

# PLANNING IN AMERICA: PERCEPTIONS AND PRIORITIES

A Research Summary  
June 2012



**American Planning Association**

*Making Great Communities Happen*

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# CONTENTS

<b>LIST OF GRAPHICS .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>1.0 BACKGROUND, METHODOLOGY, AND OBJECTIVES.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2.0 EXECUTIVE OVERVIEW .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>3.0 KEY FINDINGS.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>4.0 KEY STATISTICS.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>5.0 DETAILED FINDINGS.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Finding 1:</b> Less than one-third believe their communities are doing enough to address the economic situation.....	9
<b>Finding 2:</b> Very few Americans believe that market forces alone will improve the economy and encourage job growth.....	9
<b>Finding 3:</b> 84 percent feel that their community is getting worse or is staying the same .....	11
<b>Finding 4:</b> Community planning is seen as needed by a wide majority of all demographics.....	13
<b>Finding 5:</b> Key features of an "ideal community" include locally owned businesses and the ability to stay in their homes while growing older .....	16
<b>Finding 6:</b> Top priorities for local planning efforts and local funding priorities are closely aligned around a basic agenda: jobs, safety, schools, neighborhoods, and clean water .....	17
<b>Finding 7:</b> Half of all Americans would like to be involved in community planning in the future .....	19
<b>Finding 8:</b> 85 percent of Americans do not know enough to hold an opinion about United Nations Agenda 21.....	22

## LIST OF GRAPHICS

<b>Chart 1:</b> Addressing the Economic Situation.....	9
<b>Chart 2:</b> Market Forces .....	10
<b>Chart 3:</b> Living in Your Community Compared with Five Years Ago .....	11
<b>Chart 4:</b> Could Your Community Benefit from Planning as Defined? .....	13
<b>Chart 5:</b> Is Planning Needed in Your Community? .....	14
<b>Chart 6:</b> Best Types of Leaders to Understand and Implement Change .....	15
<b>Chart 7:</b> Participating in Local Planning Efforts .....	19
<b>Chart 8:</b> View of Planning — Positive or Negative .....	20
<b>Chart 9:</b> Things Work Better with a Plan.....	21
<b>Chart 10:</b> Support for United Nations Agenda 21 .....	22
 <b>Table 1:</b> Statements on Market Forces (by sub-segment) .....	 10
<b>Table 2:</b> Community Is Worse than Five Years Ago (by sub-segment).....	12
<b>Table 3:</b> Is Planning Needed in Your Community? (by sub-segment) .....	14
<b>Table 4:</b> Factors in an Ideal Community (High Priority).....	16
<b>Table 5:</b> Priorities for Local Planning Efforts.....	17
<b>Table 6:</b> Priorities for Local Government Funding .....	18
<b>Table 7:</b> Desire to Participate in Local Planning Efforts (by sub-segment).....	19
<b>Table 8:</b> View of Planning — Positive or Negative (by sub-segment) .....	20
<b>Table 9:</b> Things Work Better with a Plan (by sub-segment) .....	21
<b>Table 10:</b> Support for United Nations Agenda 21 (by sub-segment) .....	22

## 1.0 BACKGROUND, METHODOLOGY, AND OBJECTIVES

Two opposing trends have emerged in the planning field in recent years: significant new support and investment in sustainable community planning grants by the federal government, driven by strong local interest and demand for good planning, and a large counteroffensive with well-funded, highly orchestrated campaigns against planning from small but highly vocal groups, especially centered among new "tea party" activists.

As these trends have played out, local government budget cuts and the drying up of private investment dollars because of the economic crisis have required planning departments to make tough fiscal tradeoffs in terms of staffing and project selection.

Against this complex financial and political backdrop, the American Planning Association and its more than 40,000 professional members commissioned a research study to objectively determine what the general public wants from community planning and what perceptions exist. The research was designed to allow the planning community to measure support for planning across the full range of diverse demographic segments and to understand more deeply the priorities that Americans have for their communities.

Research for this poll was conducted in the spring of 2012. Collective Strength, an Austin-based firm specializing in outreach and communications, designed the questionnaire and performed the analytics. Harris Interactive, one of the world's foremost survey research firms, reviewed the questionnaire to ensure objectivity and fielded the study during the month of March 2012.

