

City of Walker
Citizen Focus Groups
November, 2006

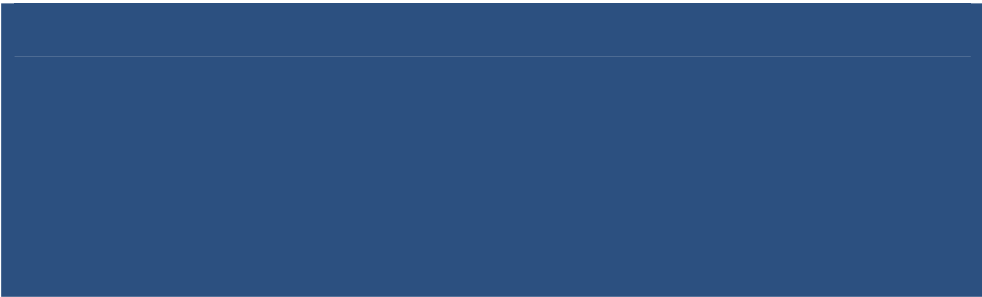
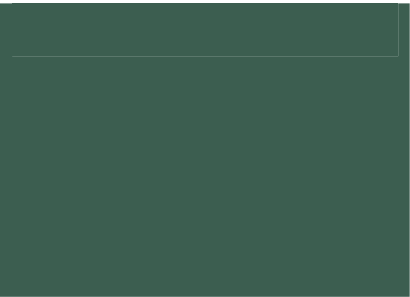


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Executive Summary

Citizen Focus Group Meetings

The City of Walker held citizen focus groups on November 16, 2006. A total of 78 people participated. They provided information to the City about what they believe are the most important services provided by the City, their satisfaction with the current level of those services, and their opinions on a variety of questions about quality of life and City Services.

This report summarizes the key findings from the focus groups, as well as providing a detailed analysis for each of the questions asked.

Demographics

- The majority get their information about the City of Walker from the City's newsletter (33%) or the Grand Rapids Press (21%).
- All ages were represented, with the majority (40%) in the 51-65 age group.
- Most of the participants (72%) live in the Kenowa Hills school district.
- Almost all (97%) are registered voters in Walker.
- Most have lived in Walker for 25 or more years.

Prioritization of Services

Participants prioritized the services provided by the City in the following order:

- Police
- Fire
- Street Maintenance
- Zoning and Building Code Enforcement
- Land Use Planning
- Parks
- Recreation Programs

In most cases, they are satisfied with the current level of services they receive. They are neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with the level of service with regards to zoning and building code enforcement as well as land use planning.

Quality of Life

Participants were asked to rate the relative importance of several factors that contribute to the quality of life in Walker. In order of importance, they ranked these factors as follows.

- Fire protection
- Police presence
- Strong schools
- Well maintained and adequate street systems
- Responsible development/planning
- Vibrant neighborhoods
- Attractive commercial areas (retail and restaurants)
- Employment opportunities
- Parks and recreation
- Attractive city facilities
- Public transportation

City Sponsored Events

Participants were asked to rate the importance of five City-sponsored events on a scale of 1 to 9, where “1” is not very important, and “9” is very important. Overall, clean-up days and leaf drop off received very important ratings, while the Memorial Day Parade, City Festival, and Easter Egg Hunt were rated as not very important.

Citizen Opinions

Participants were also asked whether they would consider additional taxes for a variety of services. Of the services listed, citizens said they would consider supporting buying land rights to ensure open spaces (55%) and staffing for an expanded, full-time fire department (54%).

Citizens believe that the City should maintain 60 days of operations in a fund balance. They believe that police officers on the street (45%) and neighborhood watch/community education (38%) are the most effective in reducing crime rates.

Citizens would like the City to continue plowing all streets after snow events. 65% say the City **should not** save money by plowing residential streets only on weekdays. They were more divided on the second question with 51% stating that the City **should not** save money by plowing residential streets on weekends only after a significant snow event (5” or more of snow).

While 62% state they do not want to pay their taxes online, the participants were equally divided about registering and paying for recreation programs online.

When asked whether the City should save money by sponsoring clean-up days every other year instead of every year, 65% said, “No.”

Participants were not in favor of adding a second sheet of ice at the Ice & Fitness Center, even if it did not cost taxpayers any money (59%).

Participant Questions

One question was added as a result of a participant question. The question was: “Are you willing to pay increased taxes for *any* increased services?” 61% of the participants responded that they do not want to pay increased taxes for any increased services.

General Knowledge of the City

Participants were also asked a series of questions about the City to assess their general knowledge of the City. Results for those questions are shared in the detail of this report.

Detailed Analysis of Results

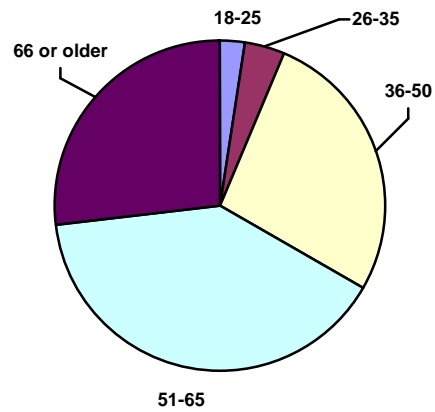
Demographics

Focus group members can be divided into the following demographic groups.

Age

(What is your age?)

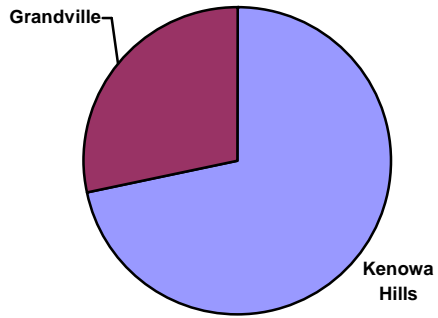
18-25	3%
26-35	4%
36-50	27%
51-65	40%
66 and older	27%



School District

(In what school district do you live [or is your business located]?)

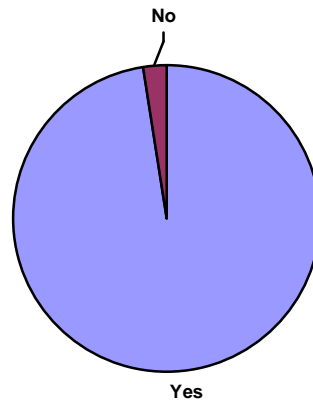
Kenowa Hills	72%
Grandville	28%



Voter Registration

(Are you a registered voter in Walker?)

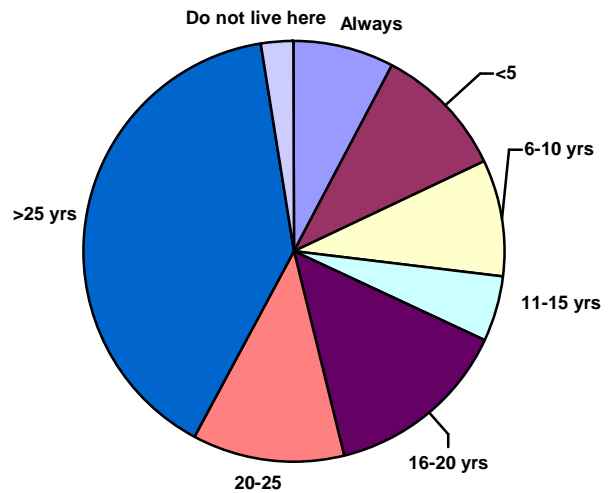
Yes	97%
No	3%



Length of Time in Walker

How long have you lived in Walker?

I was born here	8%
Less than 5 years	10%
6-10 years	9%
11-15 years	5%
16-20 years	14%
20-25 years	12%
More than 25 years	40%
I do not live in Walker	3%

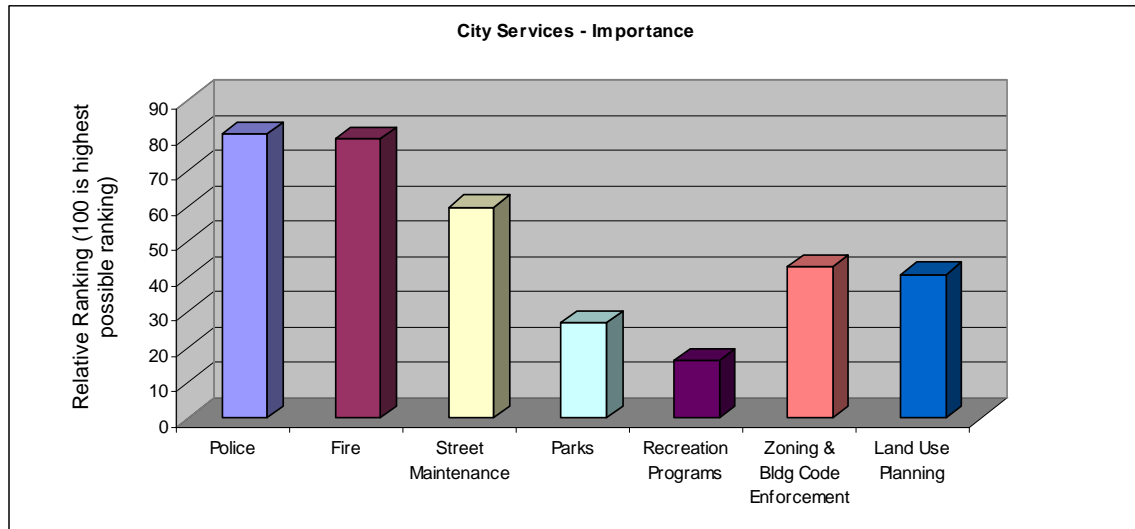


Prioritization of Services

Participants evaluated the relative importance of seven City services:

- A. Police
- B. Fire
- C. Street Maintenance
- D. Parks
- E. Recreation Programs
- F. Zoning and Building Code Enforcement
- G. Land Use Planning

They used a paired voting methodology to create a prioritized list of services.

