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CONVERTING VACANT LOTS TO PARKS: SHAMOKIN SURVEY RESULTS



For Shamokin Community
Gardens and Pocket Parks

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Introduction

The City of Shamokin and Shamokin-based organizations are actively engaged in a range of projects and initiatives that both spur community engagement and further revitalization efforts. Two such examples are the continued improvements to Claude Kehler Community Park and the newly opened Illumination Station on Independence Street. The Shamokin Community Gardens and Pocket Parks group, formed in 2020, is one group that captures the growing community interest in increasing green space and parks within the City.

The need for green space is important, as such assets provide an outlet for residents to rest, increase social interactions among community members, and reduce stress. Not only do parks improve the well-being of the general community, but they also aid the landscape by incorporating plants and other types of biodiversity that enhances the environment. One way to include these spaces is through the reclamation of vacant lots.

Shamokin has numerous abandoned lots and buildings, but a notable one lies on Sunbury Street. The current property stands as a small garden with picnic tables and a few raised beds for planting. Shamokin Community Gardens is working to improve the space as well as other vacant lots and convert them into neighborhood assets, with community input. These spaces are underutilized and offer potential for revitalization. By reclaiming these lots, the City can turn them into beneficial spaces for the entire community to enjoy.

Through community outreach and engagement, it is possible to design neighborhood parks that can become a neighborhood asset for all to enjoy. Building on this momentum, a survey was conducted to begin the process of understanding community preferences with amenities and design for a number of potential neighborhood park locations in the City, as well as conducting an interactive community feedback approach. The results show that there is community interest in developing lots as neighborhood assets, and that families with young children and households without children do have different preferences as to design and amenities.

What do you think is the most important issue that needs to be addressed in Shamokin?

"Cleaning up the city. Adding the parks just makes those vacant spots look so much better."

Community Survey

A survey was conducted in order to understand how residents view Shamokin generally, and what amenities specifically they'd like to see in a neighborhood park. The survey results in this report represent responses from February 1st, 2023 to May 5th, 2023. It was distributed through social media and community fliers yielding a total of 91 respondents. Of the respondents, ~20 did not ascribe a particular residential neighborhood. However, according to their length of residency, it's assumed that they do live in the City and were marked as such. The majority of respondents have lived in Shamokin and Coal Township more than 15 years, with a fairly even distribution between households with and without children living at home (see Table 1). The majority of respondents were women (65%), and the majority were also 45 years or older (53%).

Table 1: Household Demographics

Length of Residency: Shamokin and Coal Township	
Less than 15 years	37%
More than 15 years	63%
Length of Residency: Neighboring areas	
Less than 15 years	41%
More than 15 years	59%
Children	
No children living at home	55%
Children living at home	45%
Household Size	
3 or fewer people within the household	64%
4+ people within the household	36%

Interactive Community Feedback

At the Rebuilding Our Community Picnic, held on July 16, 2023, additional community input was gathered. This event was a follow up to the February 2023 Rebuilding Our Community Reconvening, a workshop where over 125 residents set priorities for neighborhood revitalization, and where the survey was originally launched. A summary of the survey data was shared and attendees were invited to provide feedback on amenity and plant options, as well as preferences on two potential designs for the Sunbury Street park. This effort yielded an additional 10 respondents.

What's the best part about living in a small city like Shamokin?

"The rich history, culture and close knit community."

"The overall friendliness as well as the walkability."

"It's a small community that tries hard. We take pride in our home and we help each other."

Perceptions of Shamokin

More than half of the Shamokin residents who responded (53%) are proud to live in Shamokin. Respondents who do not live in the city reported lower levels of pride than actual residents. However, across all respondents 65% are hopeful about Shamokin's future. Similarly, 64% of respondents from Shamokin feel connected to their fellow residents. With the implementation of a park, this figure could increase; this reveals a disconnect that a new park could address. Across all respondents, a majority are concerned about environmental issues within the city (79%). See Table 2 for a summary of responses about perceptions of Shamokin.

