



CITY OF  
**PALO  
ALTO**

## City Council Staff Report

**From: City Manager**

**Report Type: STUDY SESSION**

**Lead Department: City Manager**

**Meeting Date: December 9, 2024**

Report #:2410-3643

### **TITLE**

Presentation of the 2024 Annual Community Survey Results

### **RECOMMENDATION**

Staff recommends that the City Council receive the Report of Results for the 2024 City of Palo Alto Community Survey by Polco/National Research Center, Inc (Polco)

### **BACKGROUND**

Since 2003, the City has annually or biennially conducted a community survey to gain insights into residents' perspectives about the community, including local amenities, services, public trust, resident participation, and other aspects of the community. Survey information is used to support budgeting, land use and strategic planning, and communication efforts with the community. This report summarizes the latest survey conducted starting September 16, 2024, through October 21, 2024.

### **ANALYSIS**

The City takes pride in delivering outstanding programs and services to the community. An essential gauge of community satisfaction is through polling. The data obtained from these surveys serves as a valuable reference point for setting City Council priorities. City staff utilizes this information to assess programs, services and shaping performance metrics during the annual budget process.

The National Community Survey is one of several methods employed to engage the community and evaluate the perceived quality of City services. Similar to last year's response rate of 17%, this year's total responses were 585. While historically responses have hovered around 750, or about 23%, this year's 17% response rate, although lower, remains statistically significant. It also aligns with the typical range observed in other jurisdictions, which falls between a 12% to 20% response rate.

A few highlights in the Key Findings section based on respondent perspectives of the report are provided below, as well as a summary of notable circumstances that may have affected the results.

**Palo Alto residents continue to rate their quality of life highly.**

- About 9 in 10 residents rated Palo Alto, as well as their neighborhood, as an excellent or good place to live. Similarly, 9 in 10 residents highly rated the overall quality of life in Palo Alto, while about 8 in 10 praised the city as a place to work and to raise children. These ratings were consistent with previous years and aligned with the national benchmark, except for Palo Alto's rating as a place to work, which was higher than the national benchmark.
- Additionally, about 7 in 10 residents gave high marks to the city as a place to visit, and more than half rated Palo Alto as an excellent or good place to retire. Both ratings were similar to those from previous years and aligned with the national benchmark.
- About 8 in 10 residents indicated that they were likely to remain in Palo Alto for the next five years and would recommend living in the city to someone who asked, which was similar to previous years and the national benchmark. Finally, about 9 in 10 residents would recommend Palo Alto's libraries to friends, on par with previous years.

**While residents were very satisfied with many City services, there are areas for improvement.**

- About 9 in 10 residents gave excellent or good ratings to the library facilities, public library services, and the variety of library materials, as well as to fire emergency services, ambulance or emergency medical services, Palo Alto open space, and city parks. These ratings were similar to national benchmark, and city parks were rated above the benchmark.
- More than 8 in 10 survey respondents positively rated the preservation of natural areas (open space, farmlands, and greenbelts), police services, fire prevention and education, recreation centers/facilities and programs/classes, animal control, street cleaning, sewer services, refuse collection (garbage, recycling, yard waste, and e-waste), utility payment options, drinking water, and art programs and theater. These ratings were on par with those given in previous years.
- When comparisons to the nation were available, most of these services rated higher than the national benchmark, including preservation of natural areas, drinking water, utility payment options, animal control, street cleaning, recreation centers/facilities and recreation programs/classes.
- All in all, 28 services received similar ratings to those in 2023, while 6 services received lower ratings (building and planning application processing services, code enforcement,

traffic enforcement, traffic signal timing, sidewalk maintenance and electric utility) and one service received a higher rating (street repair).

- When compared to the nation, there were 9 services above the benchmark (Palo Alto open space, city parks, preservation of natural areas, drinking water, utility payment options, animal control, street cleaning, recreation centers/facilities and recreation programs/classes) and 14 services on par. No service was below the national benchmark.

