

**Report from** Financial Management Services, Director

**Date of Report:** Oct. 31, 2017

**Date of Meeting:** Nov. 8, 2017

**Report Number:** FMS-B050-2017

**File:** 10.57.12

**Subject:** Telephone Town Hall Public Engagement 2018 Budget – Results

## Recommendation

That the Budget Standing Committee (BSC) receive this report for information purposes.

## Background

Budget deliberations involve difficult decision making as the Budget Standing Committee, City staff and Council as a whole must consider how the needs for services and programs can be balanced with taxpayers' ability to pay.

Public input into the budget process can be invaluable for residents, members of the BSC and Council as a whole. While the value of this input is recognized, engaging the public in this process has proven to be challenging through traditional methods such as online surveys and open houses. While the City still hosts Budget Open Houses as part of the public engagement process, the decision was made a few years ago to try a Telephone Town Hall session. This year, a total of 10 people attended one of the two open house sessions.

With a Telephone Town Hall, residents are called in their homes and provided the opportunity to participate in a budget discussion. For the 2015 budget, the Telephone Town Hall included a call-out to 15,000 homes and for the 2016, 2017, and 2018 budget engagement process that number of households was increased to 30,000.

## Report

### Overview

The one-hour Telephone Town Hall call went to 30,000 random homes in the city of St. Catharines, from 7 to 8 p.m., on Oct. 25, 2017.

The event was hosted by Budget Standing Committee chair Mat Siscoe and Mayor Walter Sendzik with City staff as support. Participants were provided an opportunity to listen to information about the budget, answer four polling questions, ask live questions, as well as leave a voicemail message at the end of the Telephone Town Hall.

In total the City was able to connect to 3,594 residents with the assistance of the service provider Front Porch Strategies. The peak attendees were 547 (751 in 2017; 700 in 2016; 500 in 2015) participants and of those – 74 entered the queue to be able to provide input or ask questions during the live event.

## **Polls**

For the polling questions, typically residents are asked the level of tax increase they would accept, what is important to them and their family and if the City secured additional funds, what investment opportunities residents would support. As a result of the impacts of the minimum wage increase, a question specific to that area was added to this year's Telephone Town Hall.

With respect to the four polling questions, the result is that anywhere from 180 to 238 people voted in each polling question (350 to 415 people voted/participated in 2017 budget process).

## **Feedback/Questions**

During the Telephone Town Hall 74 (82 in 2017) individuals went in the queue with questions to ask, however, time only allowed for 22 (16 for 2017) to go live.

Following the session, 43 (60 in 2017) voicemails were left and a few questions were presented through the City's [budget@stcatharines.ca](mailto:budget@stcatharines.ca) email address during the public engagement process. Those messages were transcribed and forwarded to the appropriate staff and/or BSC members for response.

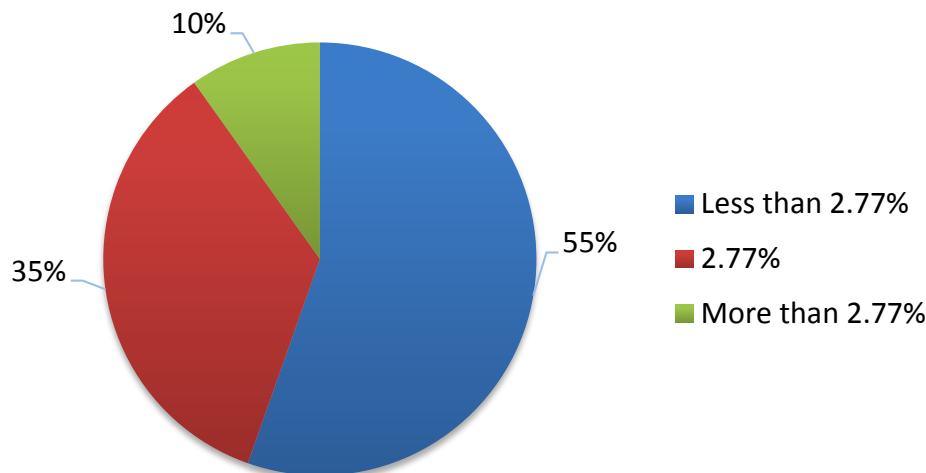
As with the previous events, a number of individuals left messages to praise the City for using the Telephone Town Hall format to engage residents, and felt it was beneficial, informative and encouraged it for future years.

A summary of public comments/questions from this year's Telephone Town Hall can be seen in Appendix 1. Results from the 2017, 2016 and 2015 Telephone Town Hall sessions can be seen in Appendix 2.

**Q 1: For the 2018 City Budget, staff have presented a budget with an overall expenditure increase of 2.77%. As part of an overall property tax rate, which of the following options do you support?**

- Less than the current proposed increase of 2.77% (55%)
- 2.77% seems right (35%)
- I would be willing to pay more than 2.77% (10%)

