respondents were satisfied with recreation options and parks/open spaces within the County. See Figure 22 for the full details. Comments regarding how to improve in this area were geared towards improving existing assets such as the West Smoky Recreation Centre and smaller parks such in the County including Kieyho Park. Other comments mentioned the need for more playgrounds for children in the hamlets.

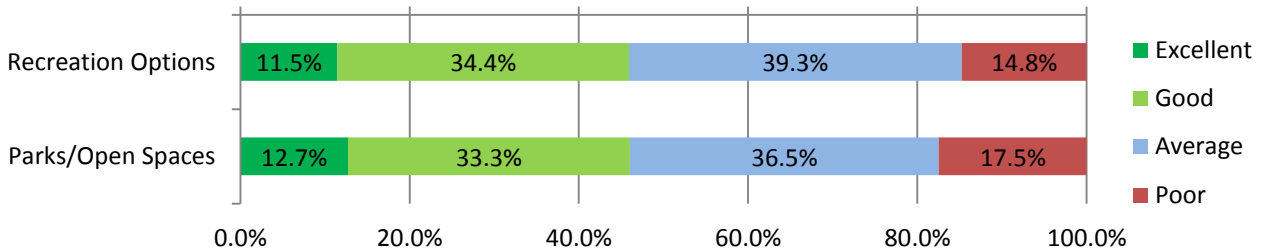


Figure 22 – “What is your opinion about recreation in the County?” (70 responses, 5 skipped)

Questions 23 and 24 asked respondents to indicate their level of agreement with statements about the environment and other aspects of the County and were given the options Strongly Agree, Agree, No Opinion, Disagree or Strongly Disagree. All “No Opinion” responses were removed from the graphs.

Respondents were overwhelmingly in agreement in regards to environmental protection in the County. Question 23 revealed that respondents felt the water quality of the rivers is acceptable, access is adequate and more forest protection is needed. Full results can be found below in Figure 23. Specific concerns regarding the environment included:

- the need to limit clear cutting of trees;
- the need to limit chemical spraying;
- improving access to rivers (e.g. Little Burnt River); and,
- stopping farmers from driving over ditches.

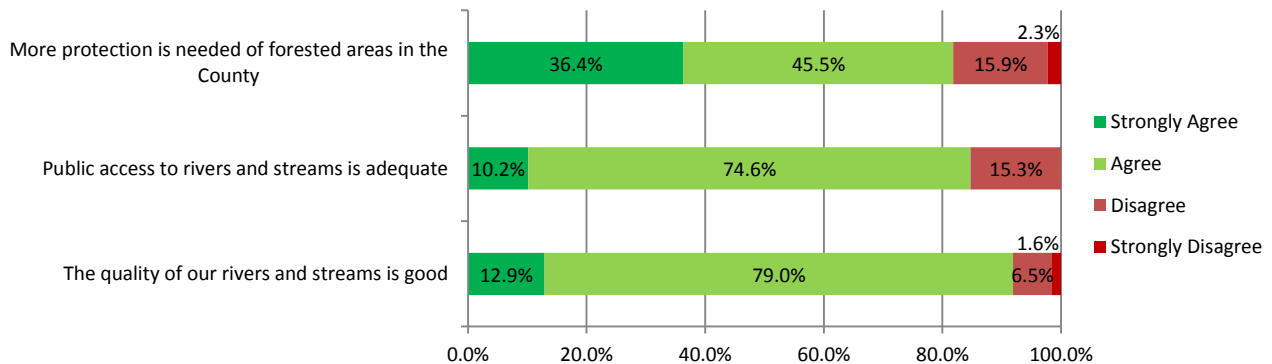


Figure 23 – “Please indicate your level of agreement for the following statements:” (72 responses, 3 skipped)

The statements in Question 24 addressed five aspects of the municipality: rural character, agriculture, housing, recreation, and heritage. Respondents overwhelmingly agreed that visual aesthetics, preservation of agricultural land and protection of local heritage is important to them. Comments mentioned the importance of improving community spirit. Respondents also agreed that recreational opportunities are accessible but comments suggest more access is better.

Other comments mentioned the lack of housing choices within the County. This is echoed in the responses as many respondents disagreed that there is a sufficient range of housing types available. The only housing type that respondents agreed to have a sufficient supply of was mobile homes. Every other housing choice was viewed as deficient. See Figure 24 for the full results of this question.

