

# **Park Advisory Commission (PAC) Downtown Parks Subcommittee Report**

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## Background

The City Parks system currently contains four parks within the downtown core, as defined by the Downtown Development Authority (DDA) boundary, including Liberty Plaza, the Kempf House, the Farmers Market and Sculpture Plaza. The 2011 - 2015 Parks and Recreation Open Space (PROS) Plan classifies Urban Parks/Plazas as follows:

‘Urban parks and plazas provide open space and pedestrian-oriented amenities in the downtown area where the surrounding population includes high density residential and commercial districts. These areas are defined by the presence of a significant infrastructure, a greater formality, and furniture to serve a greater density of people at peak times...They ideally function in concert with the surrounding businesses, especially restaurants and cafes, where a cooperative effort energizes the physical space.’(p.33)

Currently, there is no plan outlining the number of parks, type desired, or location where additional parks, if any, are needed in the downtown area. A clearer plan and direction for development of open space in the downtown would be an appropriate addendum to the PROS Plan, and help to guide future development as well as to direct developer contributions for park and open space. With increasing downtown density, this study is timely.

In 2012, the DDA completed the Connecting William Street study. The purpose of this study was to define the best use for five City owned properties currently used for parking in the downtown core either adjacent to or near William Street. Although portions of sites were recommended for open space, this was not the focus of their plan, and many City residents felt that there needed to be an effort focusing on open space needs. City Council asked PAC to look further into the subject of downtown parks.

In response to this public input, PAC formed a Downtown Parks Subcommittee to develop recommendations for City Council. While the DDA study focused on the most appropriate development for each site, the Downtown Parks Subcommittee focused on how one or more of these properties might be utilized for open space, and what features, activities, and physical location would make these spaces successful. The subcommittee also considered these properties and potential new parks in the context of the existing park system and other desired amenities, such as the Allen Creek Greenway, recognizing that resources for development and maintenance are limited and as such the need for prioritization becomes essential.

The Park Advisory Commission developed the following mission statement:

“To determine whether and what additional parks are wanted and/or needed in downtown Ann Arbor, focusing on city-owned parcels in the DDA district while maintaining awareness of additional nearby properties, for example: Liberty Plaza, 721 North Main and 415 W. Washington. The ‘deliverable’ will be a set of recommendations for the City Council.”

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The subcommittee developed a plan to learn about the issues surrounding urban open space, invite public input, and develop recommendations for approval by PAC, to then be forwarded to City Council.

## PAC Subcommittee Process

From March 2013 through October 2013, the subcommittee, consisting of four members of PAC and parks staff, met 11 times. At each meeting, there were several members of the public present and opportunities for public commentary at the start and end.

The first task of the subcommittee was to compile reading materials germane to the topic, including City master plans and studies, articles and books about best planning practices for urban spaces, and materials from various local advocacy groups. These were discussed and posted on the City web page devoted to this effort.

The subcommittee then invited groups who were interested in presenting during a working meeting. Presentations were made by the Allen Creek Greenway Conservancy, UM Urban Planning, downtown ice skating rink advocates, Library Green Conservancy, Ann Arbor District Library (AADL), Main Street Area Association and the South University Area Association. This effort provided a variety of perspectives on approaches to developing successful open space, types of amenities desired in the downtown area, what challenges downtown spaces can present and suggestions on how to combat these challenges.

There were several themes and messages communicated to the subcommittee and staff. The representatives of the downtown street associations spoke about the importance of maintaining a vibrant downtown, how well designed and maintained streetscapes serve as part of the open space system of a downtown, that the U of M Diag provides a large green public open space and that developing more large open space will not necessarily contribute to the vibrancy of the downtown. They also had serious concerns about Liberty Plaza in terms of its maintenance, behavior of users, and design. They felt the City needs to successfully solve these challenging issues and take care of our existing parks before proposing any new space.

The AADL representatives shared issues they have experienced with security, drugs, and loitering both inside and outside of the downtown library branch. They shared that they employ four full time security guards to deal with these issues, and have concerns about adding a large public open space outside of their building. Although in concept a park sounds like it would complement the library and its programs, without continuous security, high level of maintenance and continuous programming, there was concern that the space would create another venue for the behavioral issues they experience on a daily basis at the library and at Liberty Plaza.

The Library Green Conservancy advocated strongly for a large central park on the Library Lot. They point to the fact that the City already owns the land, that the location is central to the City, and believe that the proximity to the library and the potential linkage with Liberty Plaza would capture pedestrians who already frequent this area. They also feel that a park would bring activity and new customers to

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merchants and restaurants on State Street, Liberty and Main. They propose that a structure be built above the in-out ramps and the elevator towers that would house destinations such as a coffee house, play school, art gallery or community center to enliven the space.

Professor Kelbaugh from the University of Michigan Planning Department and Wendy Rampson, the Planning Services Manager, also spoke of a successful downtown space being well defined, and enclosed by buildings that activate the space. Both spoke about downtown Ann Arbor being rather small, and that plazas are more appropriate than a large green park for a downtown of this size.

The Allen Creek Greenway Conservancy spoke of their vision for a greenway running along the alignment of the Ann Arbor Railroad, and about connectivity both adjacent to and through the downtown.

The ice skating advocacy group spoke about how development of a temporary synthetic skating rink could provide a test for the site for use as a park.

Several committee members attended 'Placemaking' seminars, hosted by the Michigan Parks and Recreation Association, which provided valuable insight into creating successful urban open space including case studies that illustrated outcomes of Placemaking efforts.

Placemaking principles provided guidance for the development of the recommendations. The principles have been informing urban development for the past couple of decades, and create a framework for planning successful spaces. One of the leading organizations promoting Placemaking is the Project for Public Spaces, Inc. They summarize the keys to development of a successful place as follows:

- Access and Linkage – a place is easy to get to and highly visible. Physical elements can affect access (e.g. of a row of shops being more interesting and generally safer to walk by than a blank wall or empty lot), ideally convenient to public transit, and easy circulation within the site.
- Comfort and Image – perceptions about safety and cleanliness, the scale of adjacent buildings, a place's character and charm, as well as more tangible issues such as a comfortable place to sit.
- Uses and activities – the basic building blocks of a place that can make a place special or unique. When there is nothing to do, the place will be empty and unused.
- Sociability – when people see friends, meet and greet their neighbors and feel comfortable interacting with strangers, they tend to feel a stronger sense of place or attachment to their community. It is a difficult but unmistakable quality for a place to achieve.

And reasons why public spaces fail:

- Blank walls or dead zones around the edges of a place contribute nothing to the activity of the place. Having a thriving, active area around a space is as important to its success as the design and management of the space itself.
- Poor entrances and visually inaccessible spaces keep people out instead of inviting them in.