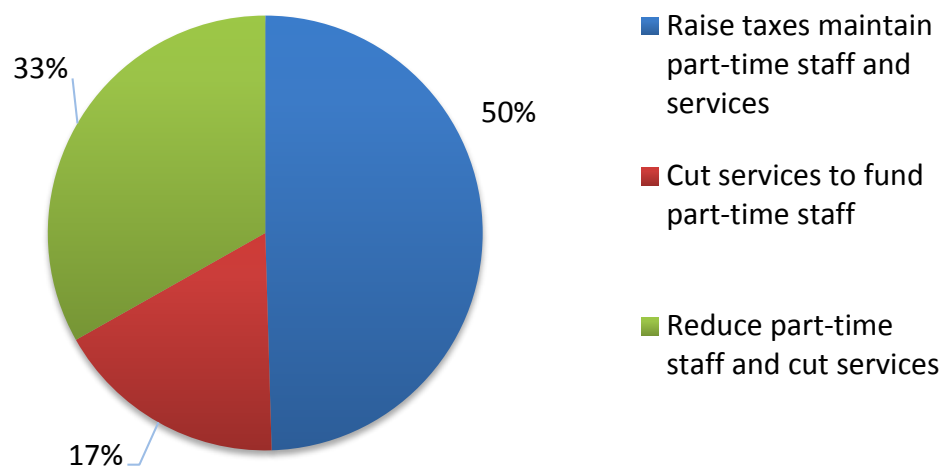
Total votes: 213



**Q 2: With the province's minimum wage increase escalating the City's budget by more than \$400,000, do you support:**

- Raising taxes to maintain part-time student staff and services (50%)
- Cutting services to fund part-time student staff (17%)
- Reducing part-time student staff and cutting services (33%)

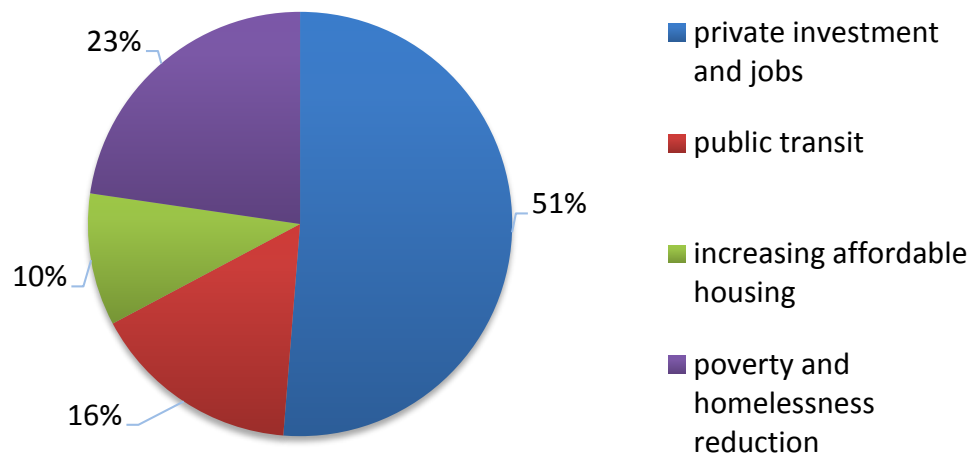
Total votes: 214



**Q 3: Which of the following is the most important to you and your family?**

- Attracting more private investment, business and jobs to St. Catharines (51%)
- Enhancing public transit to better connect Niagara communities through inter-municipal transit service (16%)
- Increasing the mix of affordable housing (10%)
- Investing in programs and services to reduce poverty and homelessness (23%)

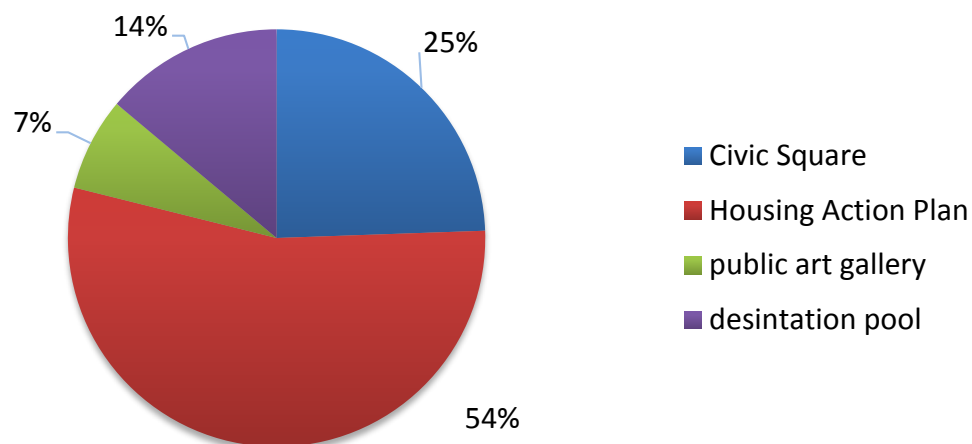
Total votes: 238



**Q 4: If the City secured additional funds for major community initiatives, which would you support?**

- Build a Civic Square in the downtown core (25%)
- Invest in affordable housing / the Housing Action Plan (54%)
- Create a new public art gallery (7%)
- Build a new “destination” pool (14%)

Total votes: 180



## **Financial Implications**

The Telephone Town Hall session, as part of the 2018 Budget engagement process, will cost approximately \$6,700.

## **Relationship to Strategic Plan**

### **Economic Sustainability**

Be an affordable City for young people, families and retired older adults.

### **Social Sustainability**

Provide excellent customer service and communication with citizens.

## **Conclusion**

The Telephone Town Hall format has allowed the City to expand its community outreach and public engagement in the budget process. The Telephone Town Hall has seen higher response rates than the past interactive online budget and the public open house sessions. The response from the members of the public who participate is positive and many have stated in past events that they hope this format will continue to be used in the future.