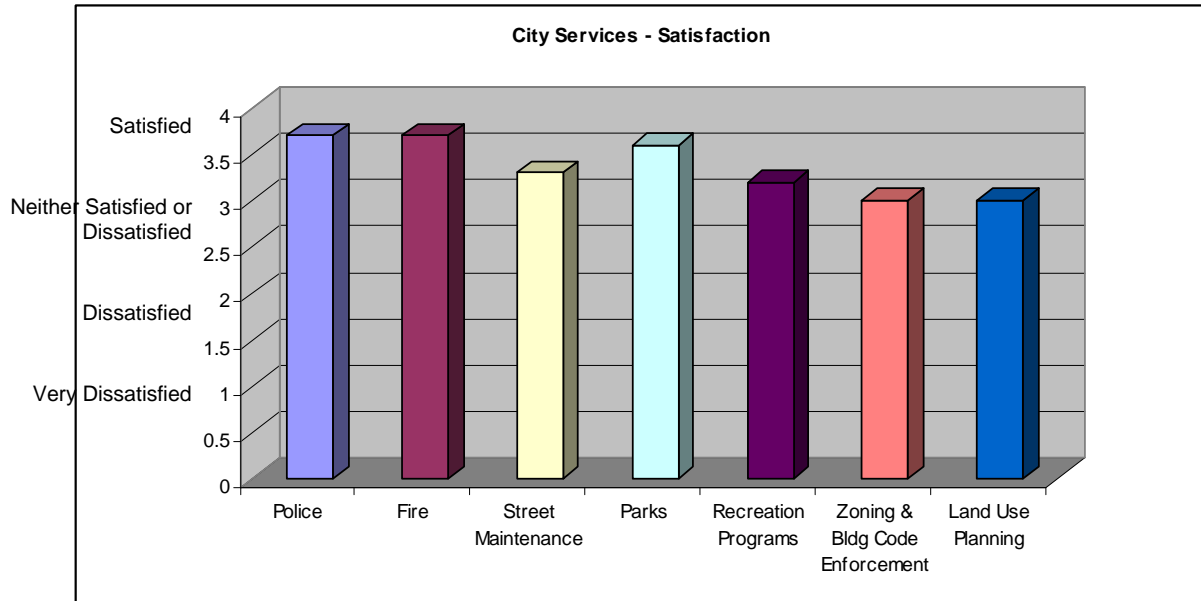


Importance

The results showed that police and fire services are rated as the most important services by the participants, followed by street maintenance, zoning & building code enforcement, and land use planning. Parks and recreation were rated as significantly less important than these services.

Satisfaction with Services

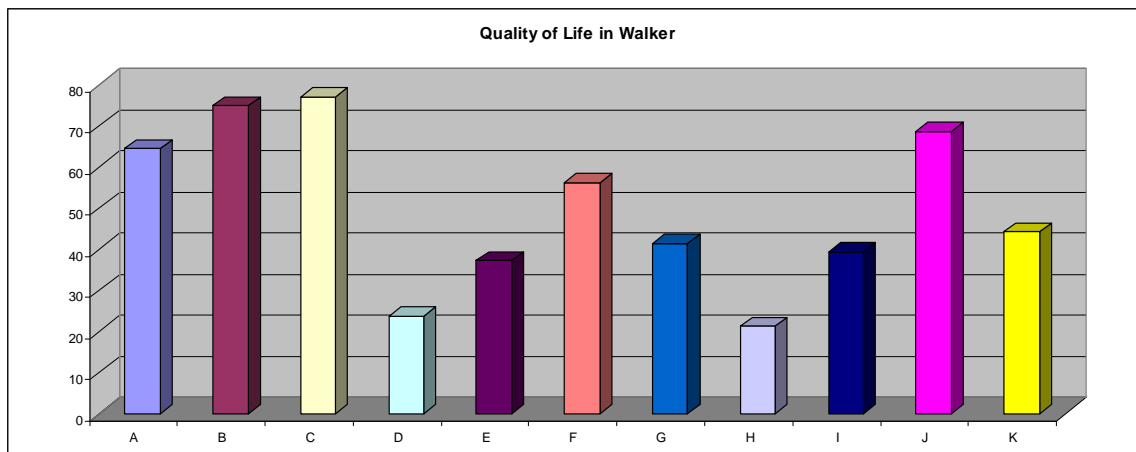
Participants were asked whether they are satisfied with the level of City Services that they receive. In general, most services were rated as “neutral” to “somewhat satisfied,” with police and fire services receiving the highest ratings.



Quality of Life

Participants were asked to rate the relative importance of several factors that contribute to the quality of life in Walker. Items considered were:

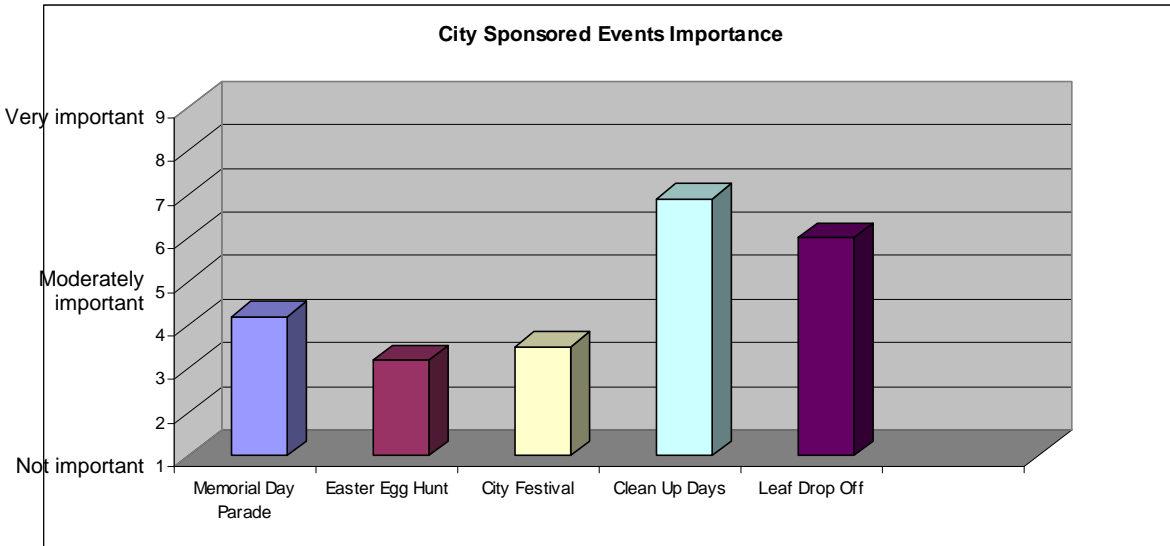
- A. Well-maintained and adequate street systems
- B. Police presence
- C. Fire protection
- D. Attractive city facilities
- E. Parks and recreation
- F. Responsible development/planning
- G. Attractive commercial areas (retail and restaurants)
- H. Public transportation
- I. Employment opportunities
- J. Strong schools
- K. Vibrant neighborhoods



The results showed that fire protection, police presence, and strong schools are the most important to quality of life for this group of participants. Following in importance are well-maintained and adequate street systems, responsible development and planning, vibrant neighborhoods, attractive commercial areas, employment opportunities, parks and recreation, attractive city facilities, and public transportation.

City Sponsored Events

Participants were asked to rate the importance of five city-sponsored events: the Memorial Day Parade, Easter Egg Hunt, City Festival, Clean Up Days, and Leaf Drop Off. Clearly, clean up days and leaf drop off are more important to this particular group of residents.