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- A lack of programs and activities, such as a market or street festivals can make for an empty, forlorn plaza or space.
- Lack of good places to sit and paths that don't go where people want to go make the space less inviting and comfortable.

The subcommittee toured downtown parks and the five Connecting William Street Properties during one of the public meetings to experience first-hand the merits of each site. There were discussions at each of the locations about what was working or not (in the case of existing parks), and what potential there was for the sites being studied. There was also discussion about how the area surrounding these spaces would positively or negatively influence the space.

The subcommittee then developed a survey designed to solicit feedback from the general public. Goals for the survey included gauging public opinion as to whether there was interest in additional park and open space in the downtown, what size of open space and types of activities desired, and how the space should be funded, including the initial development, ongoing maintenance, security, and programming,

The survey was advertised widely with the goal to reach as many people as possible. Outreach included eGov delivery email to over 4300 residents, postings on the Tree Town Log, listings on the City Meeting Calendar, flyers distributed around town and to local businesses, postings in the A2 City News/Resident Newsletter, and a press release in the A2gov.org news section. Several other news organizations picked up the story, including the Ann Arbor Journal, the Natural Awakenings magazine, and the Ann Arbor Chronicle.

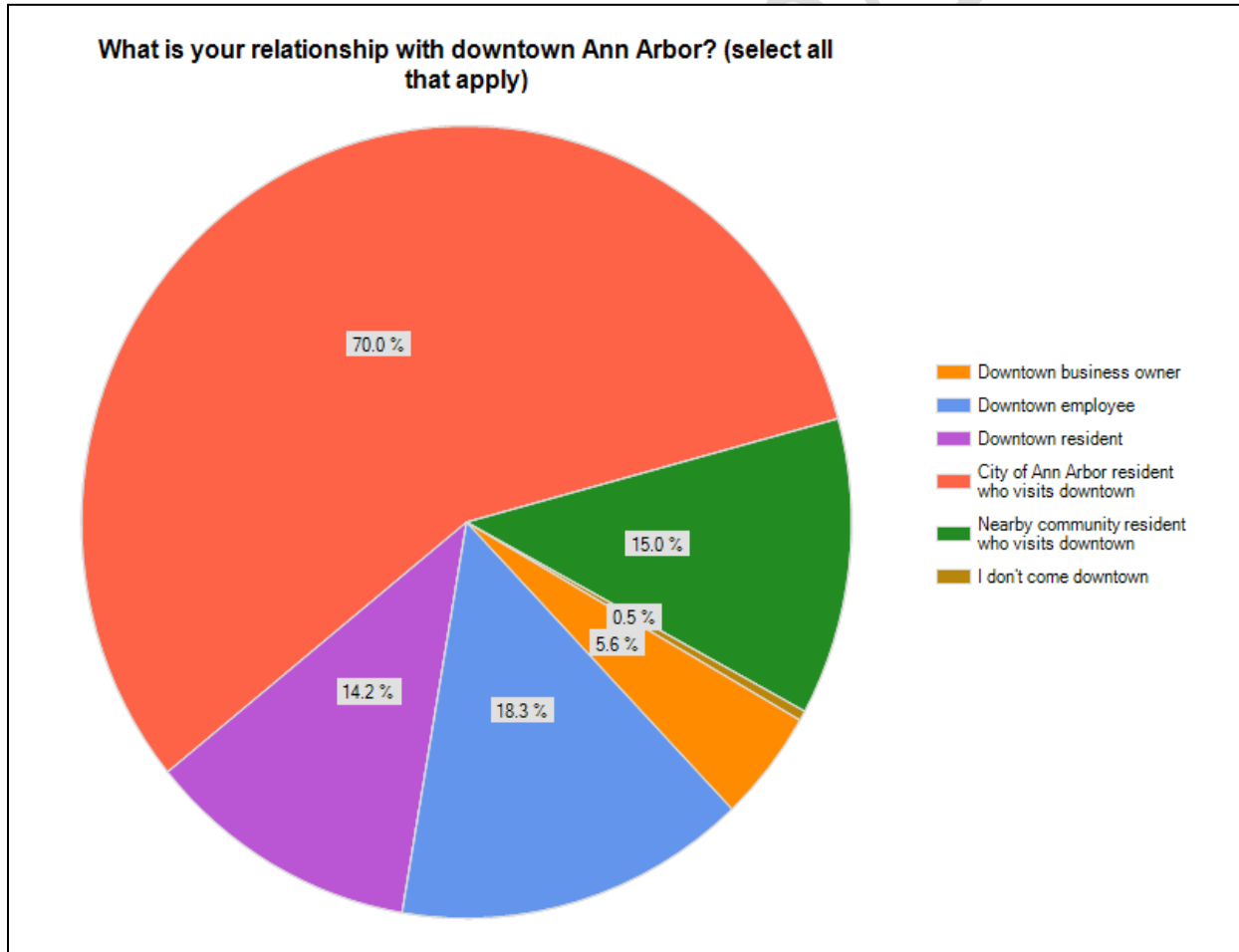
There were 1,608 respondents to the survey who answered 14 questions, including two open ended questions. Following are the results of the survey.

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## Survey Summary

The first few questions were to gather demographic data. Of those who answered the questionnaire, slightly over 60% were female, nearly 80% were between the ages of 25 and 64, and over 50% were from the 48103 zip code.