The Telephone Town Hall is inclusive and provides an opportunity to raise public awareness of the City's budget, as well as garner input from the taxpayers the City serves. The information gathered through the polling questions provides the Budget Standing Committee and Council with a better understanding of the public's opinions on tax levels, priorities and future planning.

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### **Approved and Submitted by:**

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Director, Financial Management Services

## Telephone Town Hall Voicemail Messages – 2018 Budget Engagement Process

#	Comments/Question
1	Please call in the afternoon - not available in the mornings – have a few questions
2	Main concern is if we do spend money on a pool, it should be 50 metres not 25 to attract events to the city.
3	Former Hotel Dieu site - would like an update on timeframe when construction will start for the graduated senior living facility.
4	Accessible buses - when are we getting more? Having to wait 2 weeks for appointments currently.
5	Very pleased with town hall procedure calling in to say thank you
6	paving and repaving roads - not a way to save money in budget (Region and City projects causing us to pave, rip up and repave)
7	Culvert behind her house - city is to maintain it 3 times a year - have to call every year to start process - not being done as letter states
8	No stoplights from Glendale to St. Paul St. west - not safe for bikers would like a nice road from Glendale to St. Paul St. west. - would like a call back
9	No sidewalks in our area (Northglen Ave) - very difficult for kids as far as driving - accessibility - accident waiting to happen - agrees with putting in another pool
10	Paving over median- would prefer the city put some cement flower pots there? We are a garden city. Also would like an explanation of the tax increase.
11	Thank you very much for the privilege for being on this call and answering all my questions.
12	Calling about left hand turn lane from Glendale into Esso - assumed it would be two lanes one to go left and one to go straight - city boulevards/islands are a mess - paving possibly is the solution. Need a solution to not take up so much time/money
13	What is the city going to do for this area (Edinburgh Dr.) with sidewalks - no sidewalks here - we need sidewalks
14	Thank you very much for this opportunity - Civic Square great idea - would like to assist with the town hall idea if needed
15	Rat problem - neighbourhood is being proactive - would like to assist with this problem - has found solutions for this to share with rest of City
16	Revitalization for the East End. Prime property. Niagara St. and North Street, almost dead centre of town. Consider developing a volunteer committee of retired business people to draw something into that area. Any money for those efforts? A lot of retired people with knowledge.
17	Taxes not too high - please with that – however, the city need buses on Vansickle to go at least once a week to Louth Street plaza – currently only travels that route on weekends?
18	Concerned about the Thorold Jail/Detention Centre and the numbers of deaths while people are in custody. Personally lost a loved one while in custody at Thorold Detention. Will be contacting Ombudsman about it and will

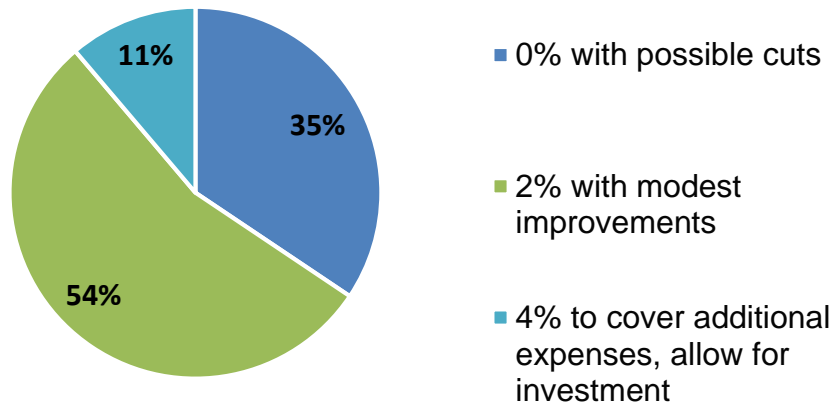
	be talking to "Fifth Estate" about it to give a full detailed account of the situation.
19	Appreciate the phone call, reminder and the Town Hall. Engaged in listening to the questions. Find this very helpful.
20	Burgoyne Bridge: understand it is Regional. The expensive arch is needed because the span is so long; not unnecessary. Glad you are pursuing a study to find out why the extra funds needed and that it wouldn't happen again. Thinks people involved should be fired: architect and engineers who designed and priced out the bridge before tendering. Someone should have been in charge. Another option would be to sue the contractor or to go to the Attorney General of Ontario and have a criminal investigation. Some action should be taken.
21	Bike lanes should be extended in City. Some areas that need them are: corner in Port Dalhousie and heading out Lakeshore Rd towards Martindale Road; large artery. Bike lanes also need to be cleaned diligently in the spring to keep them used.
22	Median on Fourth Ave., I don't know why the medians are there--they should be taken out and add in turning lanes and even take out some traffic lights on Fourth. As far as Parks & Rec, the greens are not well looked after at the St. Catharines Golf club on Lincoln. Also the 4-Pad, who is paying the costs for the renovations to the mechanical systems that should have been taken care of originally.
23	Wants to thank for being part of meeting. Very informative. Where would he contact someone to put forward idea of training kids for use of bicycles on city roadways--licencing bicycles on the road and have training programs related to it and that the licences would fund the program.
24	Seen property taxes rise over 39 years. Forced into retirement; thinking about selling and moving to the Maritimes where they can purchase a similar home for 1/3 the price. Don't understand why expenses are so high and out of control.
24	Enjoyed the meeting. Very helpful. Like to see safety dollars to make St. Catharines a safer/family friendly place. Civic Square is a great idea--like Toronto with skating in Nathan Philips Square. Would be great and would engage the people into coming downtown.
26	Look at revenue generating opportunities: parking enforcement or traffic enforcement which would generate revenue and create more safe areas; currently that is taken care of by police but perhaps we could break a part of it away and create more revenue here, giving less to the police
27	Thank you. Informative.
28	Why does a person on disability have to wait eight years for emergency housing? More concerned about sidewalks, roads, pools, tennis courts, etc. Homes for mentally ill more important. No support for them causes further depression. Please call.