The actual survey was conducted online within the United States by Harris between March 8-12, 2012, among 1,308 U.S. residents aged 18 years or older. The respondents for the APA poll were recruited from a Harris Interactive Online panel, one of the oldest and most credible general public panels in the world. Respondents were selected to match the 2010 U.S. Census Bureau demographic estimates of the American general public in terms of age, income, race, ethnicity, and geography. In addition, low-income, African American, and Hispanic demographic segments were over-sampled to ensure sufficient inclusion in the survey's overall (raw) and weighted results. Thirteen hundred (1,300) completed interviews is a generally acceptable number for a statistically valid sample size of the U.S. population.

### **More Information**

For more information about the research presented in this summary and the study methodology, contact Collective Strength at [robin@collectivestrength.com](mailto:robin@collectivestrength.com) or APA at [govtaffairs@planning.org](mailto:govtaffairs@planning.org).

## 2.0 EXECUTIVE OVERVIEW

### Planning "essential" to economic recovery.

Community planning is widely supported in America. The word *planning* has a positive connotation, and the feeling that "things work better with a plan" is a nearly universal personal experience. Community planning is perceived as an "essential" part of economic recovery by a large majority of every demographic group.

Just 11 percent of Americans feel things have gotten better for most people during the past five years in their communities. Most do not feel that enough planning for economic growth is happening in their local communities and do not believe that "market forces" alone will lift the economic situation out of crisis. Two-thirds of Americans — across political affiliations and size of community — believe their community needs more planning to restore and sustain prosperity. Americans see their neighbors, business leaders, and community planners as the most likely players to be able to lead the necessary efforts to rebuild the economy and improve communities.

More than 50 percent want to personally be involved in community planning efforts, including more than half of Democrats, Republicans, and independents as well as majorities of urban, suburban, and rural respondents.

Access to local independent businesses, being able to age in their own neighborhoods, more options that do not require cars, and energy-efficient homes are high priority features for more than half of Americans when asked about their "ideal" community.

When asked what they want planners to work on, a common set of themes emerged that include: jobs, education, safety, neighborhood protection, and clean water. These issues are aligned with local funding priorities given tight fiscal resources and generally corresponding with national priorities.

Given the clear priorities Americans have for planners, and the belief that the economy will not improve with market forces alone, this research indicates that significant opportunity exists for planners to continue gaining strong support for their work.

## 3.0 KEY FINDINGS

**Finding 1:** Less than one-third of Americans believe their communities are doing enough to address the country's economic situation.

**Finding 2:** Very few Americans believe that market forces alone will improve the economy and encourage job growth.

**Finding 3:** 84 percent feel that, compared with five years ago, their community is getting worse or is staying the same.

**Finding 4:** Community planning is seen as needed by a wide majority of all demographics.

**Finding 5:** Key features of an "ideal community" include locally owned businesses and the ability to stay in their homes (age in place) while growing older.

**Finding 6:** Top priorities for local planning efforts and local funding priorities are closely aligned around a basic agenda: jobs, safety, schools, neighborhoods, and clean water.

**Finding 7:** Half of all Americans would like to be involved in community planning in the future.

**Finding 8:** Most Americans (85%) do not know enough to hold an opinion about United Nations Agenda 21; 6% oppose it and 9% support it.

## 4.0 KEY STATISTICS

- Almost 50% say living in their community is worse for most people now than it was five years ago; 11% say it is better. The rest believe it is "the same."
- 14% believe that market forces alone, without community planning, will help the economy and create more jobs; 66% believe it takes both.
- 67% believe that "community planning is important to economic recovery."
- Community planning, as defined in this report, is supported by 79% of the general public.
- 66% of Americans believe their own community needs more planning. This finding holds true for 65% of Republicans and 67% of independent voters, 75% of Democrats, and near the 60% or above level across those in urban, suburban, and rural areas and in small towns.
- More than 50% of Americans want to participate in community planning efforts, including majorities of nearly all of the demographic sub-segments.
- 75% agree with the statement, "Engaging citizens through local planning is essential to rebuilding local economies, creating jobs and improving people's lives."
- Job creation (70%), safety (69%), schools (67%), neighborhood protection (64%), and water quality (62%) are the highest ranked priorities for community planners to work on.
- Given limited local fiscal resources, Americans give high priority (more than 60%) to funding the following services: Education, job creation, clean water, safety, economic development, and health.
- 52% support the use of taxes to pay for implementation of planning while 20% are opposed.
- 85% of Americans don't know enough about Agenda 21 to have an opinion about it.
- The word "planning" has a positive meaning to 72% of Americans, and 92% believe that, in their experience, "things work better with a plan."