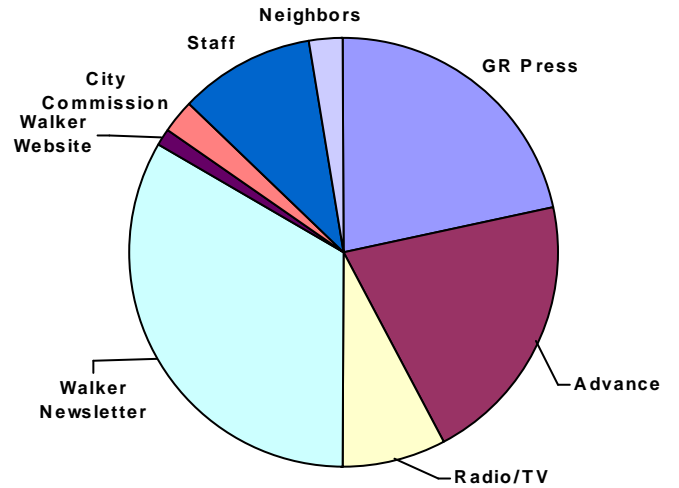
General Opinions

Participants were also asked a series of questions about their opinions on different subjects. Results of each question are shown in the sections that follow.

Information Sources

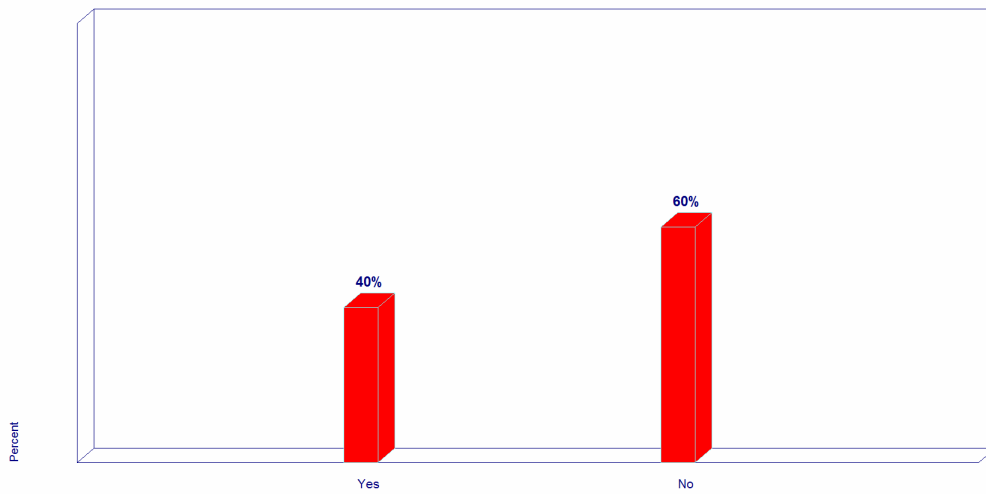
(Where do you get most of your information about the City of Walker?)

Grand Rapids Press	22%
Advance	21%
Radio/TV	8%
Walker Newsletter	33%
Walker Website	1%
City Commission Members	3%
Staff Members	10%
Neighbor or Friend	3%



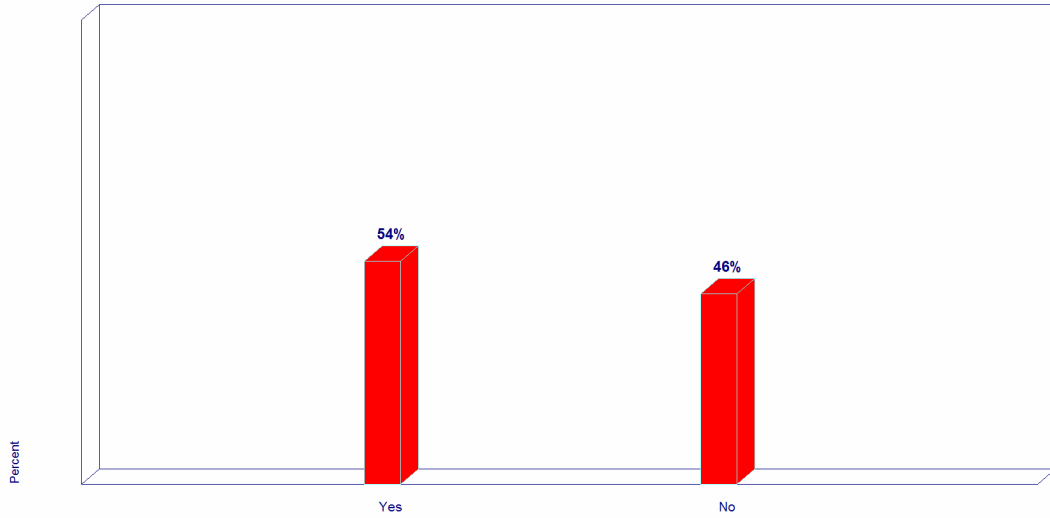
Additional Millage for Police Officers

A- Would you support a voted additional millage for additional police officers?



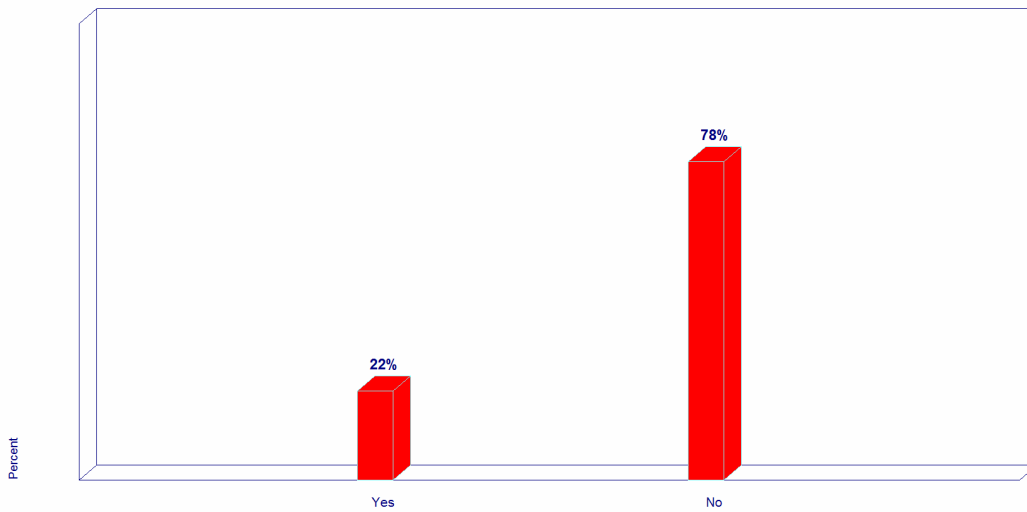
Additional Millage for Extended, Full-Time Fire Department

B- Would you support a voted additional millage for staffing for an expanded, full-time fire department?



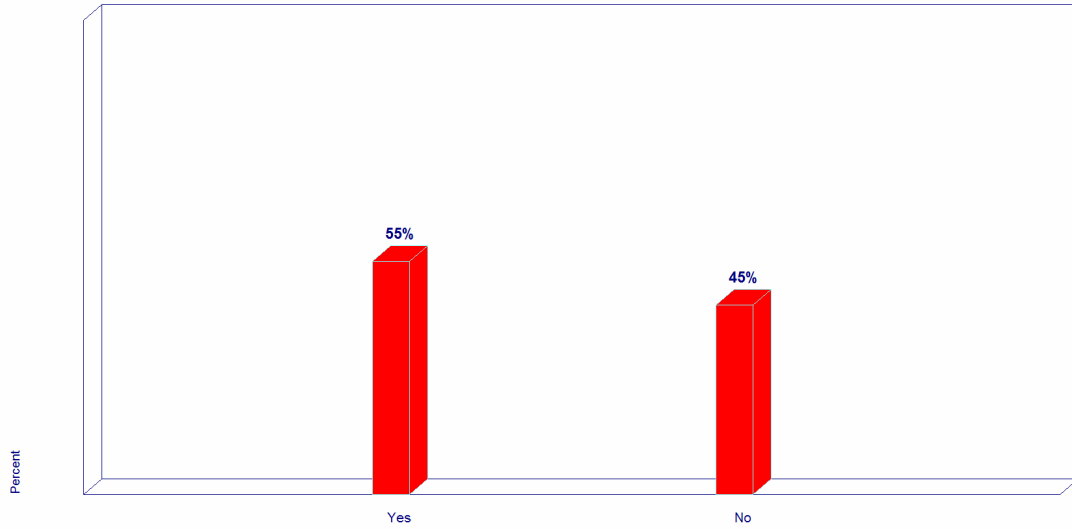
Expanding the Library Size

C- Would you support a voted additional millage for expanding the size of our library?