29	Bylaws: why are some only enforced if someone complains but others are not followed through?
30	Very enjoyable. Appreciated the program with opportunity to speak. Mayor and Council doing a very good job. This Council and Mayor are trying very hard to move forward. Suggestion: establish a City Foundation where people could donate and get a tax receipt. Donations could be earmarked to go towards Parks & Rec or Museums or Housing.
31	Two concerns: concerned about a development at St. Paul & James St being vacant - expedite process. Want that developed soon. Keep downtown revitalized. Garden Park St has a lot of graffiti on opposite side of Mahtay and behind buildings on St. Paul St.
32	Hopes the budget will be lower and we pay less property taxes the infrastructure is good in St. Catharines - less property taxes
33	Can the City share more information for low income housing and other types of houses for the elderly - housing project city has a plan for?
34	something done on Parnell for speeding - stop sign or bumps - street with four elementary schools
35	With people wanting to use trails and such - what are the plans to increase washroom facilities at parks and along trails? Is there any money for washrooms along trails?
36	I think the whole process is flawed. Why can't a \$4 million surplus be cutting a cheque and giving it back to the residents?
37	Appreciate participation. Recently retired. I enjoy the Kiwanis Centre – it's used for all ages - encourage more facilities for all age groups. Should consider for other area of the community where possible.
38	Third Street Road widening: Why is it necessary? Wouldn't money be better spent on a road to access to hospital rather than a rural road? The traffic has increased 100%. Widening the rural road is going to increase the traffic here. Money is better spent on the service road next to 406.
39	Reduce trucks on Martindale. The vibrations and rumbling is too much for residents. Restricting some of the heavy traffic would be appreciated.
40	Health care - we need more specialists to reduce wait times. What is being done about that?
41	Furious with infill – individuals not abiding by bylaws – the changing environment - 2 story houses all over her neighbourhood – rethink infilling for the City - Not happy with Committee of Adjustment
42	Suggestion: give \$1,000 to Meridian Centre from the \$4 million Hydro money to help with their budget. Rename the IceDogs Way to Falcon Lane - Falcons have been around for 50 years and has local hockey players.
43	Lack of sidewalks and snow plowing in Cushman area - roads wider with proper curbs

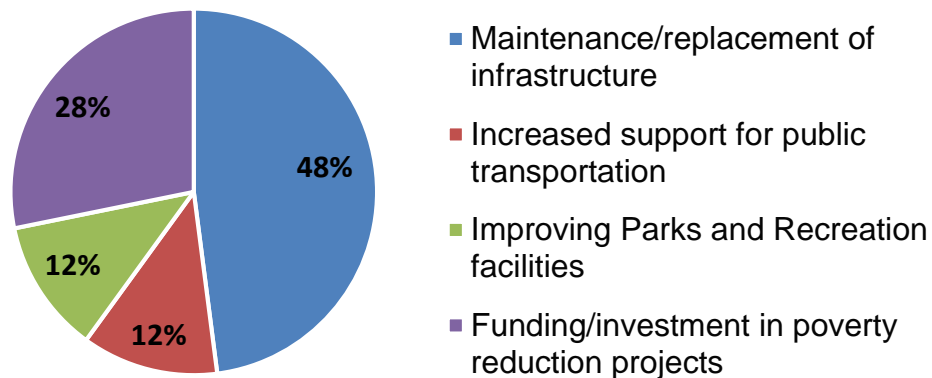


## Polling Results – 2017 Budget Engagement Process

1. The Budget Standing Committee set an overall expenditure target of 2% for 2017. As part of an overall property tax increase, which option would you support? Total votes: 375

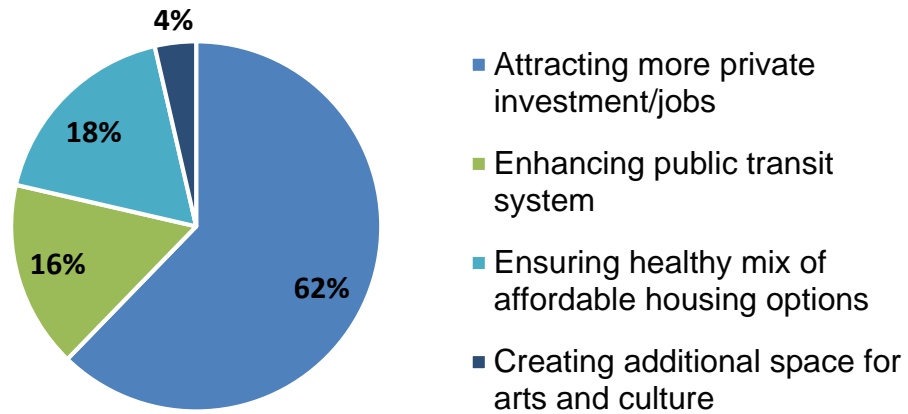


2. In working with the Federal and Provincial government, infrastructure funding has been identified as a priority. What should the City focus on for investment? Total votes: 415