Table 2: Perceptions of Shamokin

Percentage of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with these aspects of Shamokin	Shamokin residents	Coal Township residents	Neighboring area residents	All respondents
Total number of respondents	n = 45	n = 27	n = 19	n = 91
I am proud to live in Shamokin	53%	37%	11%	40%
I am hopeful about Shamokin's future	64%	78%	47%	65%
I feel connected with other Shamokin residents	64%	41%	53%	55%
I am concerned about environmental issues in Shamokin	78%	81%	79%	79%

Preferred Park Amenities

Among the responses to amenity options within a proposed park, respondents had a range of views. To start, the majority of respondents agreed that they would like to see benches (93%) and walkways (91%) (see Figure 1). Participants of the interactive community feedback strategy noted that they would like to see artwork and a mural.

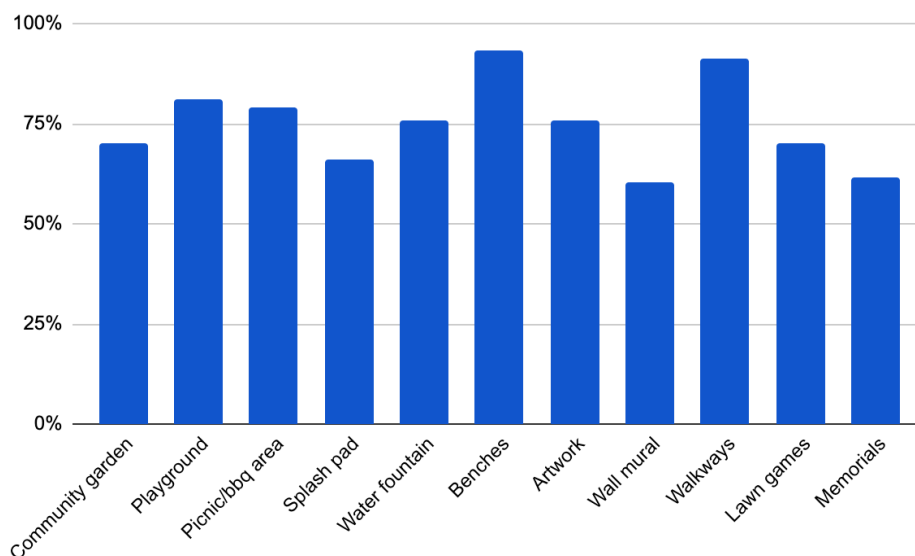


Figure 1: Preferred Amenity Options

Participants rated their preferred amenity options on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). This figure shows the percent of respondents who answered 4 or 5 to the listed options.

Differences in responses became apparent when asked about amenities targeted to children. Of the responses, 66% agreed that they would like to see a splash pad and 70% are in favor of lawn games. The findings show that families with children are more likely to value the splash pad, playground, lawn games, and a wall mural (see Figure 2). Among the participants of the interactive community outreach strategy, multiple respondents valued having a splash pad, although one commented that it might be better placed elsewhere, like near the community pool.