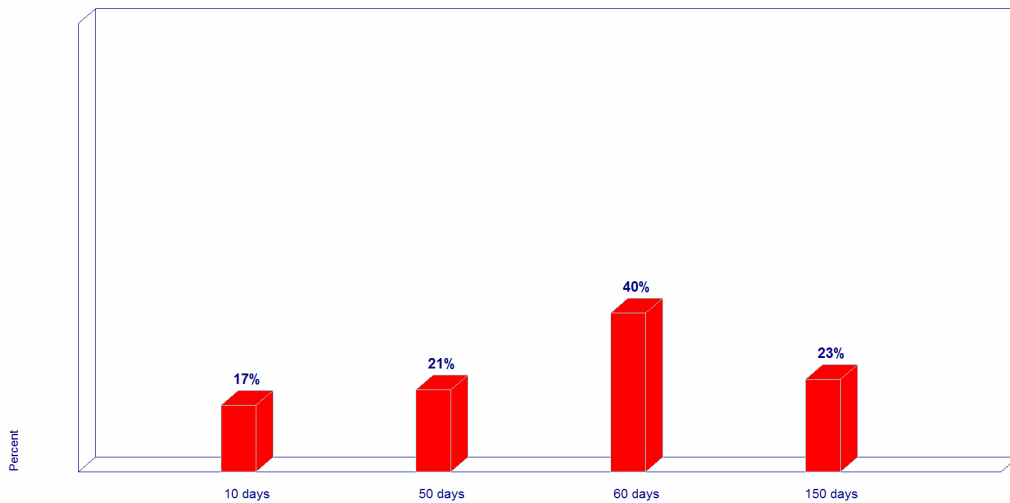
Buying Land Rights

D- Would you support a voted additional millage for buying land rights to ensure open spaces?



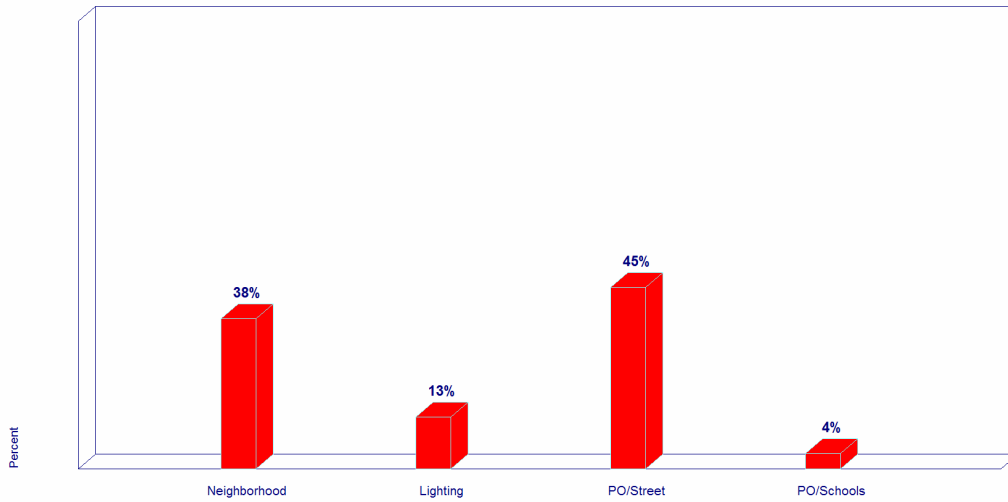
Fund Balance/Rainy Day Fund

E- What is an acceptable fund balance/Rainy Day Fund?



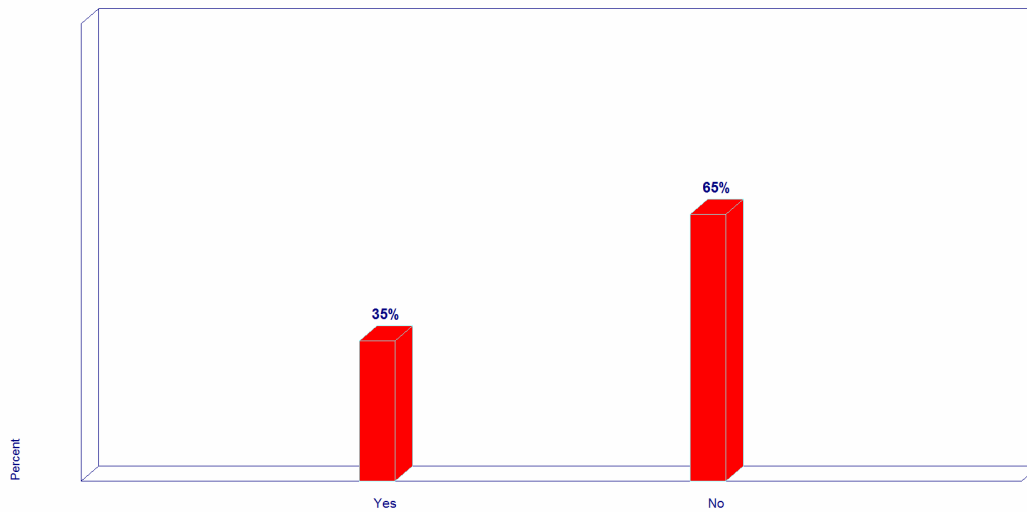
Reducing Crime

F- What is the most effective in reducing crime?



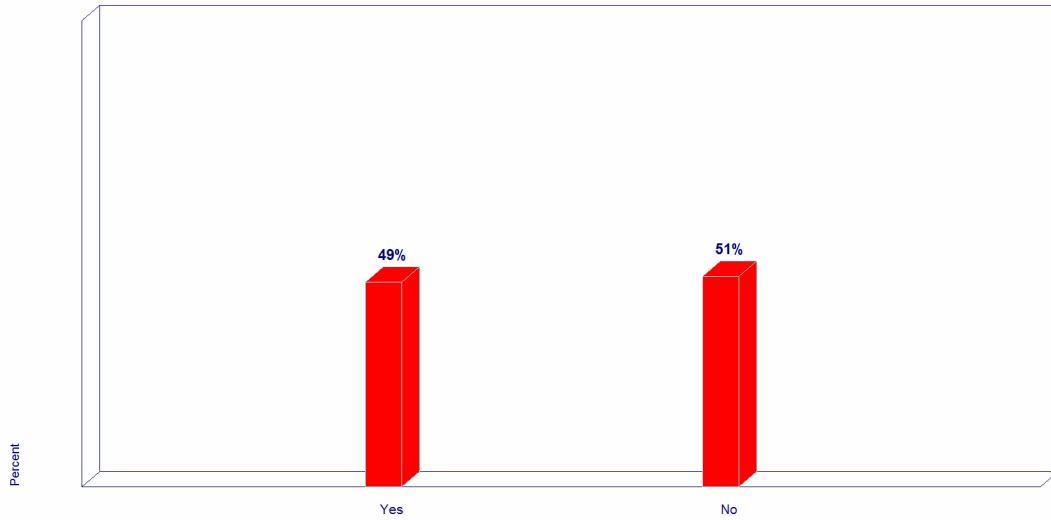
Plowing Residential Roads only on Weekdays

G- Currently, the City's goal is to plow all roads within 24 hours of a snow event. To save money, would you support plowing residential roads only on weekdays?



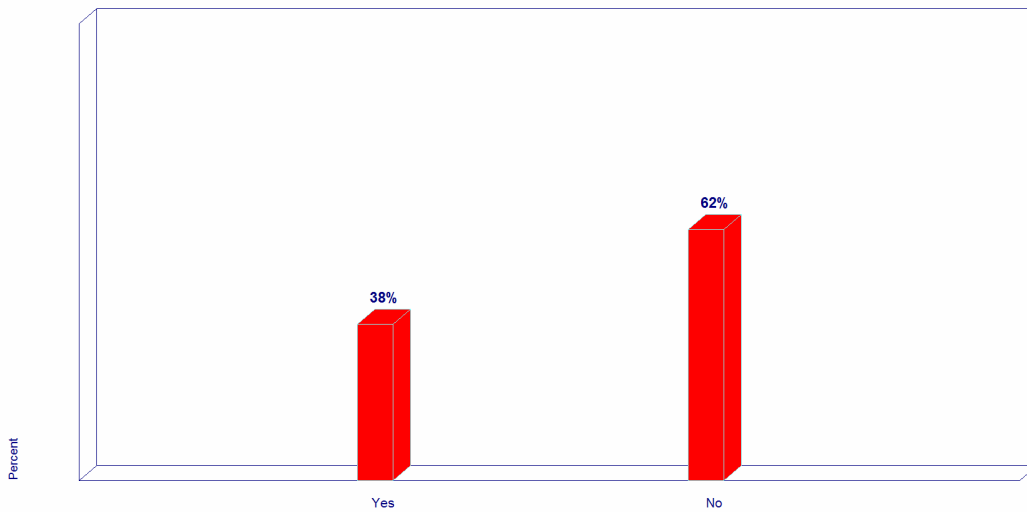
Plowing Residential Roads only on Weekends *if* a Significant Snow Event

H- Would you support plowing residential roads on weekends only for significant snow events (5 inches or more)?



