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Networks of Opportunity: Public Engagement Survey Results

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Networks of Opportunity:

Public Engagement Survey Results



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Contents

Introduction3

 Electronic Survey4

Public Engagement Findings4

 Interview Findings4

 Electronic Survey Findings5

About This Report.....5

Q1: Which Neighborhoods in the City of Chicopee Are You Familiar with?6

Q2: Please Provide Your Association with the Chicopee Schools7

Q3: How Safe do you feel it is for Children to Ride their Bike to School in the City of Chicopee?8

 Selected quotations from data:8

Q4: Which Streets Could Be Better Designed for Students Walking or Bicycling to School?9

 Selected quotations from data9

Q5: What of the Following Issues do You Believe Affects Parents Decisions to Allow or Not Allow Their Children to Walk to and from Schools in Chicopee?.....10

Q6: Do you Have Any Thoughts or Suggestions about What Would Make Streets that Lead to Schools Safer?11

 Selected quotations from data:11

Q7: How Might Enhanced Walkability Affect Student’s Ability to Report to School Regularly and in a Timely Manner?12

 Selected quotations from data:12

Q8: Which Streets Are Made Less Accessible By Snow Build-Up for Students Walking to School During the Winter?13

 Selected quotations from data:13

Major Findings14

Introduction

The Project for Public Spaces notes, “People who use a public space are the ones who know, from experience, which areas are dangerous and why, which spaces are comfortable, where traffic moves too quickly and how certain aspects of a space could be improved” (2011, p. 13). Therefore, public engagement was a core part of our project.

As previously stated, one major objective of this project is to propose safer paths to school for students. This objective stems from the fact that no bus services are provided to children who live within 1 mile of an elementary school, 1.5 miles of a middle school, and 2 miles of a high school. Since Pacer Planning could not gain students’ input for ethical reasons, target stakeholders that can act as proxies for the student population are the City’s Parent Teacher Organizations (PTOs), public safety officials, and school administration officials. In a similar vein, the target population includes students’ parents. Gaining these individuals’ input on where problem areas exist would provide invaluable insight when formulating our recommendations.

Methodology

To reach both our target stakeholders (namely school administration officials) *and* our target population (namely parents of school-aged children), Pacer Planning determined that a two-pronged public engagement strategy would be most effective. To reach our target stakeholders, we conducted in-person and phone interviews with school administration officials at several of Chicopee’s public schools. The survey and interview period ran from October 11, 2016 to November 18, 2016.

In-Person and Phone Interview

Throughout the six-week public engagement period, Pacer Planning held 7 total interviews with school administration officials in Chicopee. These interviews were with 4 principals, 2 vice principals, and a representative from the City Engineer’s office. In each of these interviews, Pacer Planning asked interviewees the following 5 prompts:

1. How safe is it for children to walk to school in the City?
2. What types of infrastructural or design changes would make streets leading to schools safer?

3. Which specific streets could be better designed for student walkers?
4. How would enhanced walkability affect students' ability to report to school regularly and in a timely manner?
5. Which streets are made less accessible by snow build-up, storage, and icy conditions for students walking to school during the months?

After each interview, Pacer Planning transcribed interviewees' responses to these prompts.

Electronic Survey

Additionally, Pacer Planning distributed an electronic survey using the Google Forms platform to our target population of parents of school children in Chicopee entitled the "Chicopee Student Walker Safety Survey." We received 106 responses to our survey over the study period. In addition to containing the same five open-ended questions we used for the interviews (listed above), the electronic survey asked respondents a series of background questions related to which of the City's schools they were familiar with, as well as a question asking them to select the factors that were involved in their decision to allow or not allow their child to walk to school. The full survey questionnaire can be found in the Appendix.

The electronic format of the survey allowed for greater access to the public. Additionally, the survey contained an option for participants to provide their email for future contact. To ensure that survey respondents are kept informed of this report's overall findings, Pacer Planning committed to sending personal invitations to all interviewees and survey respondents to our final presentation, held on December 15, 2016 at Chicopee High School, via email.

Public Engagement Findings **Interview Findings**

Pacer Planning received a great deal of feedback during the interview process. Overall, although many school administration officials stated they had experienced no major incidents related to pedestrian safety, there was a significant amount of enthusiasm for the conversation surrounding safer paths to schools for student walkers and bicyclists. We believe that this enthusiasm stems from the finding that most

students in Chicopee do not currently walk to school, but would if there were safer walking conditions.