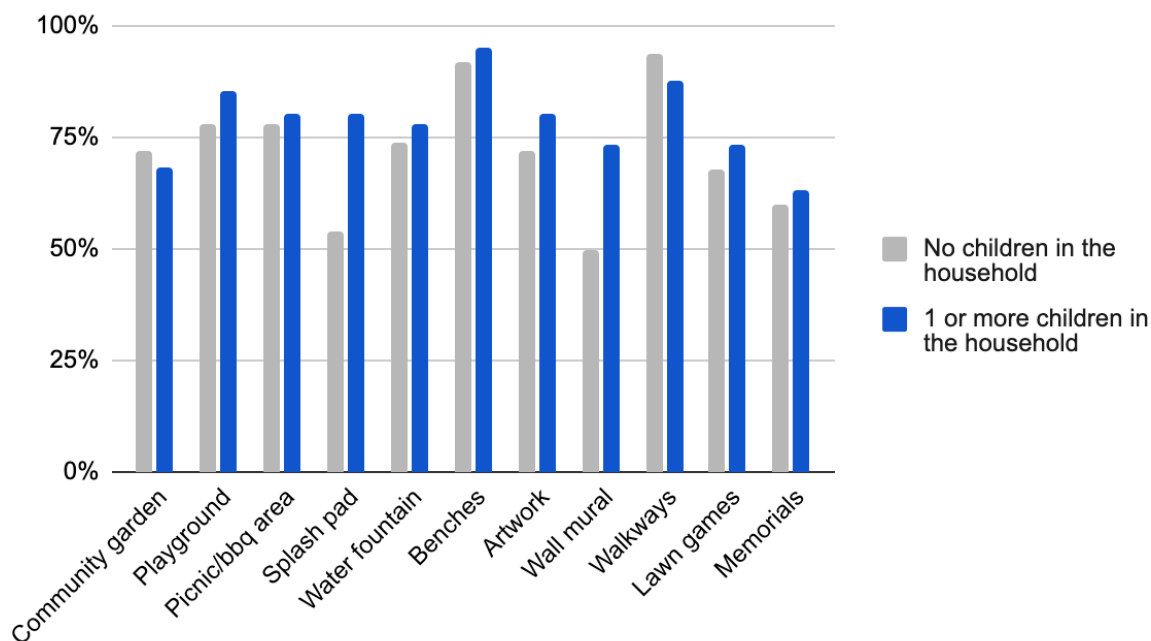


Figure 2: Differences between households with and without children. Participants rated their preferred amenity options on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). This figure shows the percent of respondents with and without children at home who answered 4 or 5 to the listed options.

Preferred Plants and Greenery

With regard to plant options, 92% preferred shade trees, and 92% were in favor of flowers. The participants of the interactive community feedback strategy shared similar views, as shade trees and flowers were the highest rated plant option among them. Within the survey, native plants (88%) and shade plants (90%) were also ranked high. Such results indicate that respondents are partial to both aesthetic and ecological considerations. Bushes and hedges, which could be used to create visual barriers and privacy, were least preferred (See Figure 3). During the interactive feedback, one particular respondent wrote that they'd like to see an area for vegetables and fruits that the community can take.

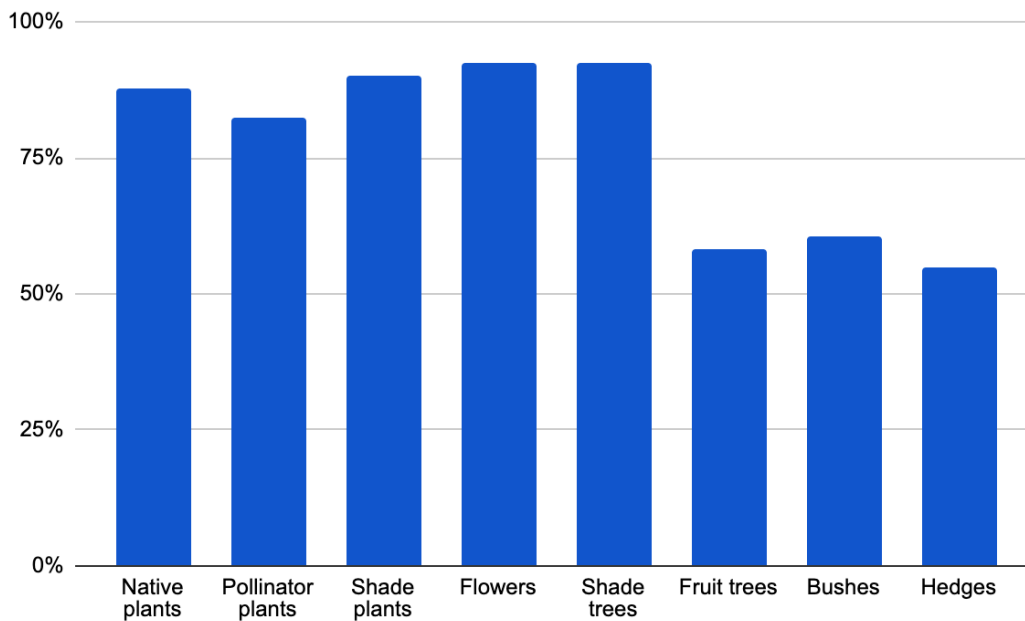


Figure 3: Preferred Plant Options

Participants rated their preferred plant options on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). This figure shows the percent of respondents who answered 4 or 5 to the listed options.