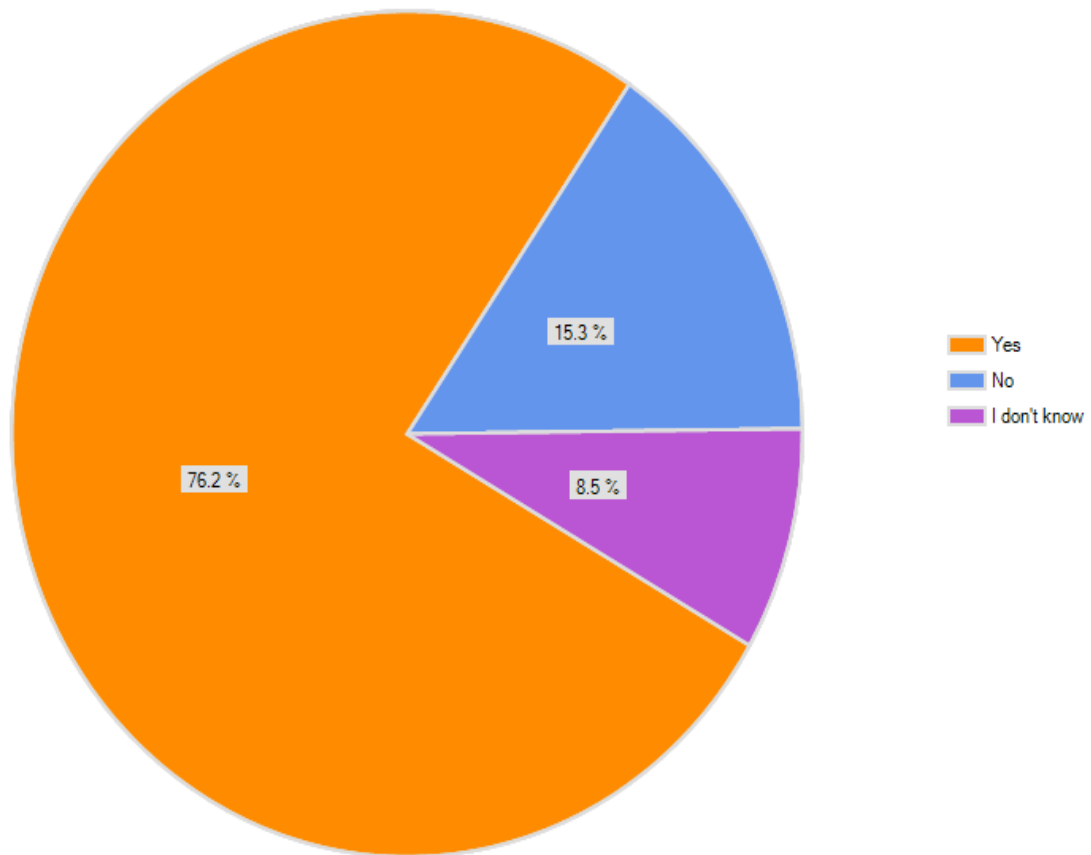
**RELATIONSHIP WITH DOWNTOWN** – Respondents were asked how they experience downtown; as a visitor, employee, or resident. As more than one category could be selected, there were multiple ways respondents may interact with downtown, however, the majority of respondents were residents who visit downtown, followed by those who work downtown, visit from nearby communities, and live downtown.



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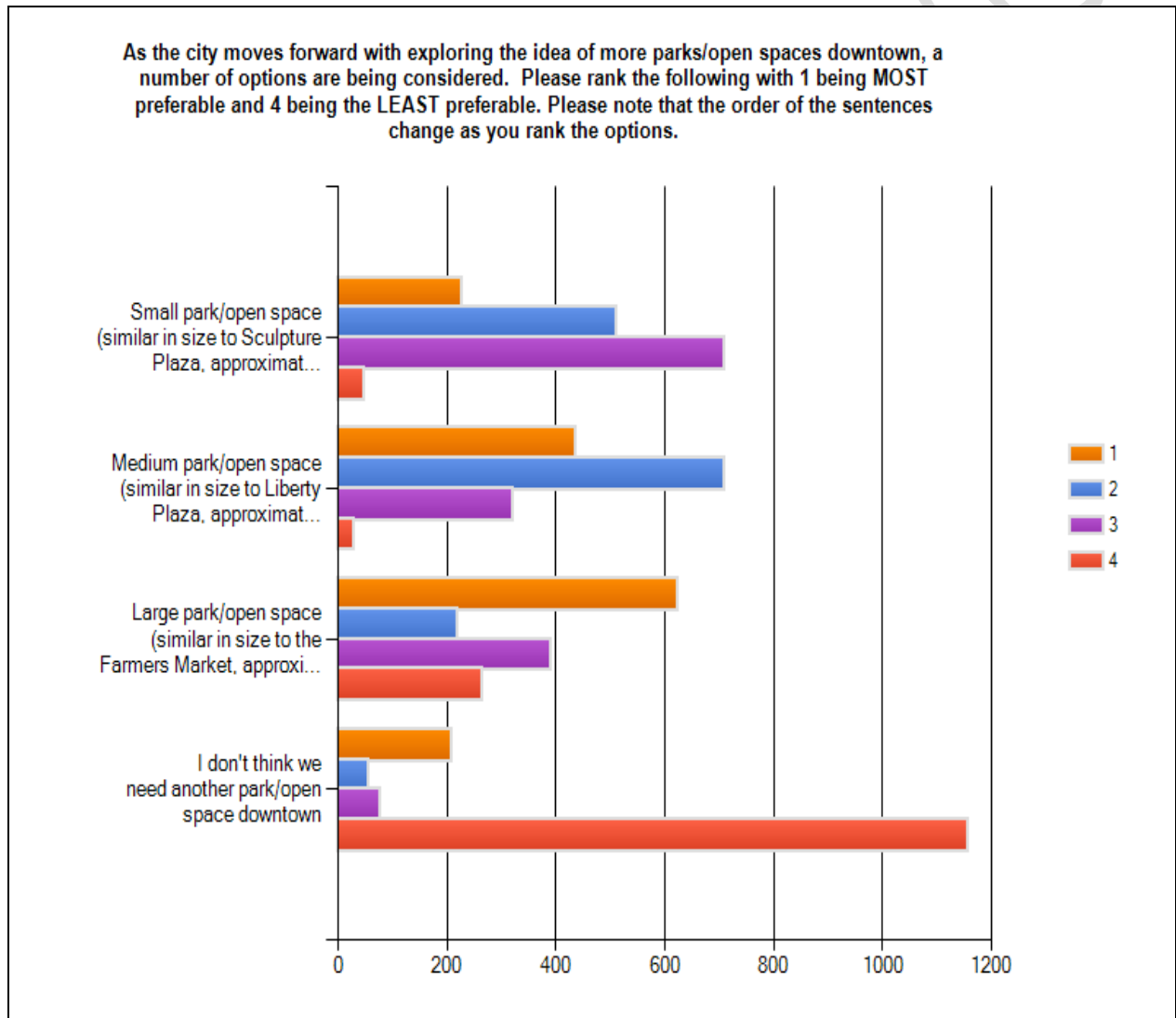
**NEED FOR ADDITIONAL PARK/OPEN SPACE** - This question was asked to get a sense of whether respondents thought there is sufficient park/open space downtown. The majority of respondents would like to see more downtown park/open space.

Do you think Ann Arbor would benefit from having more downtown parks/open spaces?



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**SIZES OF PARK/OPEN SPACE** - Respondents were asked to rank from 1 to 4 what size park/open space was most or least preferable. Large open space was ranked as the highest preference, whereas a majority of people ranked not needing additional open space as the fourth priority. However, the results showed that there are a variety of opinions as to the type of space that is preferred by residents.





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**FEATURES AND ACTIVITIES** - Respondents ranked potential features and activities that would be desirable in a downtown park/open space. Qualities ranked highest were relaxing and people watching, landscaped/green space, a place to meet friends, and shade features. The least desired features were playground equipment, water feature and food vendors.

How important are the following activities/features to you in the downtown park/open space?