Pacer Planning notes specific findings related to each school in Chapters 7, 8, and 9, which outline each of the sectors of Chicopee. Each of these chapters includes a public engagement subheading. In these sections, we highlight quotes from interviewees related to areas of concern and suggestions for improving the walkability of these areas.

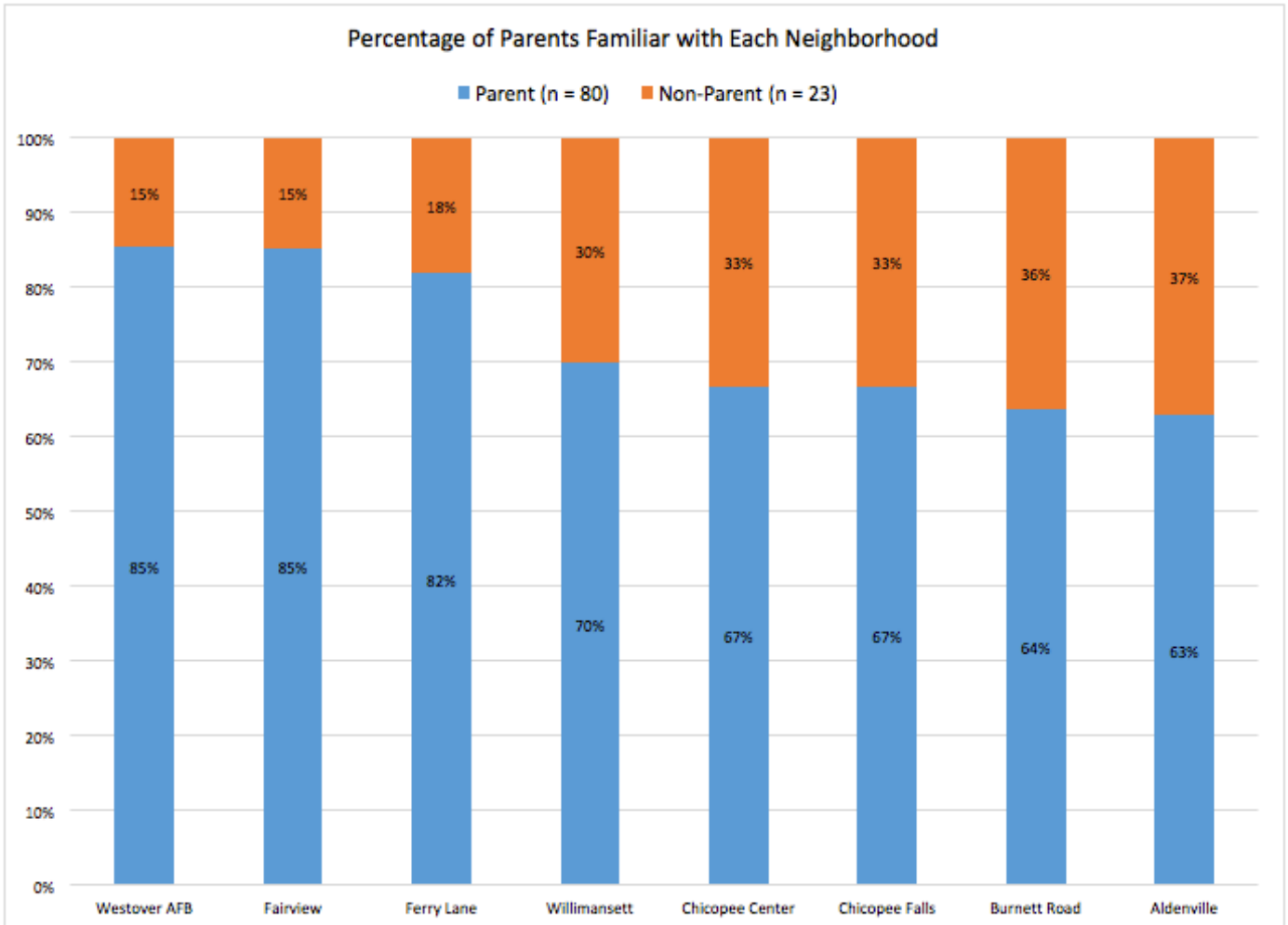
Electronic Survey Findings

Major Electronic Survey findings will be listed at the end of this report.