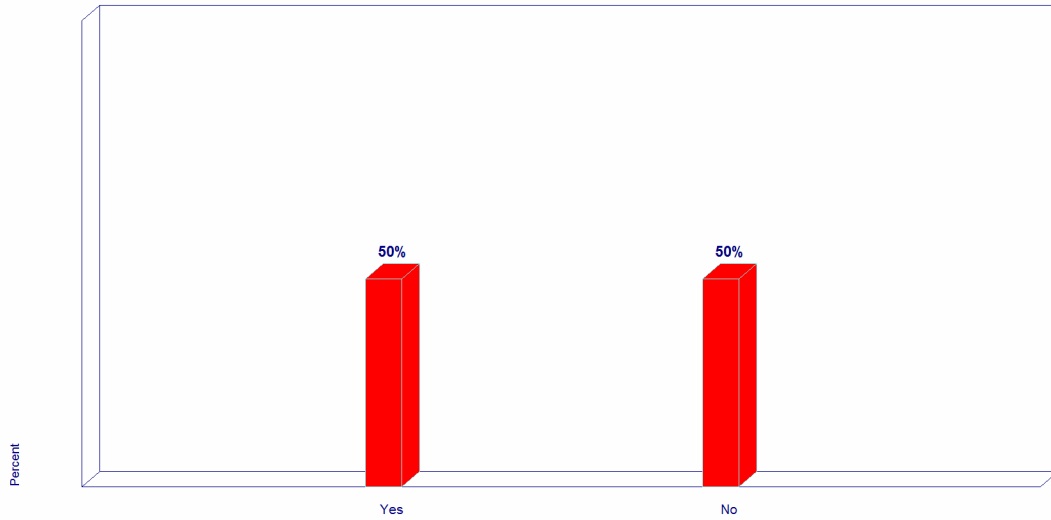
Pay Taxes Online

I- Would you like to be able to pay your taxes online?



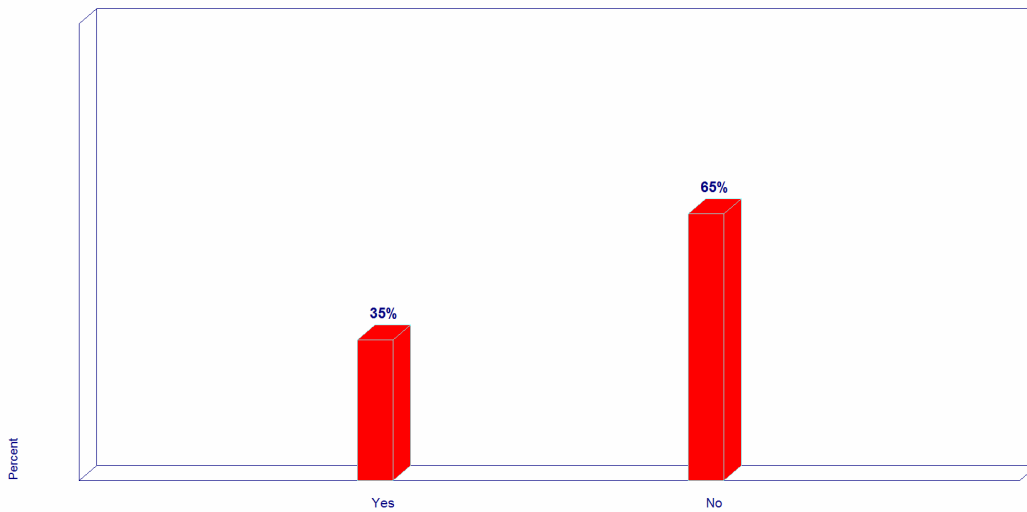
Register and Pay Online for Recreation

J- Would you like to be able to register and pay for recreation programs online?



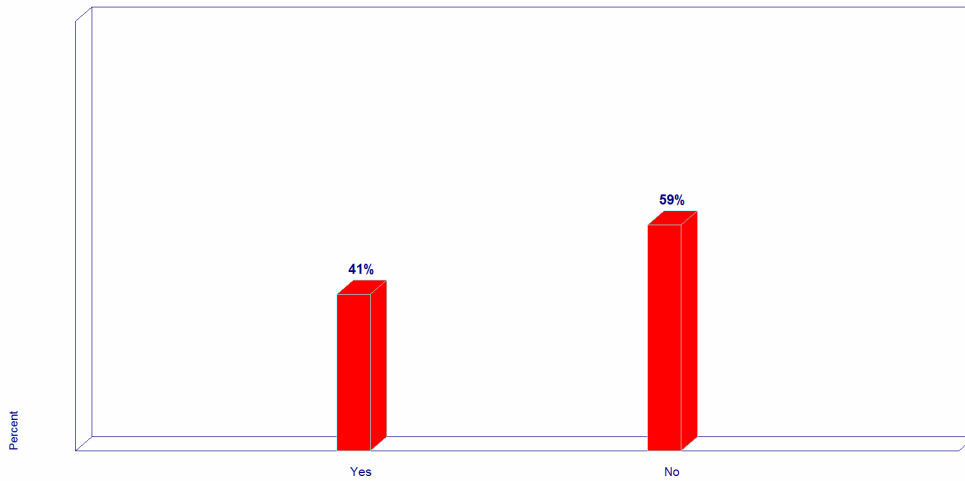
Clean Up Days Every Two Years

K- Should the City consider sponsoring clean-up days every other year instead of every year to save money?



Second Sheet of Ice

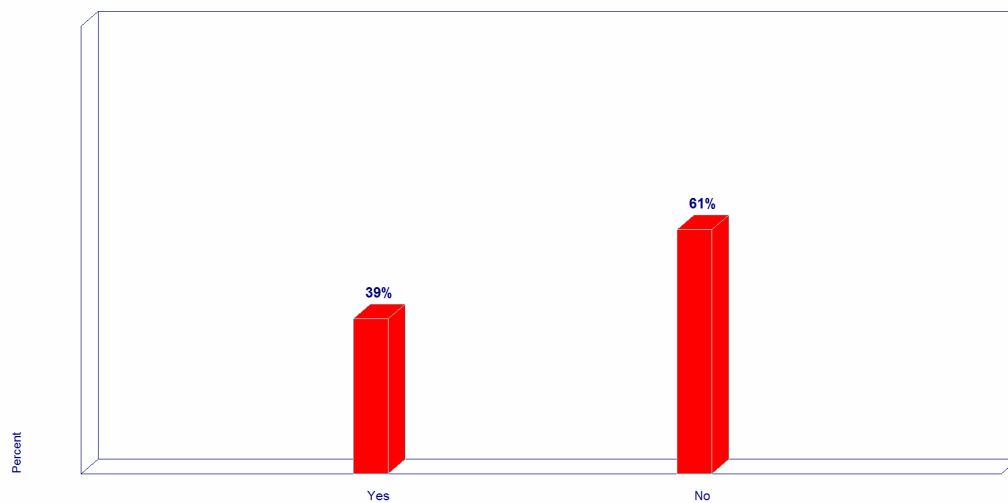
L- Should the City consider adding a second sheet of ice at the Ice and Fitness Center if it makes economic sense to do so?



Increased Taxes for Any Increased Services

This question was added at the request of a participant in the first session.

A- Would you be willing to pay increased taxes for any increased services?



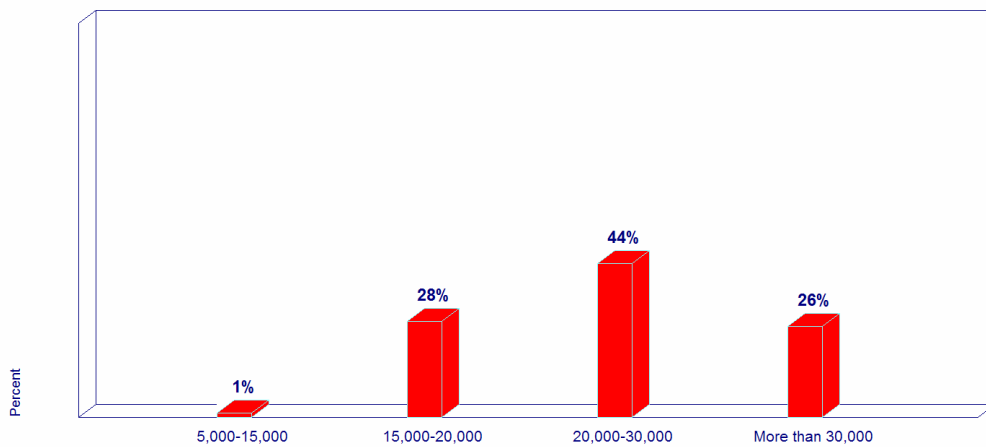
General Knowledge of the City

The focus group also provided an opportunity to assess what types of information residents have about the City. Participants were asked a series of “what do you know?” questions, which were followed by a discussion and clarification of the correct answers. Results are shown below, with the correct answer noted in each case.

Population

The last census showed that the population of Walker was just over 25,000.