## 5.0 DETAILED FINDINGS

### FINDING 1

**Less than one-third believe their communities are doing enough to address the economic situation.**

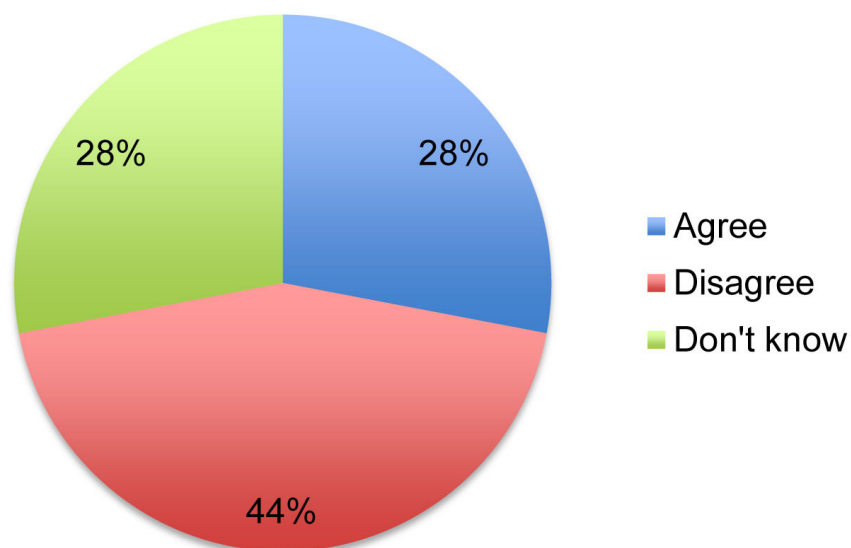
### FINDING 2

**Very few Americans believe that market forces alone will improve the economy and encourage job growth.**

### QUESTION

***Agree or Disagree: My community is doing enough to address the economic situation.***

Chart 1: Addressing the Economic Situation



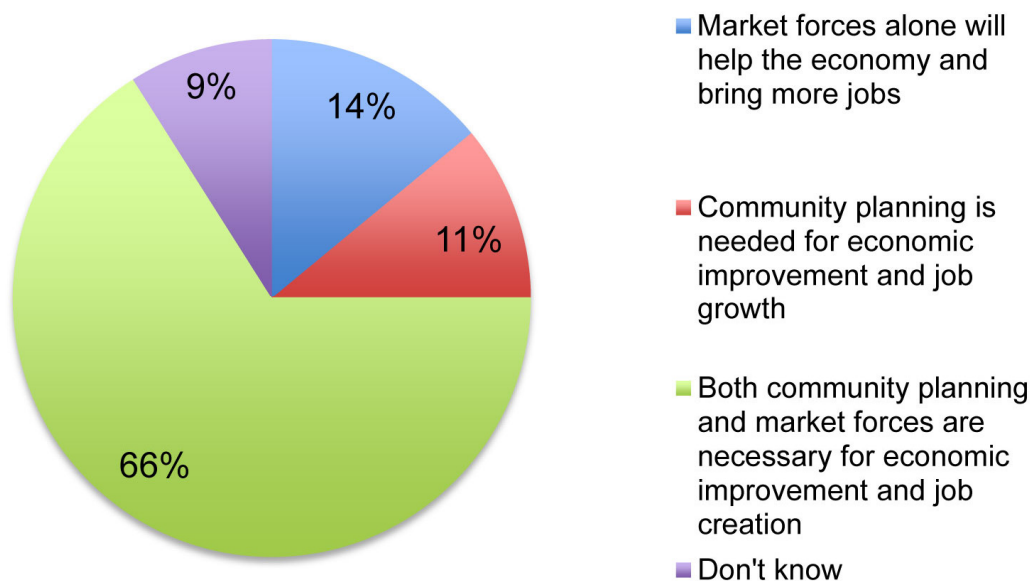
Responses to this question are among the most consistent in the study across all key demographic segments.

Americans appear not to believe that market forces will lift the economy and have a strong sense that the market will require community planning to move forward. An overwhelming 70 percent of the public either do not think their communities are doing enough or cannot tell.