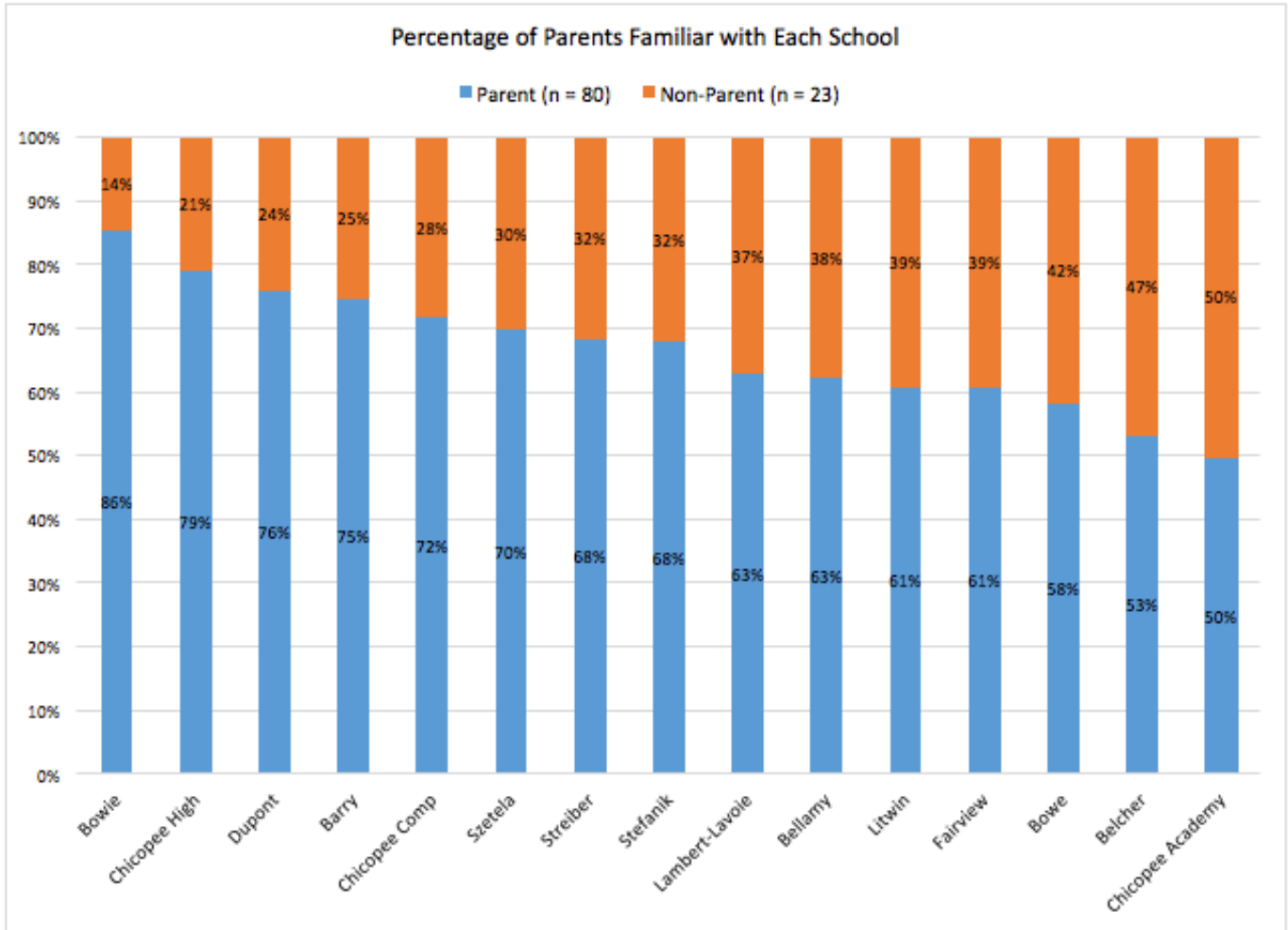
About This Report

This report acts as the final culmination of data assessment from the Student Walker Survey, distributed by Pacer Planning. Data from the multiple choice survey questions are represented in the bar graphs below, seen in Questions 1, 2, and 5. These questions were designed to allow Pacer Planning assess demographic and geographic variance between respondents. The other data is derived from the surveys open-ended responses, visually represented in word clouds (from the Jason Davies online generator) which display words with the highest frequency. The excerpts below the word clouds were selected at random to offer a greater sense of clarity and context.