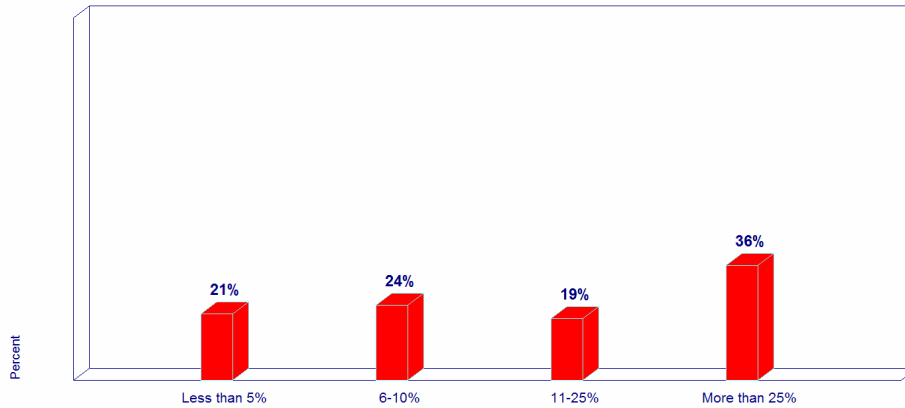
A- What is the population of the City of Walker?



Property Taxes

Approximately 3% of the property taxes paid to the City of Walker stay with the City of Walker.

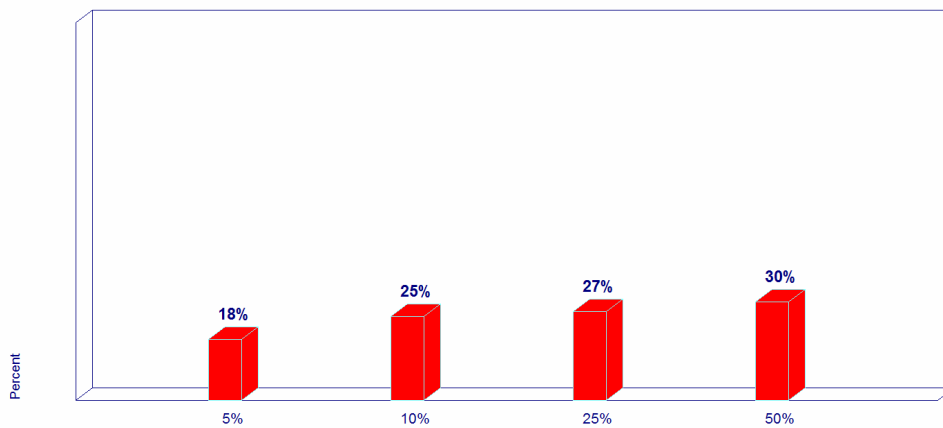
B- What percentage of your property taxes stay with the City of Walker?



Property Tax Contribution to City Budget

Property taxes account for approximately 10% of the City's annual operating budget.

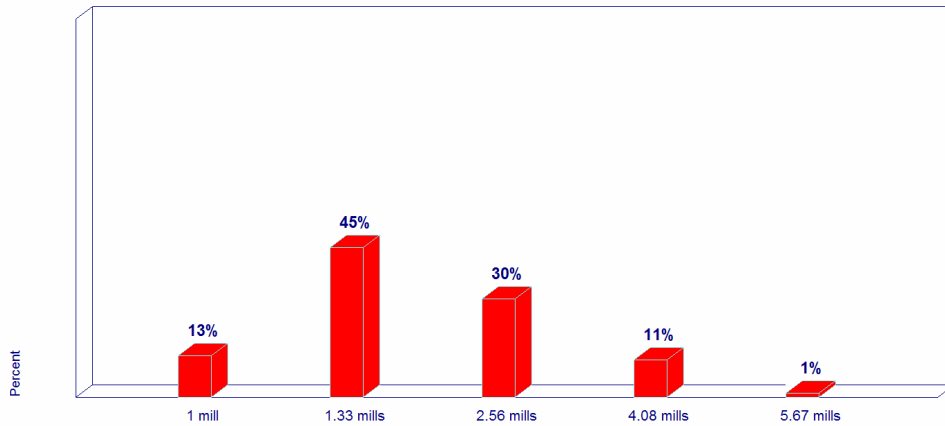
C- What percentage of the City budget is funded by property taxes?



Current Millage Rate

Currently, Walker levies 1.33 mills for property taxes. Many residents knew this, but were surprised to learn that the Charter for the City allows up to 4.08 mills to be levied.

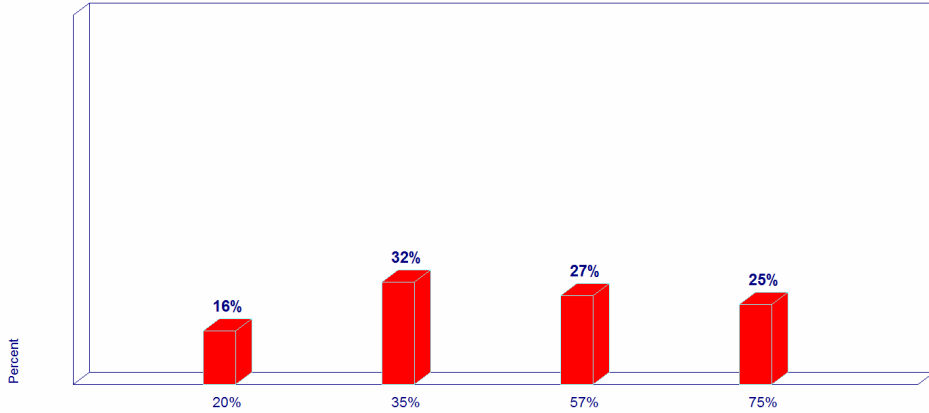
D- What millage rate do you currently pay for property taxes for the City of Walker?



Income Tax Contribution to Walker Operating Budget

Income taxes account for approximately 57% of the Walker operating budget.

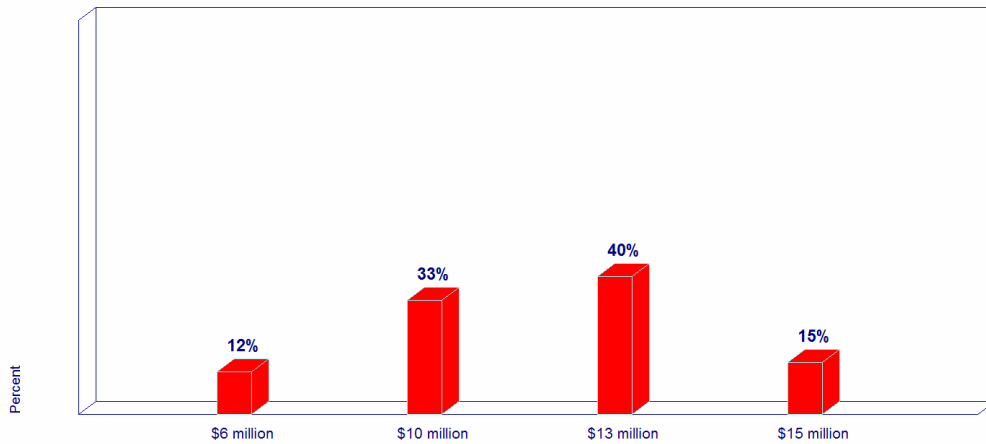
E- What percentage of the City budget is funded by income taxes?



General Fund Budget

The City's current budget is \$13 million.

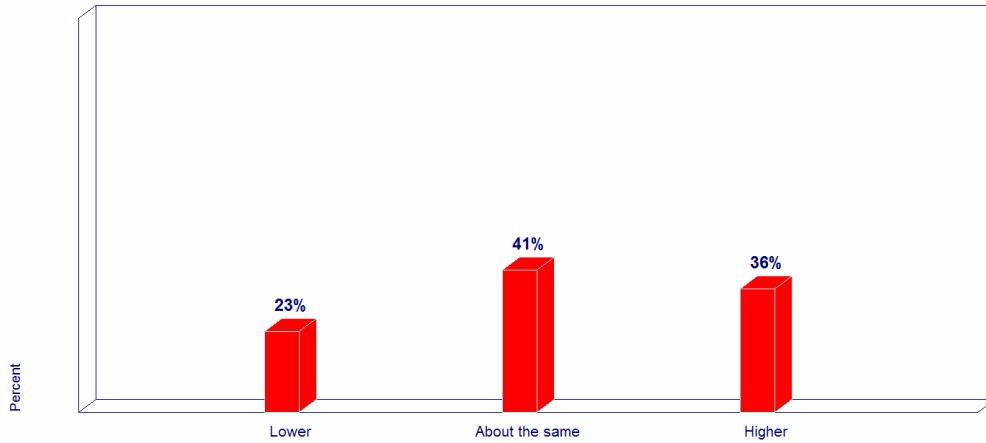
F- What is the City's general fund budget?



Comparison of City's 2006 Budget to 2000 Budget

Walker's 2006/07 fiscal year General Fund budget expenditures are about the same as the general fund expenditures in fiscal year 2000/2001.