**QUESTION**

*Some people believe that community planning is a necessary part of improving the U.S. economy and encouraging job growth, while others believe that "market forces" alone will help the economy and bring more jobs. Which of the following statements comes closest to your belief?*

Chart 2: Market Forces

**Table 1: Statements on Market Forces (by sub-segment)**

SEGMENT	SUB-SEGMENT	% MARKET FORCES ALONE ENOUGH
Political Affiliation	Democrat	6%
	Republican	22%
	Independent	14%
Race/Ethnicity	White	15%
	African American	8%
	Hispanic	15%
Type of Community	Urban	13%
	Suburban	14%
	Rural	23%
	Small Town	9%

**FINDING 3****84 percent feel that their community is getting worse or is staying the same.**

To understand views on planning in America, it is important to understand whether the public feels their own community is heading in a positive or negative direction. In order to gauge the "emotional tone" of the general public, we asked whether community living was getting better or not.

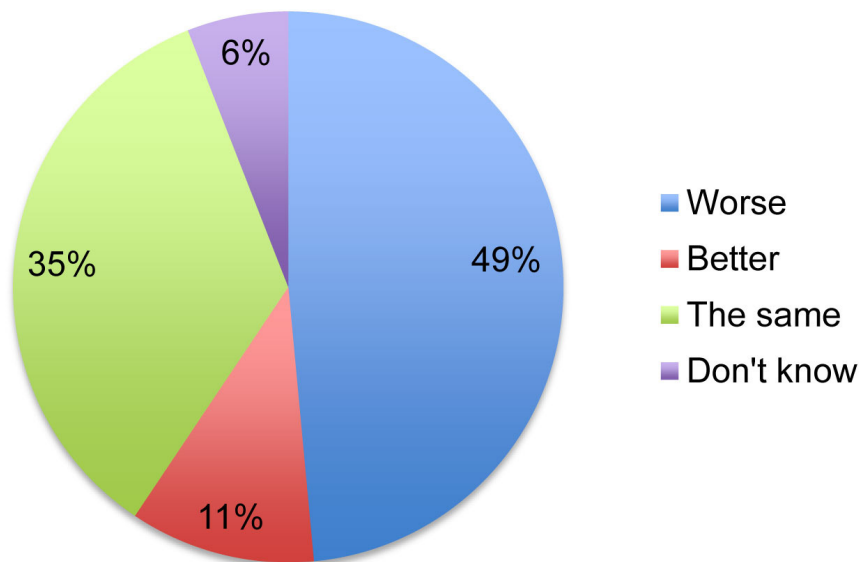
Eighty-four percent say it is not getting better, with almost half saying it is getting worse and the remainder feeling it is staying the same. This level of stagnation may be contributing to the strong sense that community planning is needed.

Significant differences exist between various sub-segments on this question. Republicans, rural and small town respondents, whites, and older respondents were more likely to select a "worse" response, while urban dwellers, Democrats, and young adults were less likely.

**QUESTION**

***Compared to five years ago, is living in your community generally better for most people, worse for most people, or about the same as it was five years ago?***

Chart 3: Living in Your Community Compared with Five Years Ago



**Table 2. Community Is Worse than Five Years Ago (by sub-segment)**

SEGMENT	SUB-SEGMENT	% WORSE
Political Affiliation	Democrat	34%
	Republican	61%
	Independent	45%
Race/Ethnicity	White	54%
	African American	32%
	Hispanic	39%
Type of Community	Urban	40%
	Suburban	45%
	Rural	58%
	Small Town	68%

**FINDING 4****Community planning is seen as needed by a wide majority of all demographics.**

Perhaps because of the economic uncertainty and lack of community progress noted above, a wide majority of respondents across the demographic spectrum feel that planning is needed and beneficial and do not believe that leaving things alone is the best course of action.

Unprompted, many respondents say they define planning as simply "looking ahead."

The survey asked respondents to read an APA-provided definition of community planning and to say whether or not they felt it would benefit their community. A second question asked specifically if their community would be better left alone or whether planning was needed.