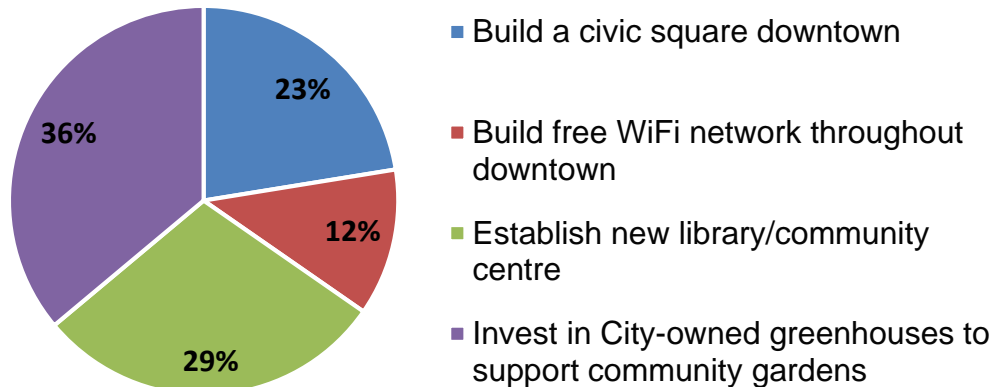
3. Which of the following is most important to you and/or your family?

Total votes: 416



4. If the City secured additional funds to accomplish one major initiative, which would you support?

Total votes: 352





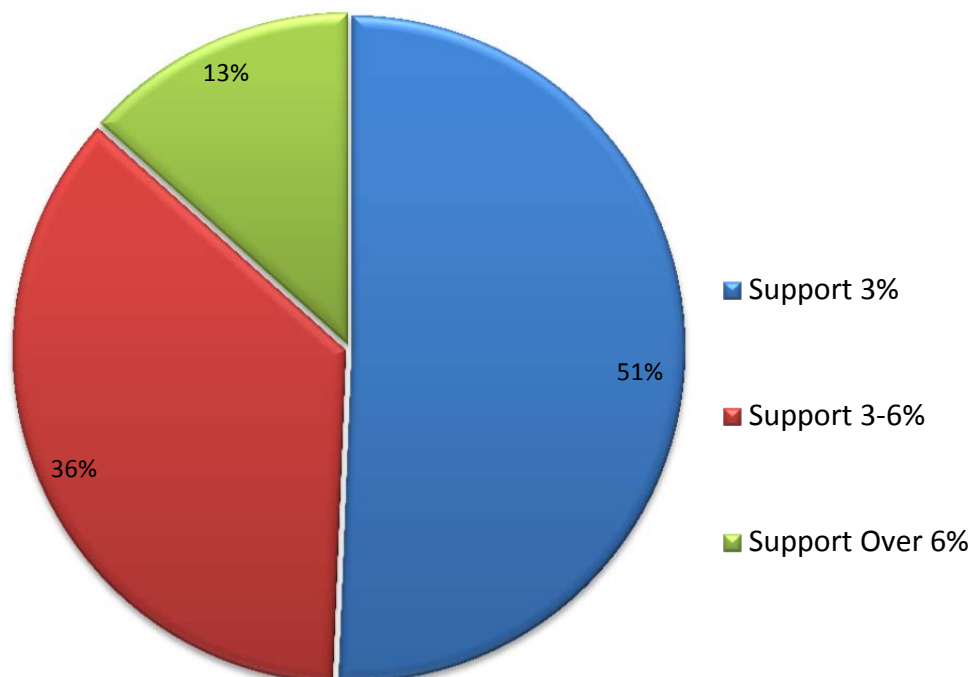
## Telephone Town Hall January 18, 2016 Budget Input – Poll Results

As part of the community outreach and public engagement into the City of St. Catharines' budget process, the Budget Standing Committee hosted a telephone town hall session where 30,000 random homes were contacted to participate.

People were provided the opportunity to listen to information about the budget, as well as answer four polling questions. Below are the results of the polls.

1. With the City's financial challenges in mind, our question is which of the following options would you support?

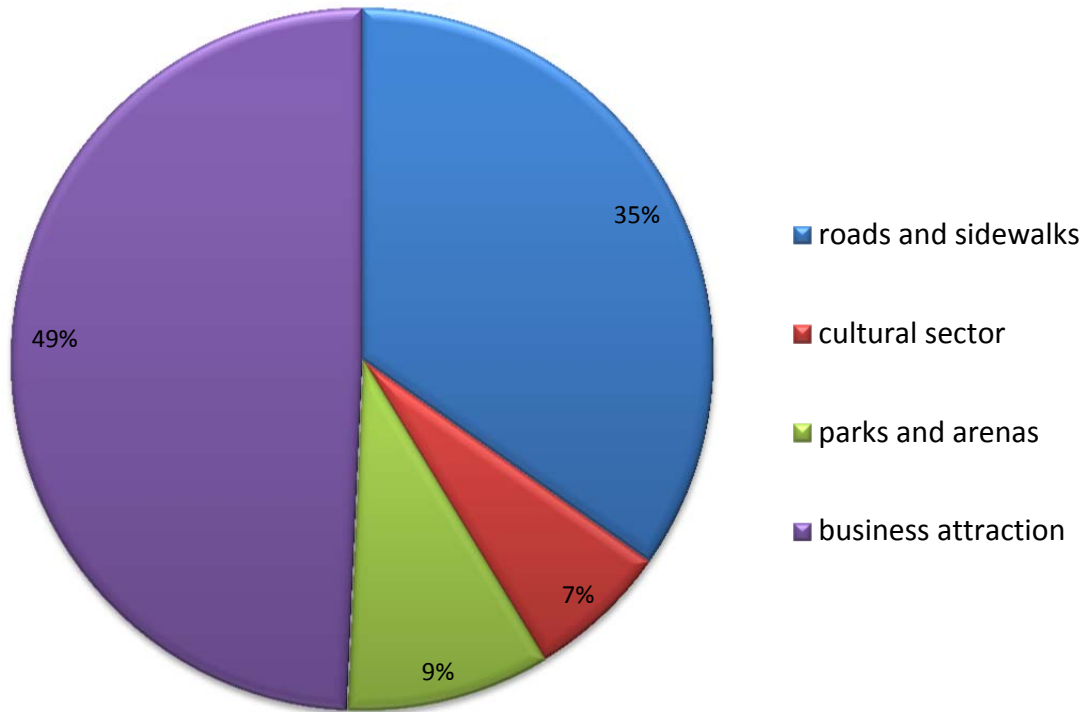
	%	Votes
a. Support a tax increase under 3%	51%	159
b. Support a tax increase between 3% to 6%	36%	113
c. Support a tax increase above 6%	13%	42