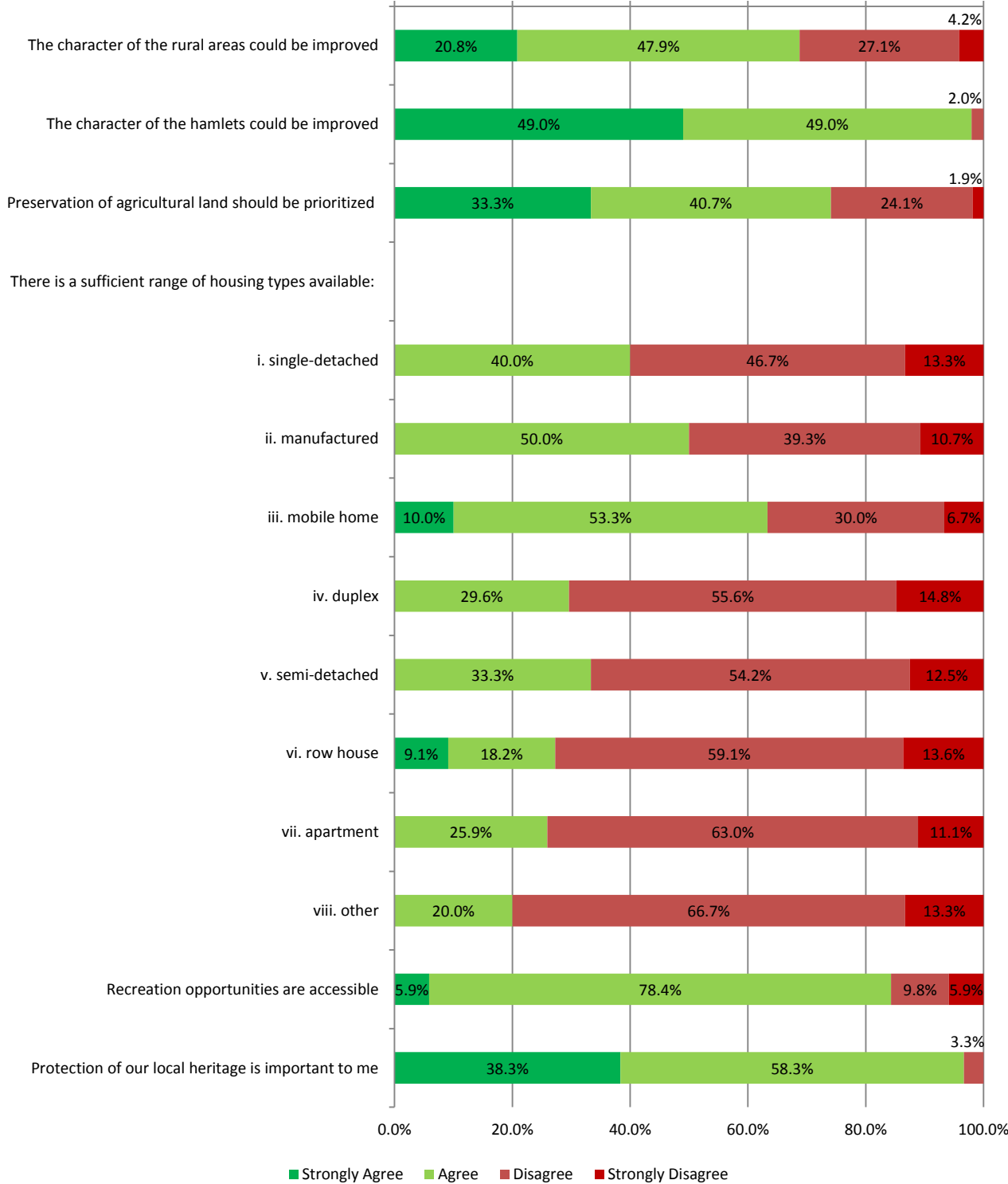


Figure 24 – “Please indicate your level of agreement for the following statements:” (72 responses, 3 skipped)



### ***Themes In The Feedback***

The final five questions in the survey invited additional feedback from the respondents. Question 25 asked “What do you think could be improved in our community?” (61 responses, 14 skipped), Question 26 read “Given the information you’ve provided, please describe how you would like your community to look in 10-20 years.” (56 responses, 19 skipped), Question 27 asked “What are the specific challenges your community experiences (if any)?” (49 responses, 26 skipped), Question 28 asked “What specific changes would you like to see in the area and/or your community?” (49 responses, 26 skipped) and Question 29, “Please provide any additional feedback you have:” (24 responses, 51 skipped). Five themes emerged from these responses that highlight the concerns and desires of the respondents regarding the County.

#### ***1. Community***

Many responses to the five open-ended questions addressed the need for a greater sense of community in order to attract new residents. Respondents also commented that they would like to see the County attract a younger population and actively engage in retaining younger residents. Respondents commented that they would like to see more community engagement, existing community facilities maintained and greater accountability from their Council.

#### ***2. Bylaw Enforcement***

Concern regarding bylaw enforcement was raised numerous times. Respondents felt there is a tremendous need to clean up the hamlets, including unsightly and vacant properties. Comments cited a cleaner County would attract more residents and retain others. Others mentioned bylaw enforcement in regards to pet control, weed control, and beaver control.

#### ***3. Business***

Respondents were concerned that there is not enough incentive for new business to locate to Birch Hills County. Comments also mentioned the need for improved fuel service and employment-seeking services. Concern was raised over large-scale farming operations and lack of infrastructure to attract growth.

#### ***4. Services***

The need for basic services was a recurring theme from respondents. Many respondents mentioned the need for improved water services, specifically to the hamlet of Peoria. Various comments mentioned the challenge of having to haul water. Other responses cited the need for improved telecommunication services throughout the County.

#### ***5. Road Infrastructure***

Road maintenance was a major concern of respondents, especially gravel roads and Highways 677 and 740. The plowing and grading of these roads were also mentioned numerous times. Moreover, respondents mentioned improving the roads surrounding the ferry. Additional concerns were over heavily loaded industrial vehicles contributing to the rapid deterioration of road infrastructure.

## REFERENCES

insureye.com. Overland Flooding. 2017.

Northwest Hydraulic Consultants. Watino Flood Risk Mapping Study. July 1996.

Statistics Canada. Canadian Business Patterns. 2011.

Statistics Canada. Community Profile. 2011.