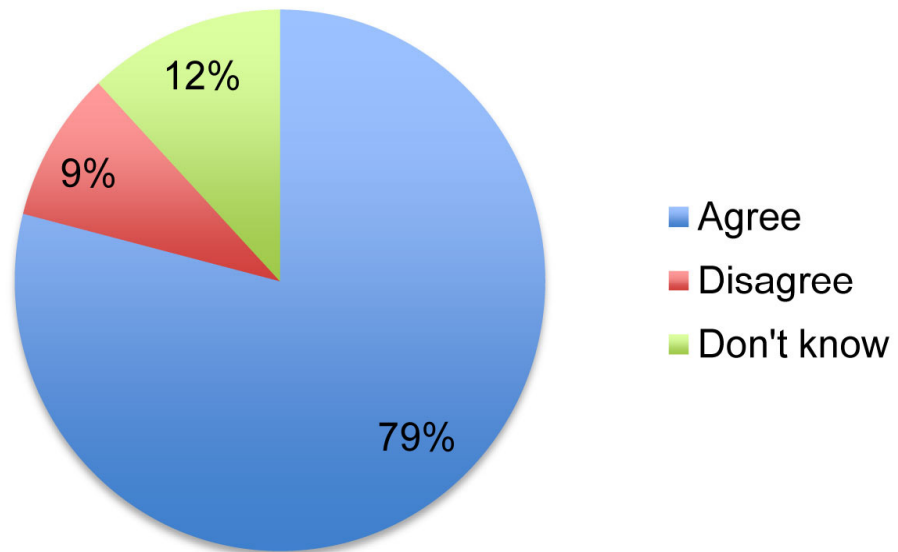
**Definition of Planning**

"Community planning is a process that seeks to engage all members of a community to create more prosperous, convenient, equitable, healthy and attractive places for present and future generations."

**QUESTION**

***Generally, do you agree or disagree that your community could benefit from a community plan as defined above?***

Chart 4: Could Your Community Benefit from Planning as Defined?

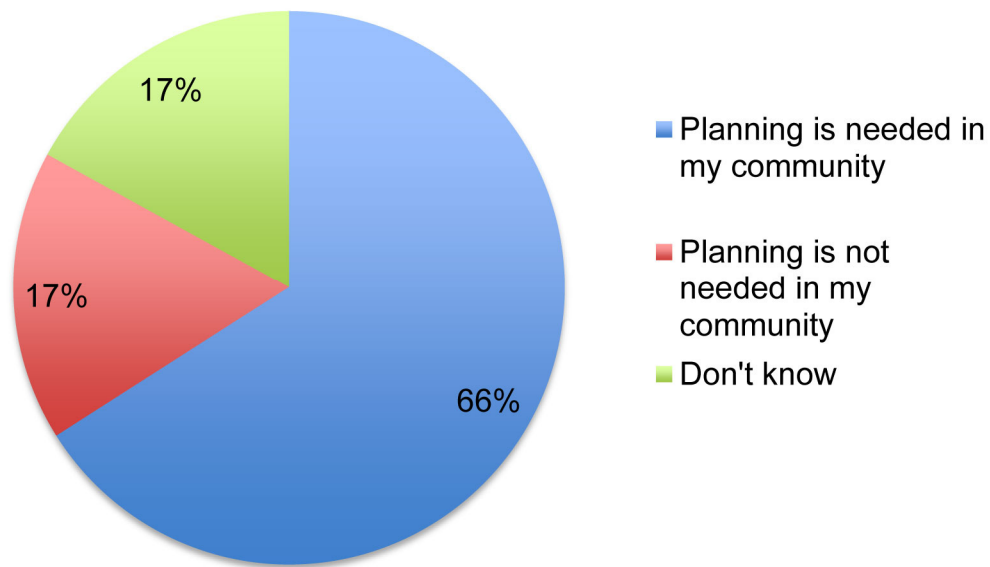


88% of Democrats, 77% of Republicans, and 81% of independents agree that their communities could benefit from community plans.

**QUESTION**

*Some people believe their community needs planning, while others believe it should be left alone. Which comes closest to your belief?*

Chart 5: Is Planning Needed in Your Community?