**Total votes: 314**

2. In the event of the City approving an above average 3% tax increase, what should be the top priority for City investments?

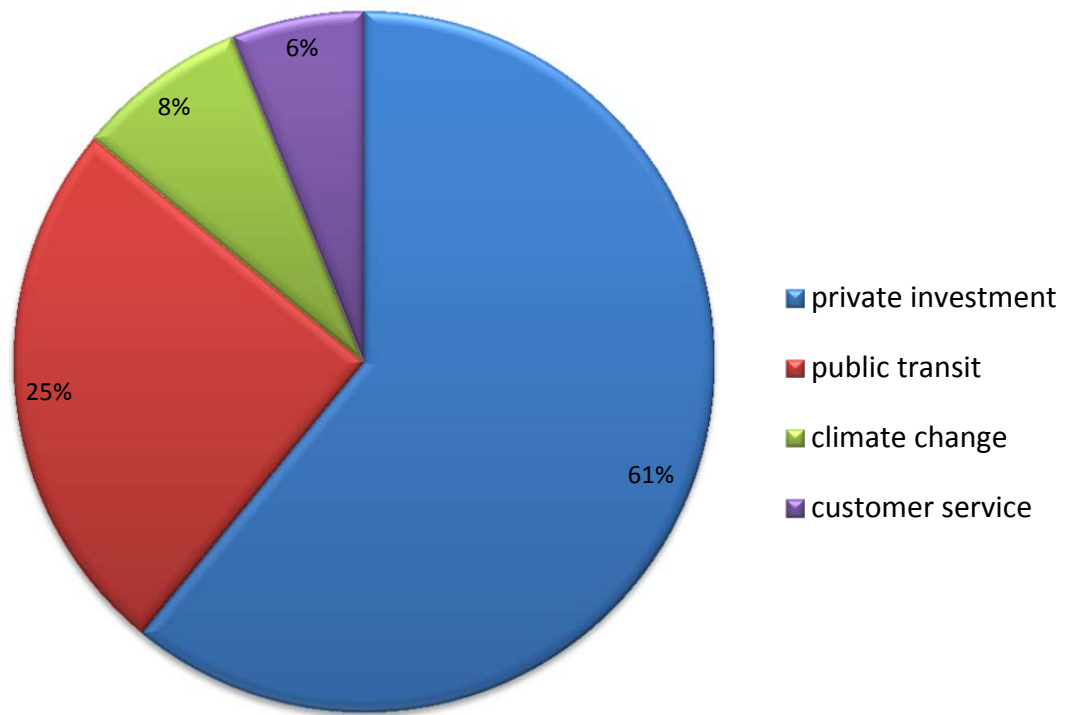
	<b>%</b>	<b>Votes</b>
a. Replacement and maintenance of roads and sidewalks	35%	122
b. Investment in creative and cultural sector	7%	23
c. Improve community parks, sports fields and arenas	9%	33
d. Investment in business attraction and retention	49%	173