Traffic enforcement received lower ratings this year compared to last. This decline coincides with a reduction in traffic citations, attributed to vacancies within the Traffic Division over the past few years. However, as of this fall, the Police Department has fully staffed the traffic unit. This development is expected to enhance traffic enforcement efforts and increase officer visibility, addressing community concerns.

Sidewalk maintenance also received lower ratings this year compared to last. Over the past three years, the citywide sidewalk improvement program was deferred due to pandemic-related funding and staffing challenges. However, these services are set to resume this year, marking a renewed focus on addressing sidewalk maintenance needs.

Several process improvements are underway to help address the low ratings for building and planning application processing services. These include enhanced customer service training for all planning, building, and support staff, aiming to improve responsiveness and efficiency in application handling. The low rating may also reflect diverging community perspectives on the handling of proposed housing developments throughout the city.

**Issues Related to affordable housing and cost of living remain a concern for residents.**

- As in previous years, fewer than 1 in 10 residents gave positive ratings to the cost of living in Palo Alto, while about 1 in 10 survey respondents favorably rated the availability of affordable quality housing. Both ratings were lower than the national benchmark.
- The survey included an open-ended question where respondents could describe, in their own words, one change the city could make to increase resident satisfaction. The most common response was related to housing and construction issues, followed by transit and transportation issues.
- Among the best rated community characteristics were the overall image or reputation of Palo Alto, the fitness opportunities (including exercise classes and paths or trails, etc.), recreational opportunities, the ease of travel by bicycle in Palo Alto and the ease of walking in Palo Alto, all with 75% of more residents giving positive ratings.
- Compared to 2023, all ratings were similar except for the vibrancy of downtown/commercial areas, which decreased from 65% in 2023 to the current 59%.

Palo Alto continues to face challenges regarding the cost of living, particularly in terms of the availability of affordable housing. When comparing with other Bay Area cities (Attachment B) in the categories of housing variety and availability of affordable quality housing, the positive percentages were similar, at 24% and 11%, respectively.

**Parks, Open Space, and natural environment topped the ranked of things that City does well.**

- The survey included an open-ended question where respondents could write in their own words one thing they believe the city does well and should maintain. Open space and the natural environment topped the ranking, accounting for 25% of the mentions, followed by activities and recreation (13%), safety services (12%), and utility and city services (11%).

**Ratings for Palo Alto government performance are on the rise.**

- Three-quarters of Palo Alto residents gave the local government high marks for treating residents with respect, while about 6 in 10 praised the government for being honest, treating all residents fairly, and informing residents about issues facing the community.
- All other aspects of government were similarly rated as in the previous year, except for overall direction that Palo Alto is taking, which received a lower rating than in 2023 (47% versus 54%). The remaining aspects were on par with previous years.
- Where benchmark comparisons were available, Palo Alto ranked similar to the national benchmarks.

Noting the 2024 survey was conducted during a major presidential election year and national headlines raising concerns about economic conditions and the general political climate. Dissatisfaction with national government direction often influences public perceptions and engagement at the local level. While local government typically deals with issues closer to residents' daily lives, such as public safety, housing, and infrastructure, we are not immune to the broader national sentiment.

The attached report includes information on trends over time, geographic and demographic comparisons, national benchmark comparisons, and verbatim responses to open-ended questions. Also, included for awareness in Attachment B is a Bay Area benchmark comparison where similar questions were asked.

**FISCAL/RESOURCE IMPACT**

Funding for the Polco contract was approved in FY 2024 budget. No additional funding is requested at this time.

**STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT**

The 2024 Palo Alto Community Survey process is a community engagement tool that helps the City Council and City staff understand community perspectives on current services and

programs, as well as priorities. Staff continues to implement the existing community engagement and Council priority workplans.

**ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW**

Council action on this item is not a project as defined by CEQA because the Community Survey is a continuing administrative or maintenance activity. CEQA Guidelines section 15378(b)(2).

**ATTACHMENTS**

Attachment A: Palo Alto Community Survey 2024 Report of Results

Attachment B: 2024 Bay Area Benchmark Comparisons

**APPROVED BY:**

Ed Shikada, City Manager