**Table 3: Is Planning Needed in Your Community? (by sub-segment)**

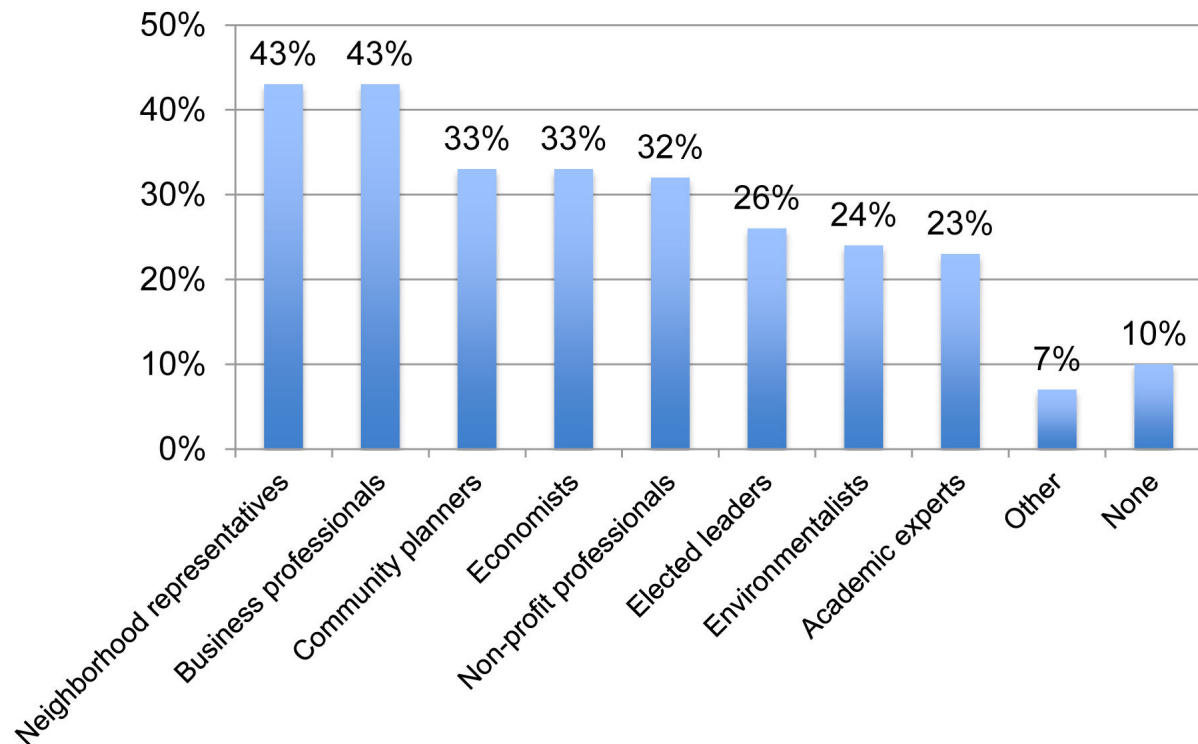
SEGMENT	SUB-SEGMENT	% PLANNING IS NEEDED
Political Affiliation	Democrat	75%
	Republican	65%
	Independent	67%
Race/Ethnicity	White	66%
	African American	69%
	Hispanic	67%
Type of Community	Urban	73%
	Suburban	65%
	Rural	59%
	Small Town	67%

Seventy-seven percent of those surveyed agree with the statement: "Communities that plan for the future are stronger and more resilient than those that don't."

## QUESTION

***Which of the following types of leaders do you think are best able to understand and implement changes that will make the next five years better than the last five in your community? (Please select all that apply.)***

Chart 6: Best Types of Leaders to Understand and Implement Change



**FINDING 5**

**Key features of an "ideal community" include locally owned businesses and the ability to stay in their homes while growing older.**

In order to provide a more specific vision for community, researchers asked respondents to think about their "ideal" community and identify features that are important to them. Six features emerged as the highest priority:

- Locally owned businesses nearby
- Aging in place
- Sidewalks
- Energy-efficient homes
- Transit
- Neighborhood parks

**QUESTION**

***Now please think about an "ideal community" for you to live in and tell us whether each of the following would be a high, medium, or low priority for you.***

<b>Table 4: Factors in an Ideal Community (High Priority)</b>	
FACTORS IN AN IDEAL COMMUNITY	% HIGH PRIORITY
Locally owned businesses nearby	55%
Being able to stay in the same neighborhood while aging	54%
Availability of sidewalks	53%
Energy-efficient homes	52%
Availability of transit	50%
Neighborhood parks	49%
Mix of housing price ranges	43%
A place that attracts young professionals to live	42%
A place with lots of things for kids to do	41%
Mix of housing choices	41%
Schools within walking distance	37%
Jobs within walking distance	33%
Unique character and/or culture	32%
Restaurants within walking distance	31%
Availability of bike lanes	25%
A place with lots of young children	17%
Houses being generally the same size	6%



**FINDING 6**

**Top priorities for local planning efforts and local funding priorities are closely aligned around a basic agenda: jobs, safety, schools, neighborhoods, and clean water.**

In addition to their ideal vision, the research probed respondents to prioritize the issues they want planners to spend time on. Top priorities include a mix of "basic services": jobs, safety, schools, neighborhoods, and water quality.