## Most Important

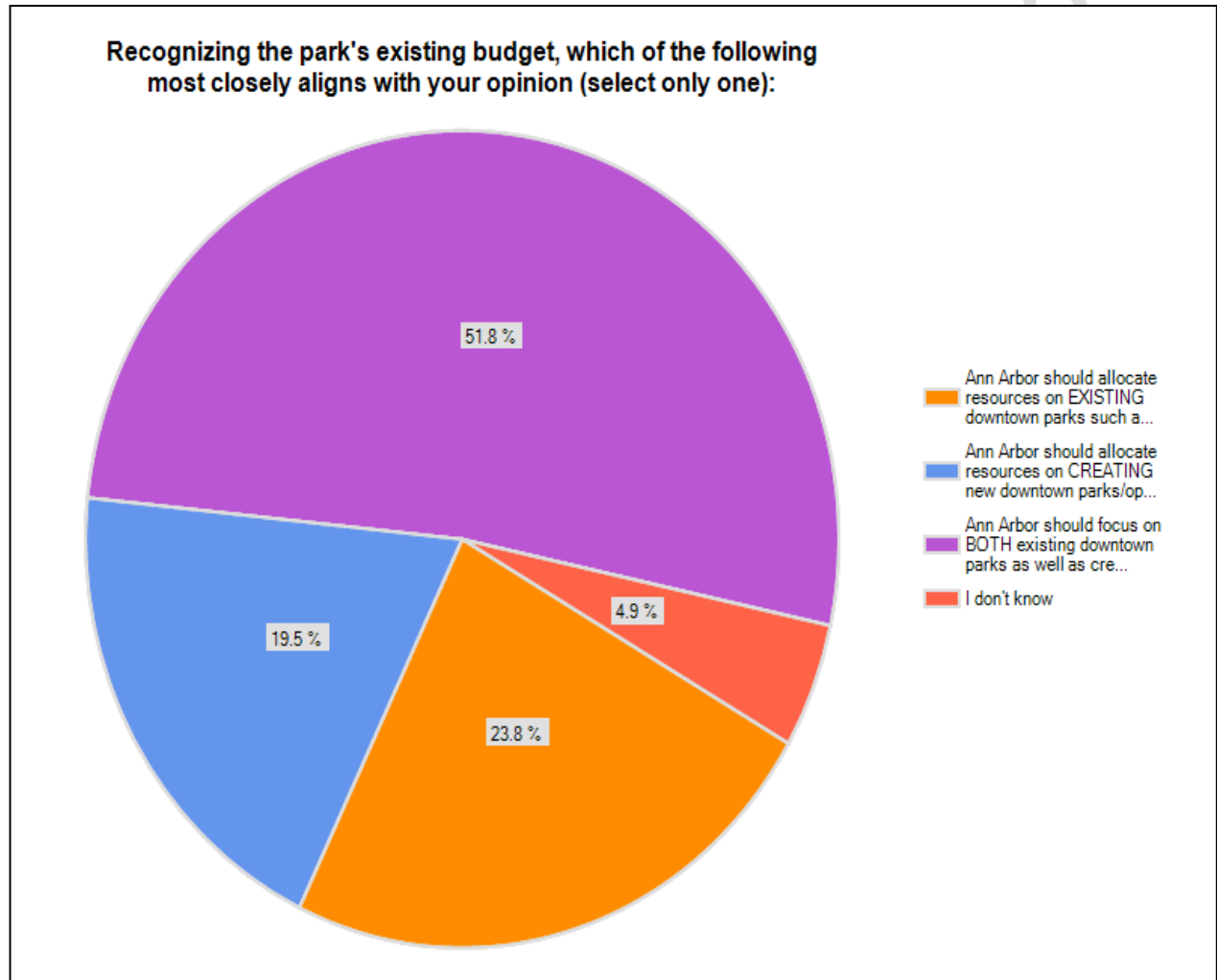
- Shade features (93.8%)
- A place to relax/read/people watch (93.6%)
- Landscaped/green space (92.2%)
- Having a place to meet friends, colleagues, etc. (88.1%)
- Place for community gatherings and social events (75.3%)

## Least Important

- Interactive water feature (74.0%)
- Food vendors (72.5%)
- Playground equipment (73.1%)
- Free wireless internet (67.6%)
- Recreational uses (65.6%)

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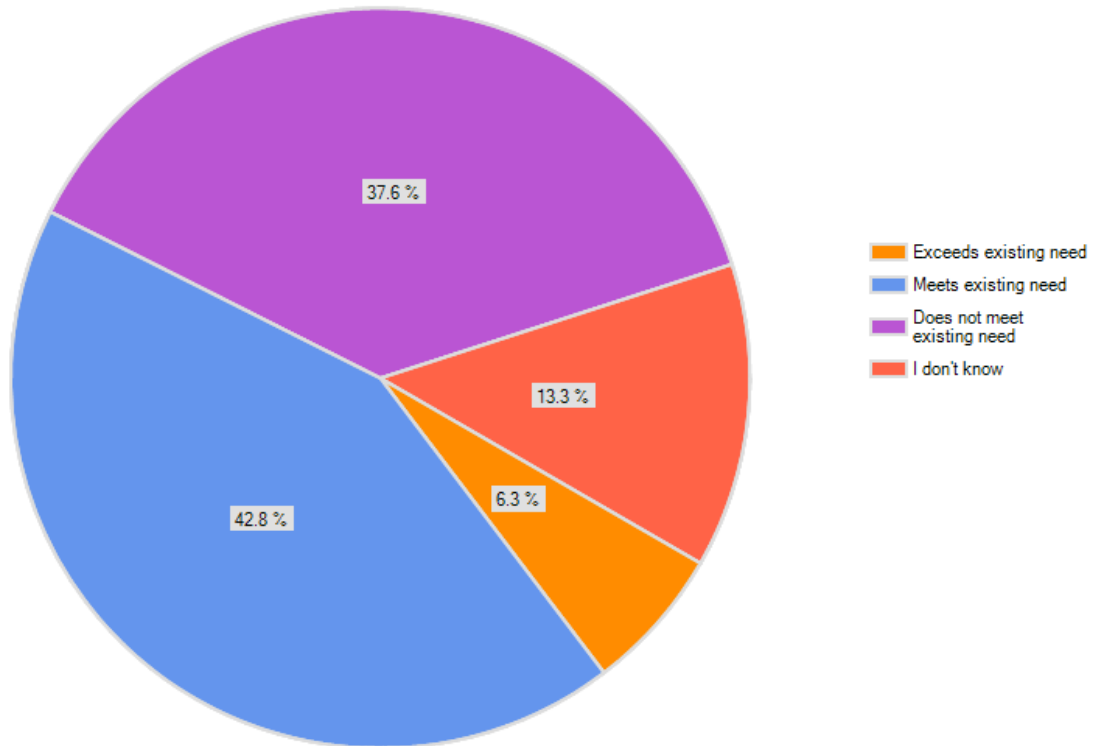
**EXISTING FUNDING** -This question asked respondents to provide an opinion as to where finite budget resources should be allocated. While focusing resources on both existing downtown parks and creation of new parks received the highest percentage, the next highest category was to take care of existing parks.