**Total Votes: 351**

3. Which of the following is important to you and/or your family?

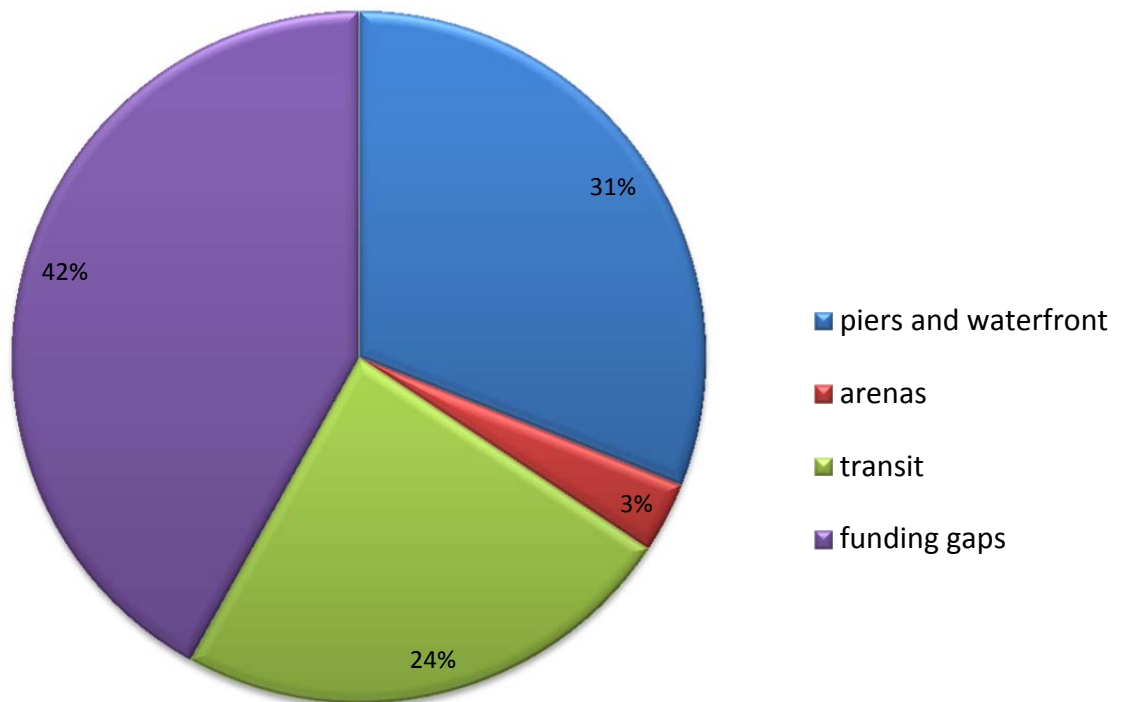
	<b>%</b>	<b>Votes</b>
a. Attracting more private investment, business and jobs?	61%	209
b. Enhancing our public transit system	25%	86
c. Preparing infrastructure for climate change	8%	27
d. Investing in improved customer service	6%	21



**Total votes: 343**

4. If the City were to secure federal/provincial funding, what project would you consider to be a priority?

	%	Votes
a. The Port Dalhousie Piers and waterfront improvements	31%	94
b. Arenas - including replacement of the Jack Gatecliff and the Rex	3%	10
c. More investment in public transit	24%	72
d. To offset the funding gap for municipal infrastructure	42%	127



**Total votes: 303**



## City of St. Catharines Telephone Town Hall Polling results Feb. 11, 2015

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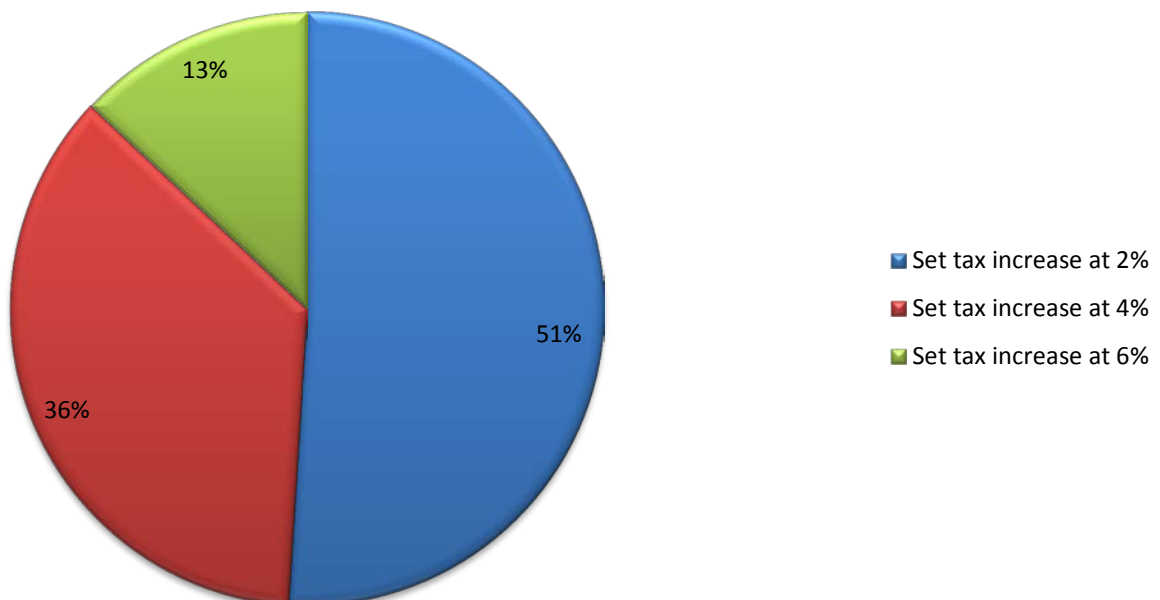
### 1. How do you think the City should manage the budget under the current economic conditions?

Set rate at or slightly above the rate of inflation of 2% by delaying projects and service improvements where possible. (51%)

Target a 4% tax increase that accounts for significant expenses associated Meridian Centre, Performing Arts Centre and the Aquatics Centre. (36%)

Allow for a 6% tax increase that accounts for increased expenses associated with new buildings, enhanced services and additional city infrastructure projects. (13%)