**QUESTION**

*Which of the following do you want local planners to spend their time on?*

<b>Table 5: Priorities for Local Planning Efforts</b>	
<b>HIGH PRIORITIES</b>	
Job Creation	70%
Safety	69%
Schools	67%
Protecting Neighborhoods	64%
Water Quality	62%
Roads	58%
<b>MEDIUM PRIORITIES</b>	
Job Training	49%
Renewable Energy	46%
Air Quality	46%
Revitalizing Neighborhoods	44%
<b>LOW PRIORITIES</b>	
Disaster Recovery	37%
Local Bus Service	36%
Sidewalks	31%
Storm Water	30%
Parks	28%
Open Space	25%
Local Train Service	21%
Climate Change	20%
Bikeways	19%
Walking Trails	18%
Sprawl	16%

As local government budgets are tightening, respondents were also asked to prioritize spending on services. A high degree of consistency exists between top issues for planners and top priorities for funding among the general public.

### QUESTION

*In an era of shrinking local government resources, for each of the following services please tell us if it is a high, medium, or low priority with regards to funding.*

Table 6: Priorities for Local Government Funding	
HIGH PRIORITIES	
Education	71%
Job Creation	68%
Clean Water	68%
Safety	67%
Economic Development	63%
Health	63%
MEDIUM PRIORITIES	
Energy Utilities	53%
Water Utilities	50%
Sewage	49%
Clean Air	49%
Housing	44%
Disaster Preparedness	41%
Transportation	39%
LOW PRIORITIES	
Parks	28%
Trails	13%

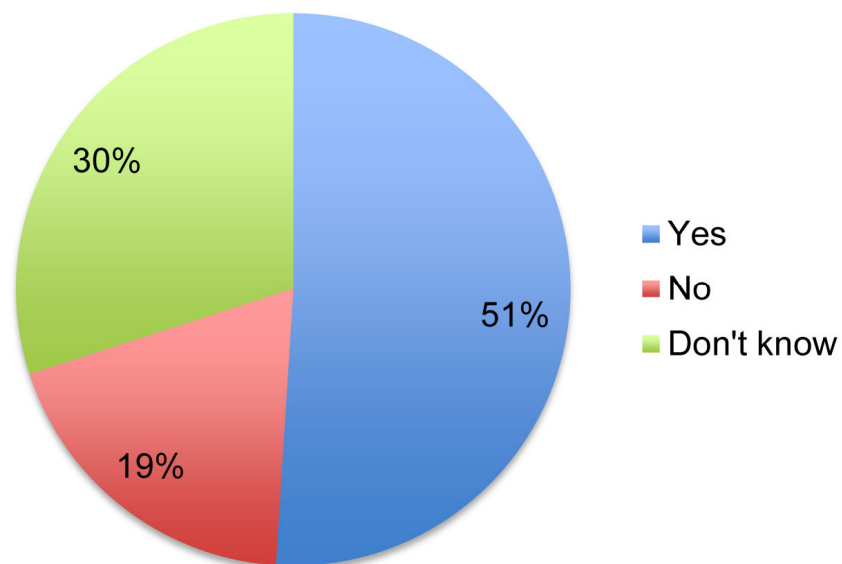
**FINDING 7****Half of all Americans would like to be involved in community planning in the future.**

Perhaps the degree of interest in local planning efforts is not surprising given the degree of economic uncertainty and general belief that planning is needed.