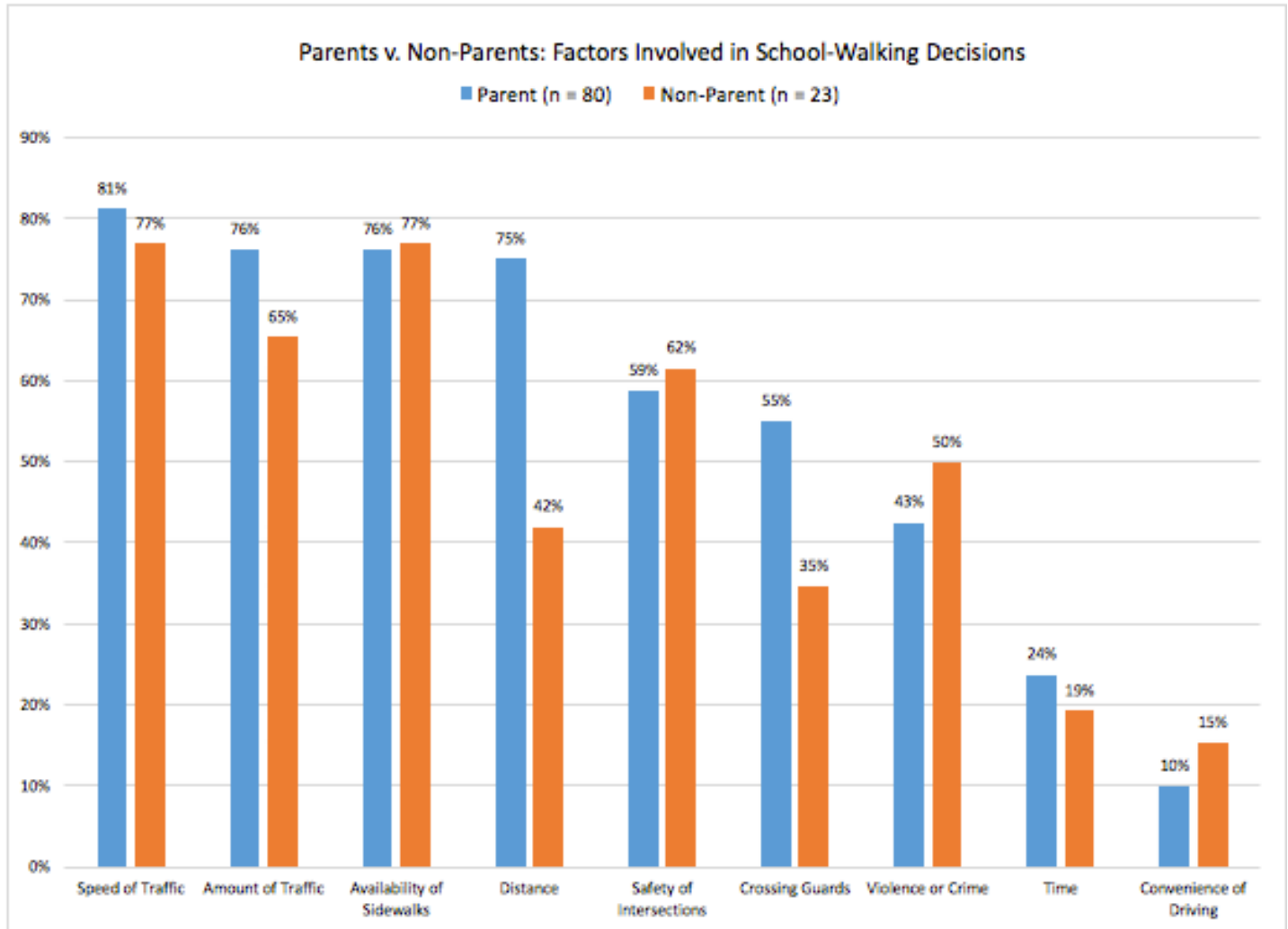
Q1: Which Neighborhoods in the City of Chicopee Are You Familiar with?