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**CONVERTED SPACES** - This question looked at how the City utilizes existing streets and other non-park areas for events and festivals, and how well they meet the need for open space. A small majority of respondents felt that this need is met.

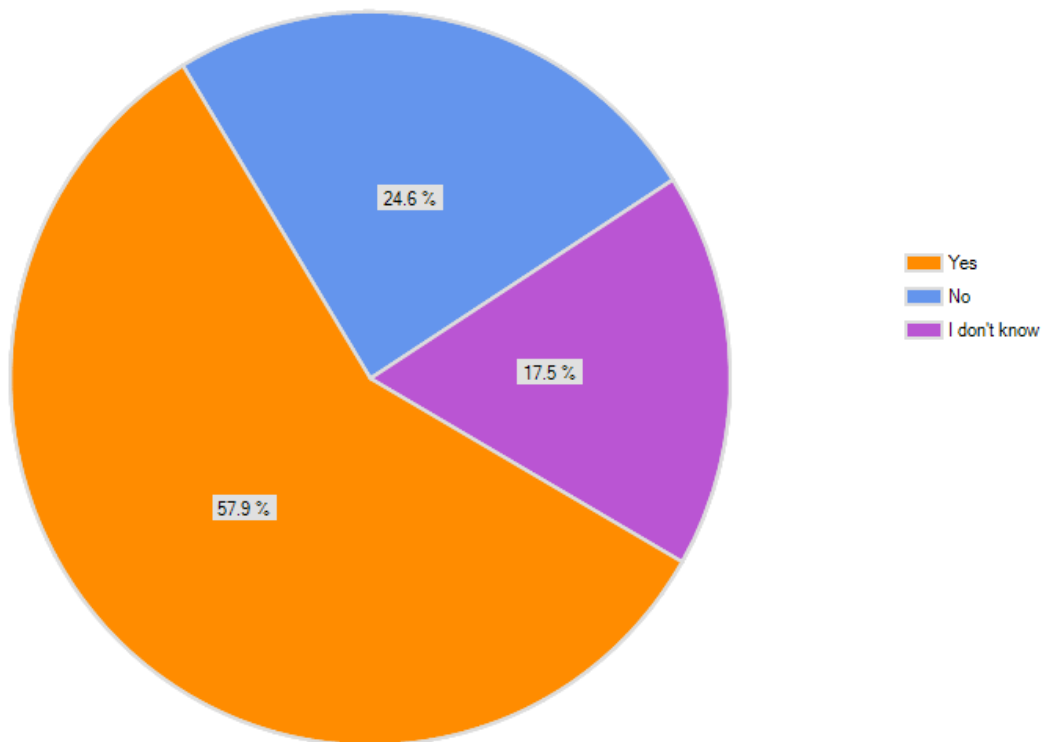
Currently, streets, parking lots, and plazas are converted for more than 50 annual downtown street festivals, fairs, and outdoor programmed events. How well do you think these converted spaces meet the community's need for downtown parks/open spaces?



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**FLEX SPACE** - This question asked about alternatives to permanent parks or open space. The majority of respondents were open to the idea, however, in the open ended responses, input included that these proposals should not substitute for permanent open space, that there needed to be more green space, that periodically closing streets would be desired, and not to displace existing parking.

Another option Ann Arbor is exploring is the use of innovative, flexible downtown park/open space concepts that have been successfully implemented in other communities. Would you be supportive of the City trying new and innovative park/open space concepts? Concepts could include: Parklets (parking space parks), short term parks with reconfigurable space, and movable planters and furniture. (Images below)



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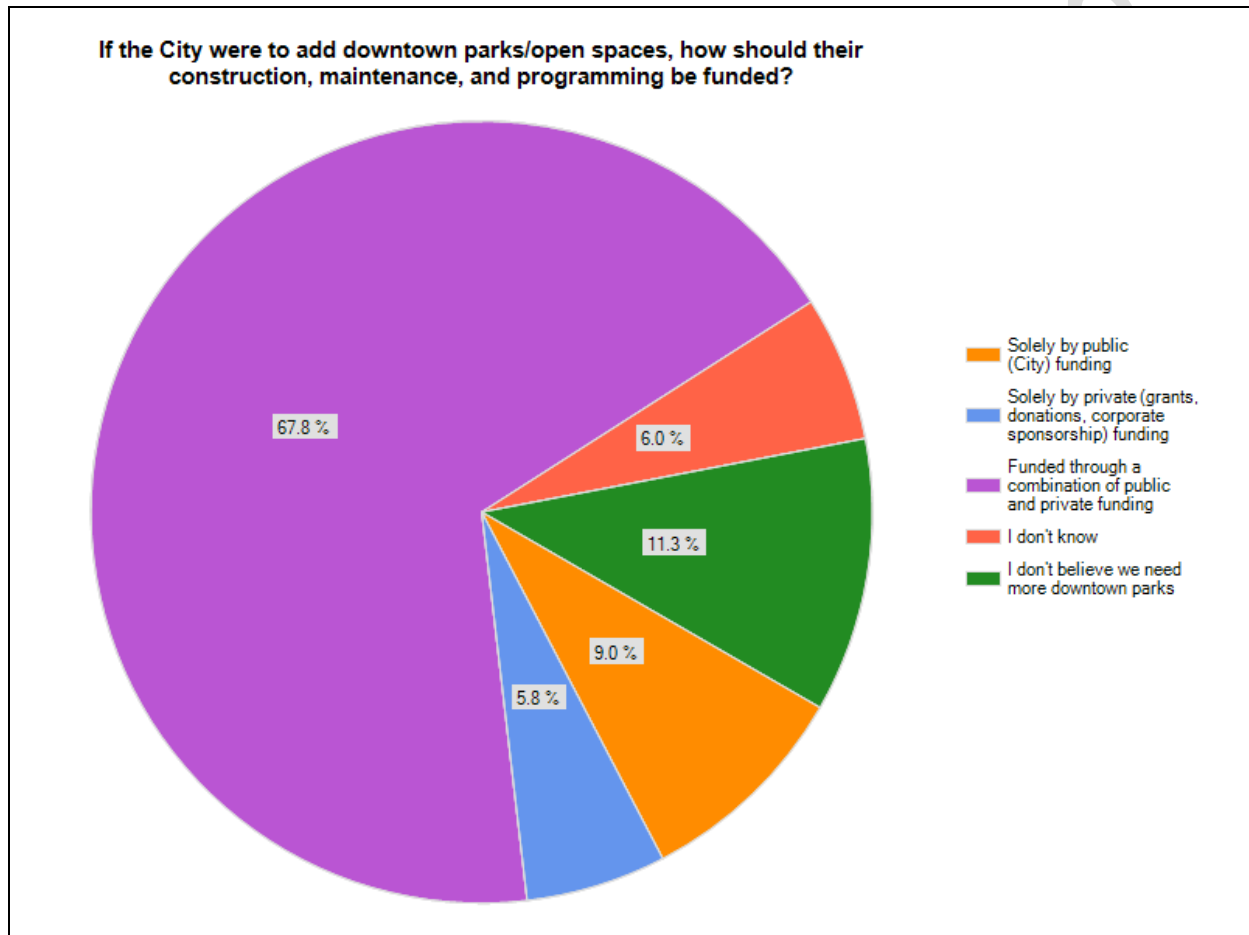
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In response to a question asking about trying innovative ways to use downtown existing space, such as streets and parking lots for flexible space, there were over 200 responses. Some of the major themes that were mentioned included the following:

- Close streets on a regular basis to accommodate not just festivals, but for more frequent pedestrian use.
- Flexible space is a great idea, but some felt that it should not be a substitute for development of a permanent downtown park or open space.
- Green space is important, including grass and trees.

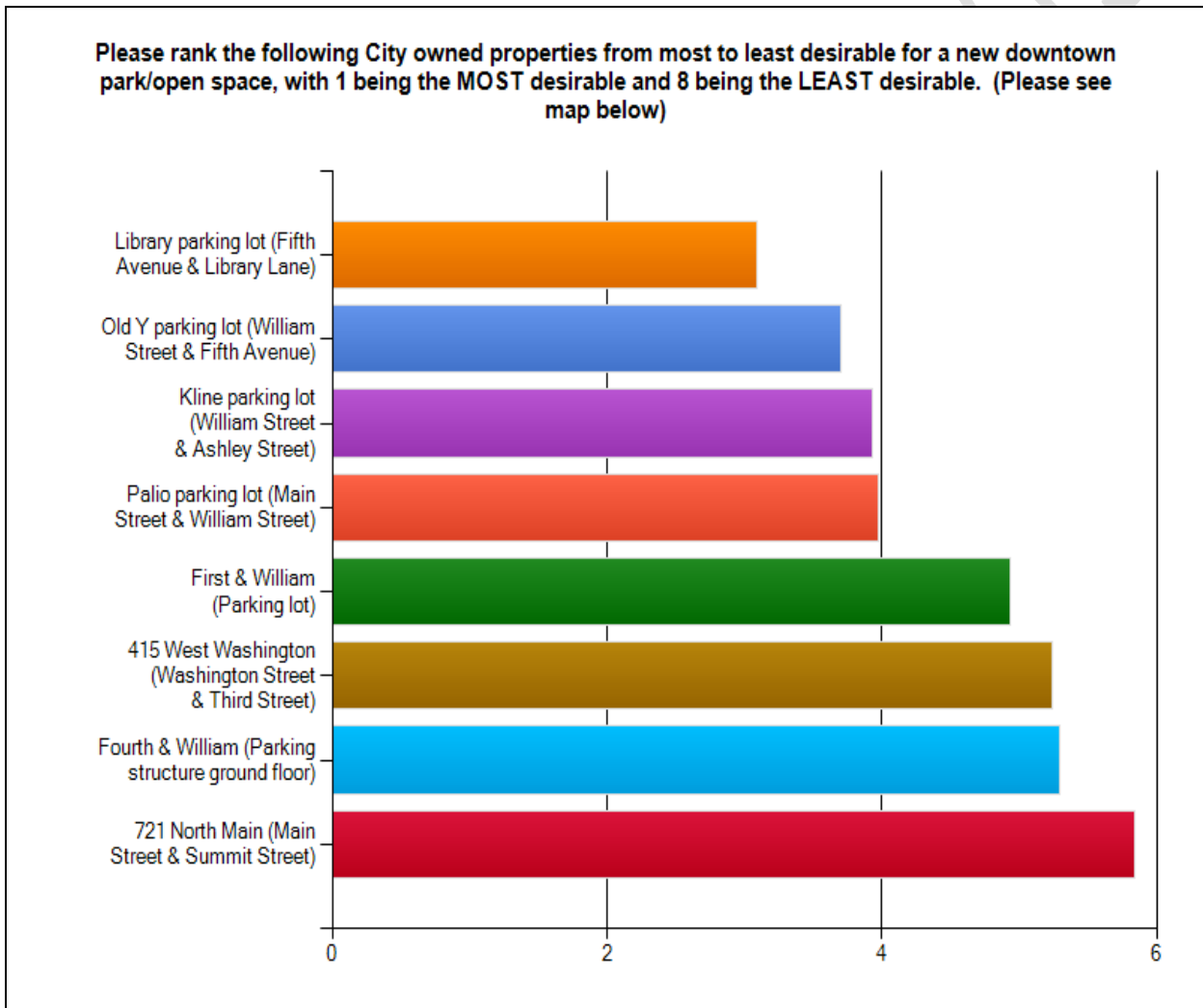
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**FUNDING** - This question asked how additional parks/open spaces should be funded, including initial construction, as well as ongoing maintenance and programming. The vast majority of respondents answered that a combination of public and private funding should be sought.



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**RANKING PROPERTIES** - Respondents were asked to rank City owned properties in or near downtown from most to least desirable for consideration as a park/open space. Using mean scores, the Library parking lot was ranked highest, followed by the Old Y lot and Kline Lot, whereas the greenway properties were ranked least desirable as they were generally not considered to be downtown, although 415 West Washington falls within the DDA district.



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A final open ended question asking for additional ideas or comments was answered by 618 respondents. The verbatim responses to the open ended questions are included as an attachment to this report. However, some frequently mentioned themes included:

- Green space is important, including lawn and trees
- Library lot is a desirable location for new park
- Desire for a large central gathering space
- Concerns about behavior/panhandling/homeless in downtown parks, and that issues currently being experienced in Liberty Plaza will be repeated in other locations
- Concerns about losing parking
- Requests to close some streets on a regular basis throughout the summer months
- Importance of maintaining the current park system, not adding more parks

## Public Meetings

Two public meetings were held, with a total of 22 attendees as well as several PAC members and staff. The meetings were advertised through all of the same avenues as the survey. The meetings began with a PowerPoint presentation that summarized the subcommittees' findings to date, including a summary of survey results. While this is a much smaller sample than the survey response, the public was then asked to provide more specific feedback on the existing downtown parks, the five Connecting William Street properties, 415 W. Washington, 721 N. Main St. and the parking lot on S. First and W. William St. The committee asked what they liked and disliked about the properties, and what types of features and activities they could envision on each site.