### How do you think the City should manage the budget under the current economic conditions?



**2. Which area, in your opinion, should be a top priority for city investments?**

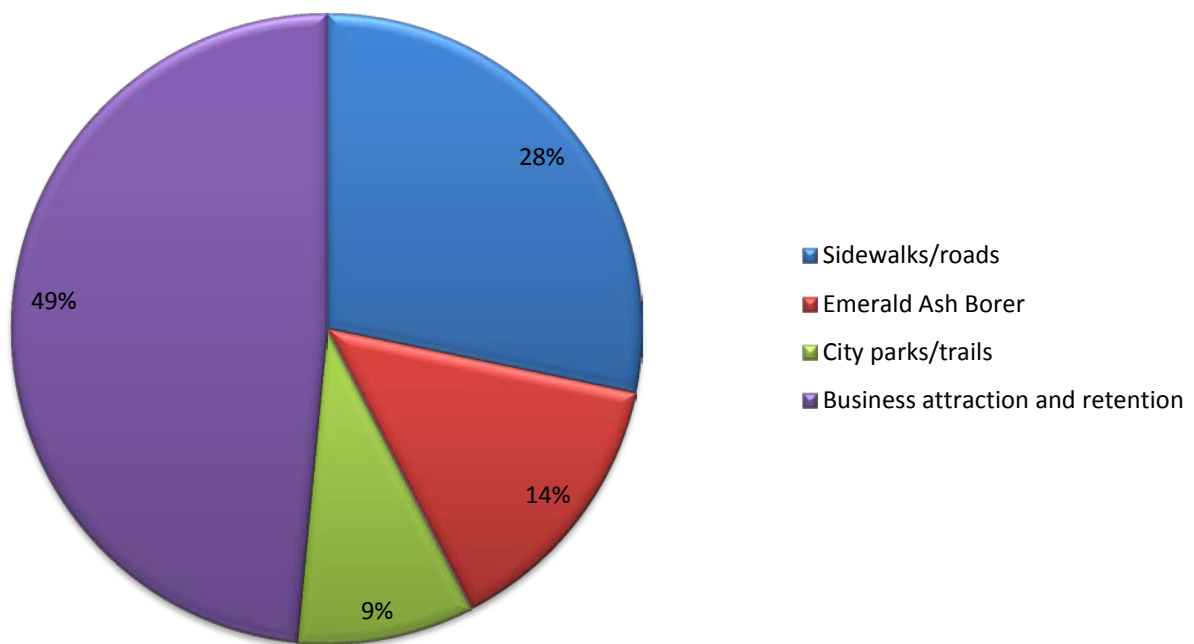
Improving roads and sidewalks (28%)

Fighting the Emerald Ash Borer through tree removal and replanting.  
(14%)

Improving the conditions of the city's parks, sports fields and trails (9%)

Increased funding for business attraction and retention (49%)

**Which area should be a top priority?**





**3. Which of the following is the most important to you and/or your family?**

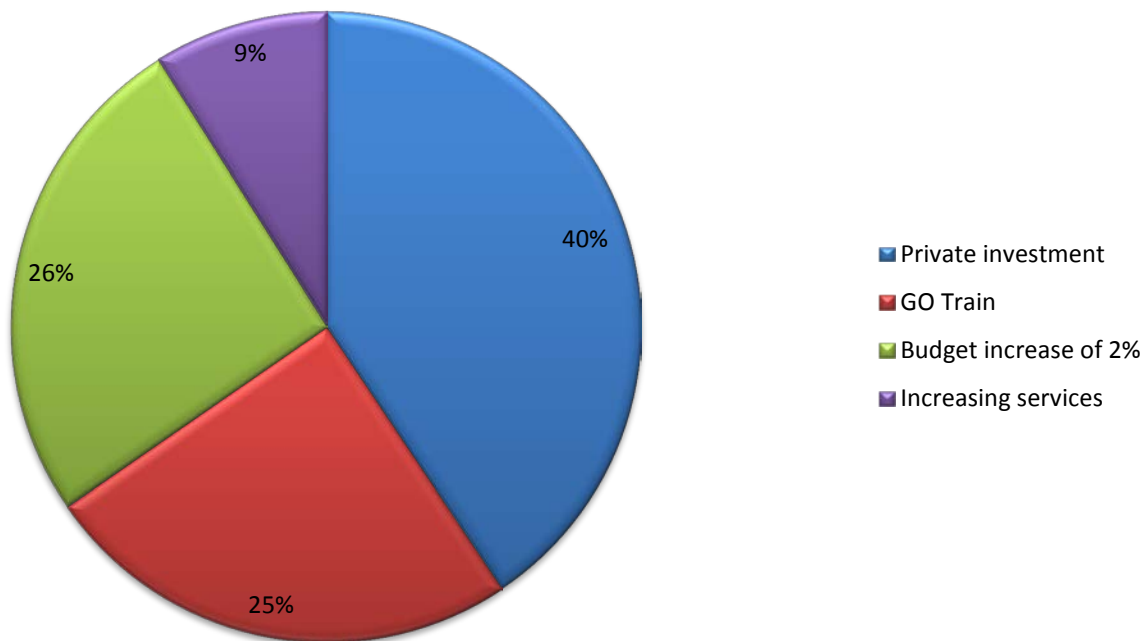
Bringing more private investment and business to St. Catharines. (40%)

Establishing daily GO Train commuter services to St. Catharines. (25%)

Keeping the overall budget increase at 2%. (26%)

Increasing the number of services provided by the city (9%)

**What is most important to you?**



**4. City Council is about to embark on a strategic planning session that will guide the city for the next 4 – 7 years. What do you think is the number one priority for the City?**

Increasing the number of private sector businesses in city. (28%)

Retaining and attracting young people to live and work in the community. (29%)

Increasing residential living in downtown St. Catharines (9%)

Redeveloping vacant industrial, commercial and residential lands in the city. (34%)

**What do you think is the number one priority for the City?**