Demand for Parks and Projected Use

The results of the survey show a strong demand for parks and revitalization, as 81% noted that the inclusion of these spaces would benefit Shamokin. When asked about vacant lots, an additional 85% of respondents noted that revitalization of these spaces would benefit the overall community. Around 76% agreed that they would like more places to gather as a community, showing that the inclusion of a park would not go unnoticed by community members. No matter whether they're residents of Shamokin or from neighboring towns, it appears there's a consistency in responses across the board. See Table 3.

Table 3: Revitalization Efforts

Percentage of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with these aspects of Shamokin	Shamokin residents	Coal Township residents	Neighboring area residents	All respondents
Total number of respondents	n = 45	n = 27	n = 19	n = 91
I am satisfied with the current efforts to repurpose vacant buildings and lots	31%	26%	42%	32%
Revitalization and use of vacant buildings or lots benefits the overall community	82%	93%	79%	85%
I would like to have more places to gather as a community	76%	74%	79%	76%
Having more parks would benefit Shamokin	76%	89%	84%	81%

Frequency of Park Visits

Concerning whether or not the incorporation of parks will spur use, the results suggest that it will. More than half of all respondents (54%) noted that they will use the park daily or at least once a week with another 25% using it bi-weekly. Even those living in surrounding towns would use it rather frequently, with 56% of respondents from Coal Township willing to visit 1-2 times per week, and all residents from other towns reporting they would visit at least once a month or more. These results show that the proposed park would be welcomed by the greater population, and would be sufficiently used by them as well. See Table 4 for a summary on the frequency of park visits .

Table 4: Visitor Frequency

Frequency of park visits among respondents	Shamokin residents	Coal Township residents	Neighboring area residents	All respondents
Total number of respondents	n = 45	n = 27	n = 19	n = 91
Rarely	9%	7%	0%	7%
1-2 times/month	13%	15%	16%	14%
Bi-weekly	20%	22%	42%	25%
1-2 times/week	44%	56%	37%	46%
Daily	13%	0%	5%	8%

The Process of Design

Using an online garden planning tool Gardena, iterative designs were collaboratively created with Shamokin Community Gardens and Pocket Parks members to show ways in which the inclusion of a pocket park in place of the vacant lot on Sunbury Street could better fit the community. See figures 4 and 5 for an (aerial) scope of the designs. The proposed design includes three tiers: the first tier will serve as the entrance and a seating area containing an arbor for the entryway, a pergola, benches, plants, and bike rack. The second tier is a community garden, fit with multiple planter boxes and two rain barrels. The third tier is for more seating, incorporating more benches, and the gardening shed that's already placed. Through this process, the designs can be crafted to incorporate the amenities people are most interested in. Stressing this importance of community input, participants of the interactive community feedback strategy favored design 2 (Figure 5).