Comments about the Connecting Williams sites included thoughts about their location in relation to the central area of downtown, their size in relation to what type of features and activities they would ideally contain, and how immediate surroundings could affect the vibrancy of the space, such as proximity to the library, parking structure, fronts or backs of buildings, and potential for development of green space.

Comments about the existing parks included the desire for more positive, actively programmed space, the need for more shade and green space (Farmers Market and Sculpture Plaza), concerns about security and behavior, especially at Liberty Plaza, the importance of surrounding uses, and how these uses contribute to the success or problems associated with the space.

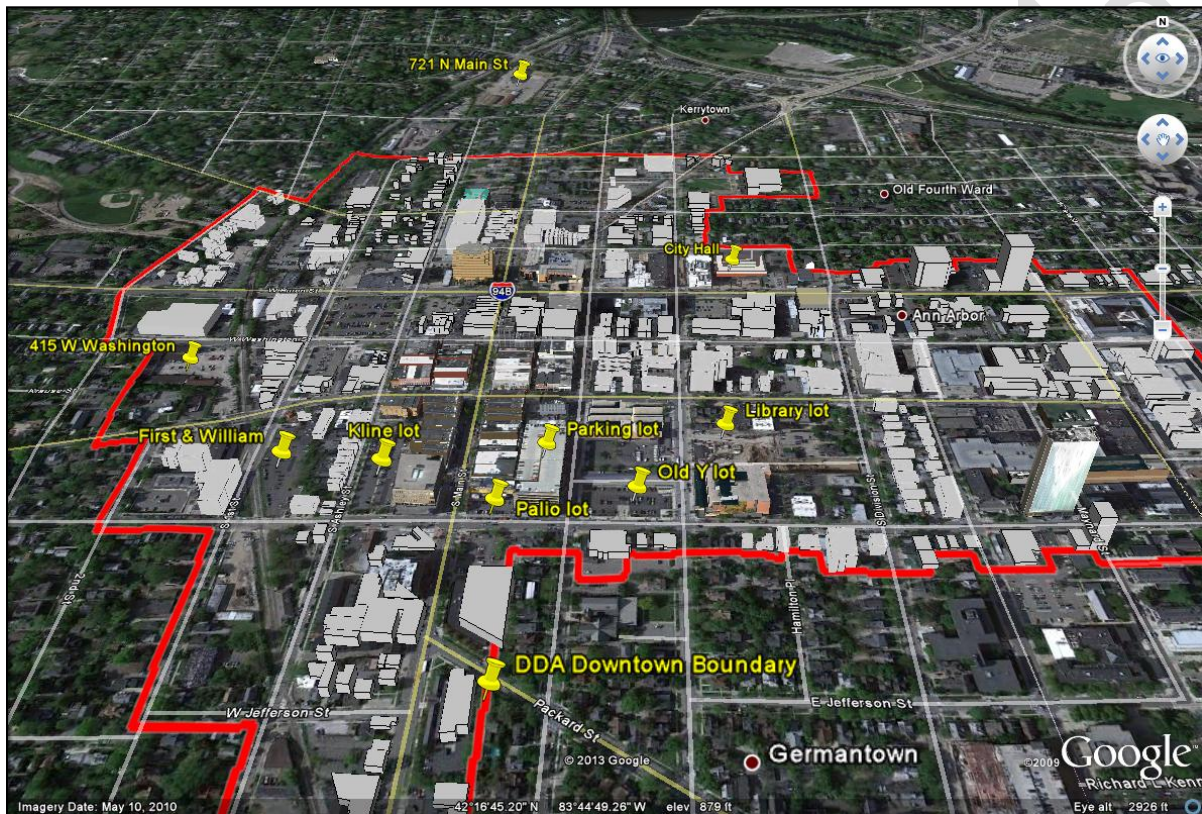
Comments about the greenway properties included that all three were considered to be too far from the downtown to be included in this effort, although there were comments about connectivity, the proximity to neighborhoods and to the river.



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## City-Owned Property Summaries and Recommendations

The following section provides brief descriptions of the City-owned properties considered by the PAC Downtown Parks Subcommittee and staff for potential urban parks and/or open space. The properties are presented from the most to least desirable location (mean score) according to the survey participants. Please see map below of these parcels. This section will outline both opportunities and barriers for successful open space on each of the sites and will conclude with general recommendations.



### The Library Lot

Located between Fifth and Division Streets, the Library Lot is approximately 1.4 acres. The Ann Arbor District Library's Main Branch (AADL) is located immediately south, with the backs of a number of businesses and residences on Liberty Street to the north and Division Street to the east. The Library Lot was designed for a combination of open space and development, with approximately \$15 million of taxpayer funds invested in the infrastructure to support street-level structures. The space also accommodates access ramps to the underground 711-space Library Lane parking structure, as well as an elevator. While not contiguous, this property is in close proximity to both Liberty Plaza and the Kempf House. The Library Lot is currently being used for surface parking, including a number of metered

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spaces lining Library Lane, and the newly constructed public street connecting Division and Fifth Streets just north of the Library.

## *Open Space Opportunities:*

The Library Lot is large in size and has a central location that was ranked highest by survey and public meeting participants alike for potential park space. Community-based groups such as the Library Green Conservancy have consistently advocated for the conversion of this space into a “Central Park”. The Library Lot was designed to create additional flexible space through temporary closures of Library Lane. This feature could facilitate synergistic programming opportunities with the AADL, nearby businesses, and festivals/community gatherings.

The Library Lot was designed to support development. A development that incorporated open public or green space into its design provides an opportunity for activation and eyes on the park. Ideally any development could have street level businesses that spill out into the open space, similar to how piazzas and squares function. An opportunity for public/private partnership exists at this space.

## *Barriers to Open Space:*

Conversion of the entire Library Lot into open space, in particular green space, would require significant and costly structural modifications. Funding such a project would require multiple millions of dollars for both capital and maintenance, as well as the lost investment in existing infrastructure.

Placemaking principles raise a number of concerns regarding the Library Lot site. Currently, the space is poorly activated, facing the backs of buildings on Liberty, William and Division Streets, Fifth Street traffic, and the windowless side of the Library. This lack of eyes on the space raises a number of concerns regarding safety and the promotion of positive behavior. A sizeable park space in this location would require significant financial investment for enhanced security, daily maintenance, and staff dedicated to year-round programming.

## **The Former YMCA Lot (Y Lot)**

Approximately 0.8 acres, the parcel formerly owned by the Ann Arbor YMCA is located between Fourth and Fifth Ave. with the Blake Transit Center to the north and William Street to the south. The Y Lot is currently used as an 86 space surface parking lot, but is listed for sale.