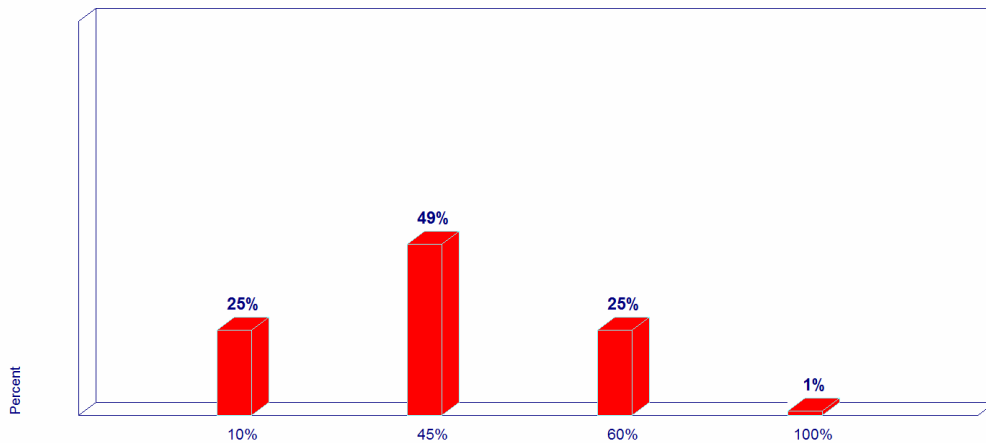
G- How does the City's budget for 2006 compare to the City's budget for 2000?



Public Safety Percentage of Operating Budget

Most participants knew that public safety was approximately 45% of the overall operating budget.

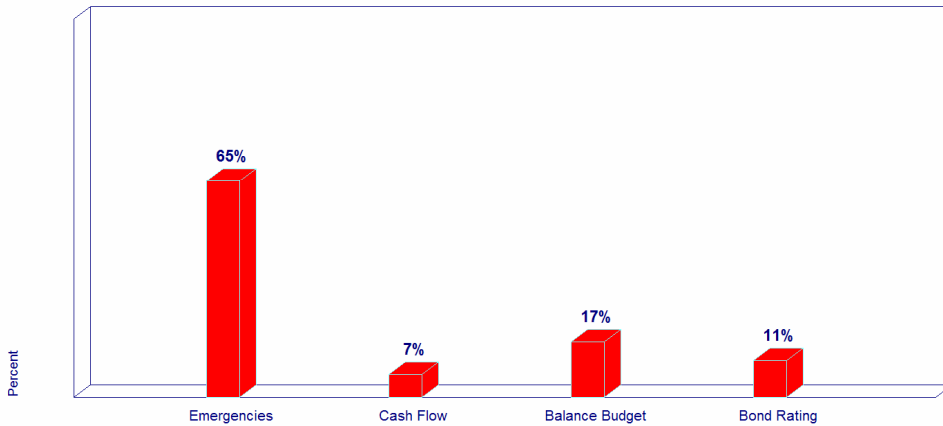
H- What percentage of the City operating budget funds public safety (police and fire)?



Purpose of Fund Balance/Rainy Day Fund

The Fund Balance serves the City by providing funds for emergencies, moderating cash flow, balancing the budget, and improving the City's bond rating.

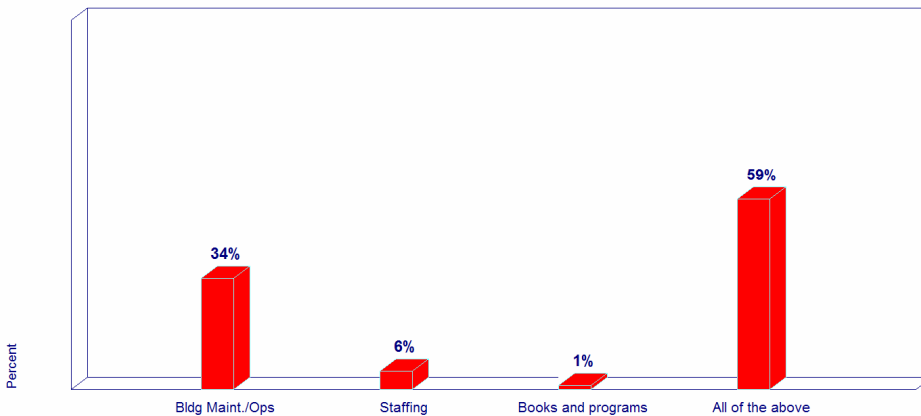
I- What is the purpose of having a fund balance/Rainy Day Fund?



Walker's Contribution to the Kent District Library

Walker supplies the building, maintenance, and utilities for the Walker branch of Kent District Library. All staffing, books and programs are paid for through a separate library millage paid directly to Kent District Library.

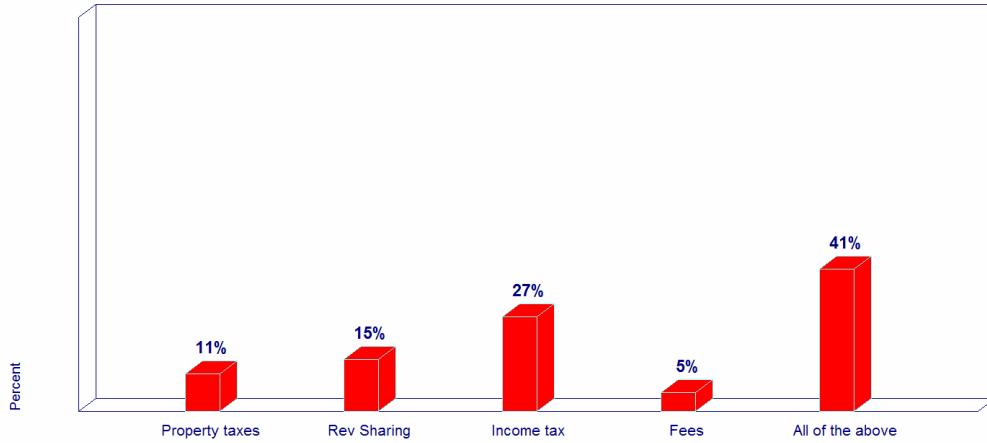
J- What does the City fund for the Walker Branch of the Kent District Library?



Sources of Income

Walker's primary sources of income are state revenue sharing and income taxes.

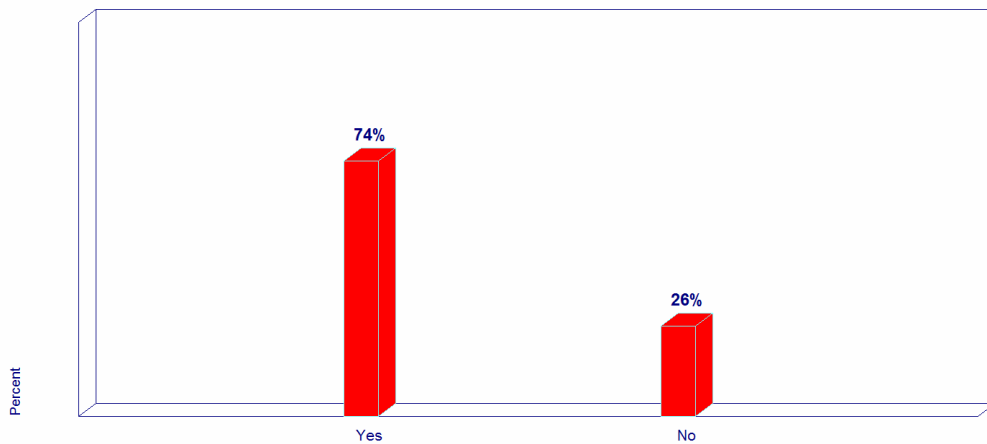
K- What are the main (or biggest) income sources for the City of Walker?



City Assessor Services

City assessor services are required by state law.

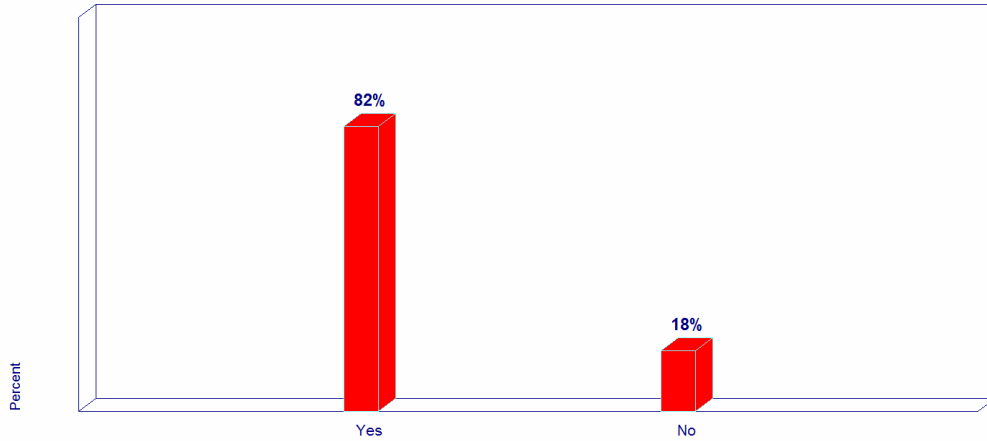
L- Are city assessor services required by state law?



Treasurer Services

Treasurer services are required by state law.