Q2: Please Provide Your Association with the Chicopee Schools



Q5: What of the Following Issues do You Believe Affects Parents Decisions to Allow or Not Allow Their Children to Walk to and from Schools in Chicopee?



Major Findings

The execution of this survey offered a glimpse into public sentiment of Chicopee parents regarding the safety of their children, on their school commutes. The additional insight from non-parents further cemented the need for non-vehicular travel accommodations throughout the city. The strongly opinionated survey results, not only justified the City-Wide Bike and Pedestrian Path proposed by Pacer Planning, but it also allowed for a greater understanding of how Chicopee residents (predominately parents) vision the future of their city.

Results from the Survey's multiple choice questions, represented in the bar graphs, were purely demographic - thus allowing for Pacer Planning to assess who the respondents were and where they were coming from within the city. Question 1 provided a geographic framework from respondents. Though there was no major variation between each respective group, we see that most parents are coming from the Westover AFB and Fairview neighborhoods, while non-parents are mostly representing the Aldenville and Burnett Road neighborhoods. Such geographic variations suggests there are commutes for both parties to get to and from schools, as most of Chicopee's schools are populated in the Fairview and Aldenville neighborhoods, as well as the South Sector of Chicopee. For Question 2, we see that most of the parents are familiar with the Bowie and Chicopee High schools while non-parents are more familiar with the Belcher and Chicopee Academy schools, with much variation in between. As there are a lot of schools within the city's jurisdiction, the variation is not surprising as many of the respondents mentioned they have children within the schools, work at the schools, and even went to many of the schools as well. Lastly, Question 5 offers more detailed insight into the pressing concerns that support or hinder student abilities to walk or bike to school. These results show us that parents and non-parents alike host genuine concern for the well-being of students, listing Speed of Traffic, Amount of Traffic, and Sidewalk Availability as their major concerns. More variety is displayed in questions regarding distance and crossing guards, which makes sense because non-parents might not be concerned about such matters since they have no school-aged children. From this question we also see that Time or Convenience are not pressing factors for either group,

reflecting the city's comfortable attitude and reliance towards the automobile.

While the multiple choice questions allowed us to assess the demographic variables of the Survey respondents, the open ended questions, represented in word cloud formation, allowed for more feeling-based and thought provoking responses. The responses offered in Question 3 offered minimal variation in responses, as most answers shared a very similar sentiment: the city is not safe for students to walk or bike to school. While some response were brief in nature, others offered vivid testimonies and suggestions for improvement. A lot of specific street names and schools were mentioned in the responses, offering potential areas of prioritization for the City. The subsequent question (4) contributed further insight on streets that could use prioritized attention. While streets all throughout Chicopee were mentioned with valid supporting arguments, the most frequently represented streets were: Burnett Road, Granby Road, Memorial Drive, Grattan Street, and Pendleton Ave.

To support the other questions, Question 6 gave respondents the opportunity to explicit list suggestions to enhance the school commuter experience. Many of the responses suggested physical redesign, some as major as inserting new sidewalks and crosswalks while others considered smaller features like increased signage and parking restrictions. Many suggested that the increased presence of crossing guards and better lighting would create safer environments for children and parents alike. Question 7 has the lowest response rate of all of the questions, which may be due to the usage of the term walkability - as some respondents stated they simply did not know what the term meant. Such confusion allowed for great variation between the few responses; some respondents placed the responsibility of getting students on time on the caretakers, while others expressed that due to the given conditions of the city infrastructure there is no way they would let their students walk as it is too far and unsafe. Aligned with the nature of the question, the most frequent words were variations of no (represented on the word cloud as "nope") immediately followed by "yes." A response with greater clarity might have been offered with different terminology used in the question. The final question was designed to assess sentiments related to non-automobile travel in the wintertime. While a great number of respondents were in opposition, most suggesting they would much rather drive their kid to school, they too offered lively and clear

suggestions as to how to remedy the inaccessibility for travel in the winter. Many requested greater enforcement for snow removal by the City, thus allowing for more visibility and a decrease in icy road conditions.

Overall, the notable response rate of the Student Walker Survey demonstrated the willingness of Chicopee's public to participate in the visioning of a a greater city. The results were critical and hopeful, displaying a need for change for the betterment of both Chicopee's current population and the generations to come.