## *Open Space Opportunities:*

Currently configured as a surface parking lot, the Y Lot is unlikely to require relatively costly structural changes to achieve green space (e.g., grass and trees). The central location of the Y Lot was commonly listed as a positive characteristic by public meeting participants and achieved the second-highest mean score for preferred park location in the survey. The Y Lot is of sufficient size to accommodate a variety

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of passive and/or active recreational activities. The Y lot would be quite accessible due to its proximity to the Blake Transit Center and may serve as a logistical way station for travelers.

## *Barriers to Open Space:*

The Y Lot is currently for sale. The City will soon be required to begin payments on a 2003 \$3.5 million loan to purchase the property. Public meeting participants almost uniformly expressed concerns about the aesthetic desirability of park space in such close proximity to congested streets, the 4<sup>th</sup> and William parking structure, and the post-construction Blake Transit Center.

## **The Kline Lot**

The Kline Lot is located at the intersection of William and South Ashley Streets. To the east, the site adjoins the back entrances of a number of Main Street businesses and a service alley. The 1.1 acre property is currently used as a 115-space hourly surface parking lot.

## *Open Space Opportunities:*

The Kline Lot was ranked by survey participants as the third most desirable downtown property for park or open-space development. As a surface lot of significant size, there would be few structural modifications required for green space. The most common vision from both community and expert input, however, was a desire for relatively low-scale development consistent with the character of neighboring South Ashley businesses. The best fit for open space on this property may be a pocket park or connective path that complements future development.

## *Barriers to Open Space:*

The Kline Lot was generally viewed as not sufficiently central for a downtown park. There are also concerns about poor visibility and activation, due to the adjacent alleyway and streets. The Kline Lot is located in close proximity to the First and William property, which has been designated by City Council as an eventual section of the Allen Creek Greenway. Therefore, the perceived need for a large future green space in this section of the downtown is low.

## **The Palio Lot**

Approximately 7,000 square feet (less than ¼ acre), the Palio Lot is the smallest of the five Connecting William Street properties. Located at the southeast corner of Main and William Streets, the site is adjacent to the Fourth and William parking structure to the east and Palio restaurant to the north. The Palio Lot is currently used for metered parking, which can be bagged for event staging on Main Street (e.g., Festifools).

## *Open Space Opportunities:*

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The location of the Palio Lot presents an opportunity to create a gateway open space to the downtown. The current use would allow for green space with minimal structural changes. The site's proximity to Main Street businesses and parking could support and enhance passive recreational activities prioritized by survey participants. The lot's small size could also be dedicated to temporary flexible space.

## *Barriers to Open Space:*

The lot's small size would prevent most active recreational opportunities and not allow for larger community gatherings. Members of the public consistently expressed concern over the lack of space, as well as the site's proximity to congested streets and the Fourth and William parking structure.

## **The Proposed Allen Creek Greenway Properties: First and William, 415 West Washington, and 721 North Main**

On August 4, 2011, the City Council unanimously supported a resolution in favor of dedicating three city-owned properties as "anchor parks" of the future Allen Creek Greenway. While none of these properties were among the five considered under the Connecting William Street study, PAC supported their inclusion in the survey in order to ascertain community priorities for downtown open space and to help PAC consider this initiative in the context of the overall parks system, understanding that resources are limited.

## *Open Space Opportunities:*

The benefits of the Allen Creek Greenway for non-motorized transportation, as well as active and passive recreation, have already been supported by City Council. Unlike the properties included in the Connecting William Street study, large portions of the Greenway properties lie in the floodway, limiting their potential for development. In the last year, two buildings have been removed from the floodway on the 721 North Main property and matching funds have been sought in order to create an anchor park on the site.

## *Barriers to Open Space:*

In terms of downtown open space, the proposed Allen Creek Greenway properties were not viewed as sufficiently central. The Greenway, however, has strong community support and will inevitably compete with other potential parks, as well as enhanced maintenance of existing parks, for limited financial resources. Greenway advocates should consider looking to non-Parks sources of funding for both initial capital and maintenance costs.

## **The Fourth and William Parking Structure**

The Fourth and William 994-space parking structure is among the five City-owned properties in the DDA's Connecting William Street study. The structure was included in the study for potential conversion of street-level parking into commercial space.

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## *Open Space Opportunities:*

The Fourth and William structure could be used for temporary flexible space, as well as a connective non-motorized path. Murals or other design features could be incorporated into the parking structure to complement open space on the Palio or Y lots. Spaces for passive and active recreation have been created on the top of parking structures.

## *Barriers to Open Space:*

The parking structure is clearly not ideal for open space in terms of costs, benefits, or safety. The community has not expressed a desire for open space features on this property.

## **Recommendations**

1. The development of any new downtown park or open space should prioritize community preferences. The most commonly expressed community-based priorities include: a central location; sufficient size for passive recreation/community gatherings; shade; and natural features.
2. New downtown parks and open space should adhere to placemaking principles. Necessary criteria for a successful downtown open space include: high traffic/visibility; flexible programmable space; active use on at least three sides; the ability to provide activities desired by the community; and funding for maintenance and security.
3. Any new downtown park should enliven the downtown, complement existing parks and development, and serve the community desire for a central gathering space.
4. Any additional downtown park space should not come at the expense of the quality or maintenance of Ann Arbor's existing parks. Downtowns parks are expected to be more costly to develop and maintain. Further, existing downtown parks are not currently utilized to their potential. Given the limits of current parks funding, the development of new parks should not be approved without an identified funding source for capital development, ongoing maintenance, and programming.
5. Significant capital/structural improvements to Liberty Plaza should only be made in concert with the adjacent property owner. Short-term efforts should continue to focus on smaller-scale incremental changes (removal of shrubbery) and programming opportunities (fee waiver). Future improvements should also work to create a permanent and highly visible connection between the Library Lot and Liberty Plaza.
6. The downtown could benefit from the addition of small "pocket" parks and flexible spaces. The City should work with potential developers of City-owned properties to identify opportunities, create, and maintain privately funded, but publically accessible open spaces. (e.g., the Y and Kline lots). As a part of this effort, staff should develop recommendations for how development contributions can better serve to provide and improve downtown passive recreational

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opportunities, including proposals such as flex space (parklets), streetscape improvements, and public art.

7. The public process for downtown parks and open space does not end with these recommendations. Any additional park/open space would require robust public input regarding the design, features, and proposed activities.
8. Based on the aforementioned criteria, the Downtown Parks Subcommittee recommends that a park/open space be developed on the Library Lot that takes advantage of the flexibility offered through temporary closures of Library Lane. The size of this space should exceed the proposed allocated open space in the Connecting William Street study (5,000 square feet). However, the subcommittee is strongly in favor of a mixed-use vision for the Library Lot that utilizes the City's investment in development-ready foundation and infrastructure. Development of the site and adjacent parcels, including the accompanying increases in activity, is essential for the future success of this site. In order to adequately address issues of safety and security, the Ann Arbor District Library must also be strongly represented in the planning process.