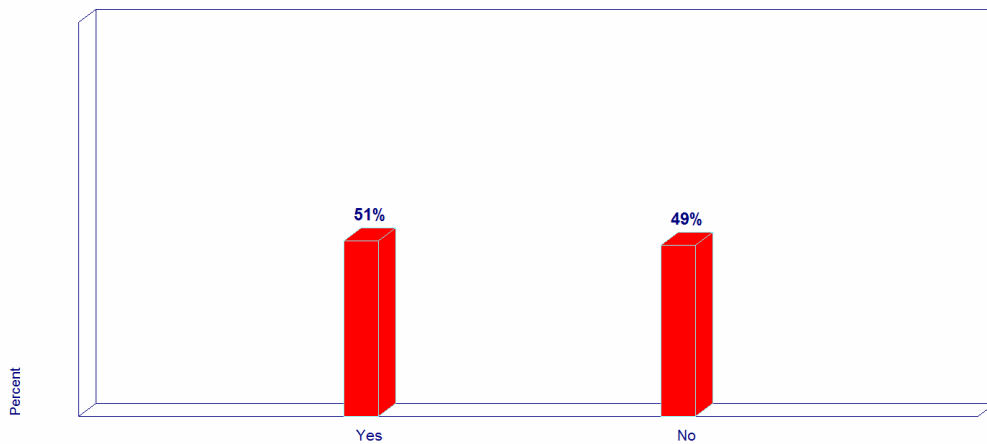
M- Are treasurer services required by state law?



Police Services

Police services are **not** required by state law.

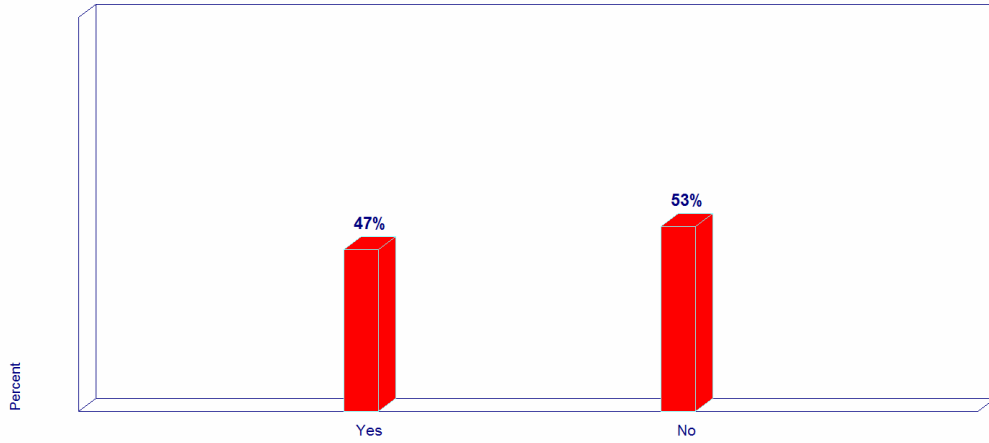
N- Are police services required by state law?



Fire Services

Fire services are **not** required by state law.

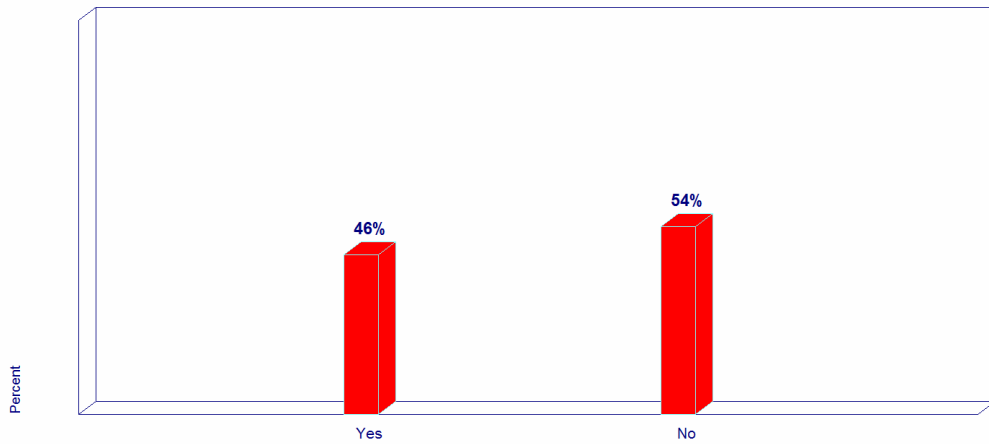
O- Are fire services required by state law?



City Commission Services

City commission services are required by state law.

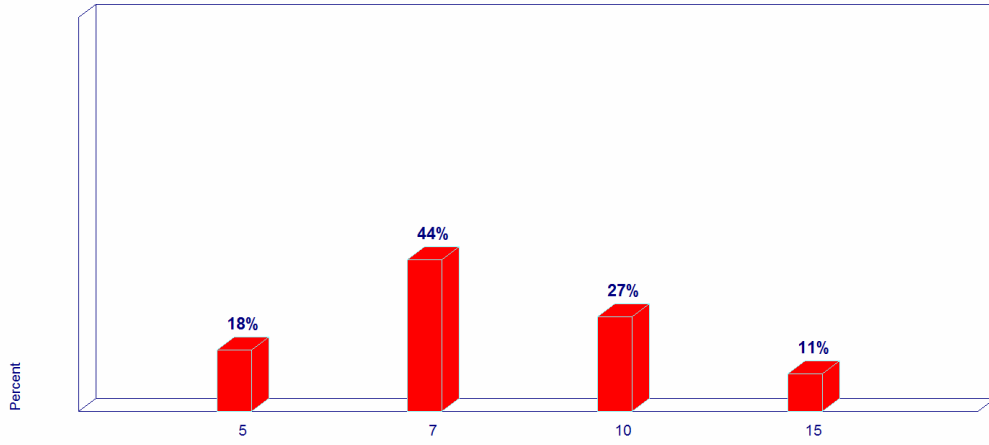
P- Are city commission services required by state law?



Parks

Walker owns seven parks.

Q- How many parks does the City of Walker own?



Participant Comments

At the end of the meeting, participants were asked to respond to “free-form” questions. The following are the questions and responses to those questions.

Walker Should Consider Adding ...

Is there anything that Walker is lacking that the City Commission should consider for the future?

- Basketball courts, broaden recreation vision
- Clean-up days need to include picking up curbside (maybe every other year)
- Extend sidewalks to more areas
- Hazardous waste drop-off site
- Bonafide shopping center
- Farmer’s Market
- Municipal swimming pool (self-supporting, indoor) (5)
- “Coot” city – services for seniors and active baby boomers
- Wi-Fi access
- Dog park (2)
- Trash pickup
- Recycling
- Intermural programs

The City Should Do a Better Job of ...

In response to the “what is the City lacking” question, many participants responded with areas where they would like the City to do a better job.

- Non-resident charges for police and fire services (if they cause an accident)
- More code enforcement (consider using volunteers) – several people agreed with this
- Enforcement of boats and trailers in driveways
- Tax breaks to buy into blighted areas/incentives (such as Alpine)
- Continue to press the State to widen Wilson Avenue
- Dense areas of Standale, Alpine Ave – consider more of a downtown feel
- Total ban on leaf and trashing burning
- Let people burn leaves and tree limbs throughout the winter
- Traffic control on 3-mile and 4-mile road (and Bristol)
- Straighten the intersection at Bristol and 4-mile

- Promote fitness center aspect of WIFC better
- Lear Plant area – turn into Renaissance Zone
- Better enforcement preventing deer hunting on private property
- Raise taxes for people who work in Walker but don't live here
- Better policing of building codes—just as flood plains, better land use planning
- Ensure people get value for their property if it depreciates due to rezoning (125% of value)
- Be careful of developing too much around Orchard Park area and south end of Walker where water is an issue
- Sales tax in Orchard Park area
- Outsource road repair
- Deal with blight off lower Alpine
- Illegal fireworks from June – September
- Timing of traffic lights on Leonard & Lake Michigan (Wilson changes)
- Operate city more efficiently (new Fire Station seems extravagant)
- Look at benefits for non-contractual workers
- Train police officers to assist rather than hire more fire department personnel
- Cul-de-sacs should get same support in winter as other streets
- Fitness center must be self-supporting
- More signs for deer crossings
- Require companies that leave to pay tax abatements
- Be more diligent on code enforcement

The City Should Stop ...

In response to the “what is the City lacking” question, another participant asked if there were any things that the City should stop doing.

- Don't make Alpine Avenue a boulevard
- Using so much road salt
- Plowing on weekends in residential areas
- Being part of Metro Council
- Contracting with cable companies
- Allowing tax abatements to companies (or strictly limit them)
- Funding public parties (like City Festival)

Sister City/Country Suggestions

With what countries and/or cities should the City consider establishing a sister-city relationship?

- Other parts of the US (2)
- Romania
- Anywhere in Europe
- Sao Paulo, Brazil
- France
- Greece
- Ireland
- Shanghai
- Toronto
- Lebanon
- London
- Scotland
- Kenya
- Netherlands
- Bulgaria
- A city about the same size as Walker in any of these countries
- Disband the program