Figure 4: Design 1



Figure 5: Design 2

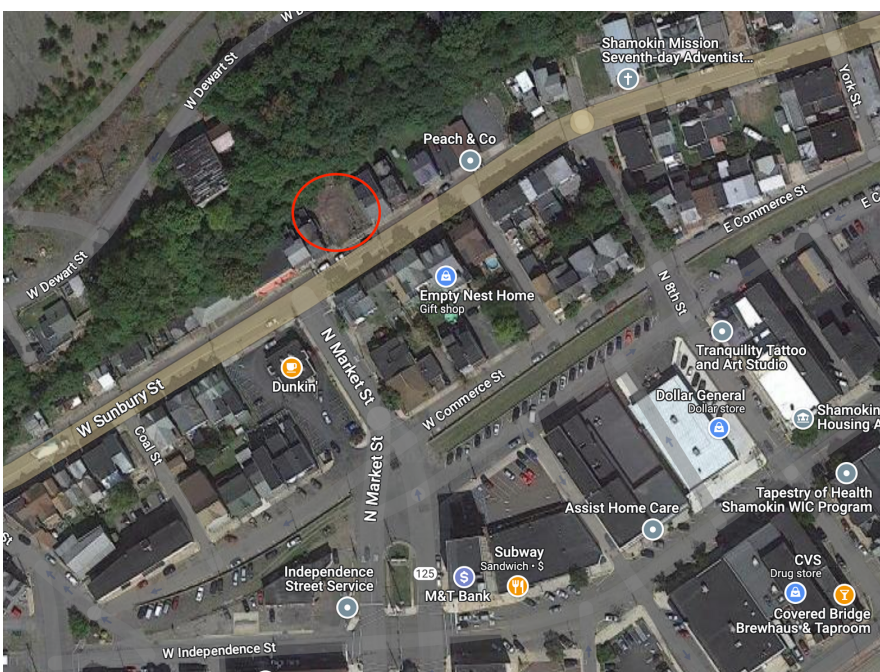
The Future of Parks in Shamokin

Shamokin's existing park network can be enhanced by converting vacant lots into neighborhood assets. One of the most visible is the Sunbury Street lot near the intersection of Route 61 and Market Street. Yet, there are other locations where this can be done. Table 5 shows other possible places where similar actions can be taken. Not only would people like to see a park on Sunbury Street (73%), but other notable locations are Our Lady of Hope Church (76%) and the 5th Ward (70%).

In the open response section associated with this question, respondents noted other locations that they would like to see future pocket parks. These included 2nd Street, 5th Street, Independence Street, and in the Ferndale area. During the interactive community feedback strategy session, one participant noted that Sunbury Street has potential, but is not an ideal location for a community park. They suggested efforts should also focus on beautifying the entrances to Shamokin with plants, trees, and other forms of shrubbery.

Table 5: Potential Park Locales

Percentage of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with wanting to see parks in these locations	Shamokin residents	Coal Township residents	Neighboring area residents	All respondents
Total number of respondents	n = 45	n = 27	n = 19	n = 91
Sunbury Street	64%	74%	89%	73%
5th Ward	67%	67%	84%	70%
Academy Hill	56%	74%	63%	63%
Bunker Hill	67%	81%	63%	70%
Our Lady of Hope Church	69%	93%	68%	76%



Location of the Sunbury Street lot, as highlighted by the red circle.

Open Response

In the various open response sections, respondents had a lot to say. When asked about their thoughts on the most important issue needing to be addressed in Shamokin, many brought up the need for revitalization and wanting things to do, as well as welcoming new businesses. Multiple respondents noted that they would like more police coverage in response to issues with crime, drugs, and blight. When asked to share the best thing about Shamokin, most respondents said that they love the sense of community and the close-knit feel. There's a sense that residents generally look out for one another. In the general comments and concerns section, the responses noted above circulated, but there were a great amount of respondents who expressed their eagerness in seeing positive changes throughout Shamokin associated with the incorporation of pocket parks.



Sunbury Street Park in development. Raised beds available for planting installed in 2021, and picnic tables added in 2023. Photo Credit: Shamokin Community Gardens Facebook page, April 2023.

"I just want to see better positive things in the area."

"I'd love to see my hometown put back to its once beautiful glory."

"Happy to see residents opinions are being asked and there is an effort to start cleaning the city."

Key Findings

Overall, this summary of survey results regarding the conversion of vacant lots into pocket parks clearly shows the need for more green space within the City of Shamokin, and that the incorporation of pocket parks would be well received by its residents. The key findings of this summary include:

- More than half of Shamokin residents are proud to live in Shamokin (53%), with even more feeling connected to their neighbors (64%). Respondents valued having more places to gather as a community (76%). Neighborhood parks provide this while also increasing connectedness.
- A majority of respondents (85%) would like to see vacant lots repurposed
- A majority of respondents (76%) would like to see more parks in Shamokin
- The findings show differences in the needs of amenity options for families with young children compared to residents who live alone and/or don't have younger children
- In regard to plants, respondents would prefer to see native plants, flowers, and shade trees over other plants like fruit trees and bushes