**QUESTION**

*Would you ever want to participate in local planning efforts whether in person, online, or over the phone?*

Chart 7: Participating in Local Planning Efforts

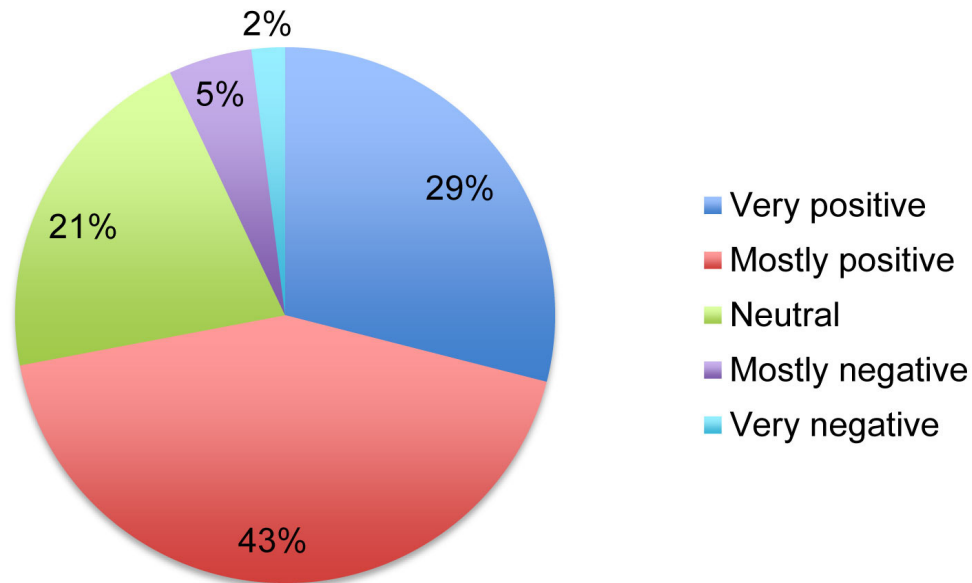


**Table 7: Desire to Participate in Local Planning Efforts (by sub-segment)**

SEGMENT	SUB-SEGMENT	% YES
Political Affiliation	Democrat	54%
	Republican	54%
	Independent	56%
Race/Ethnicity	White	51%
	African American	58%
	Hispanic	54%
Type of Community	Urban	60%
	Suburban	50%
	Rural	50%
	Small Town	44%

**QUESTION*****Does the word "planning" have a positive or negative meaning to you?***

Chart 8: View of Planning — Positive or Negative

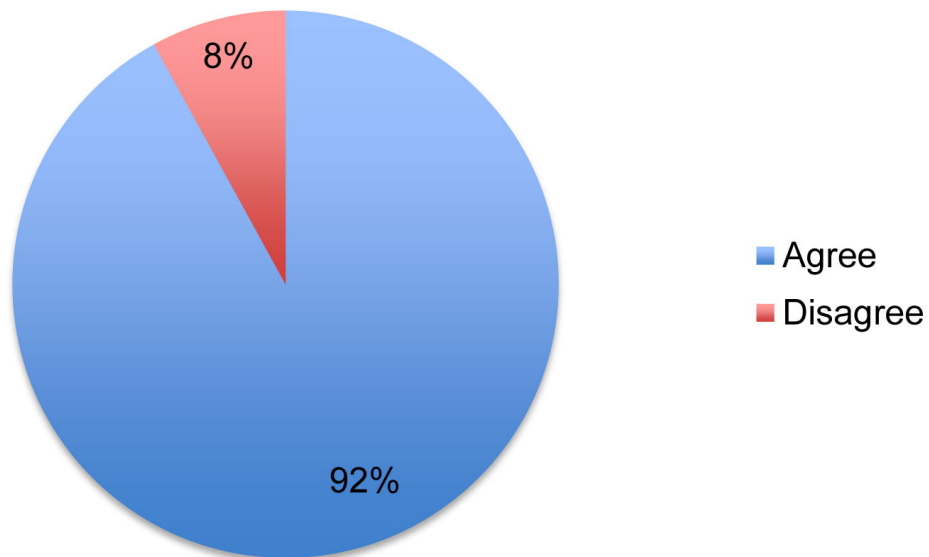
**Table 8: View of Planning — Positive or Negative (by sub-segment)**

SEGMENT	SUB-SEGMENT	% POSITIVE	% NEGATIVE
Political Affiliation	Democrat	79%	2%
	Republican	68%	12%
	Independent	63%	6%
Race/Ethnicity	White	71%	9%
	African American	76%	4%
	Hispanic	75%	5%
Type of Community	Urban	80%	4%
	Suburban	72%	7%
	Rural	64%	9%
	Small Town	69%	11%

**QUESTION**

***Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: In my experience, things generally work better when I have a plan.***

Chart 9: Things Work Better with a Plan



**Table 9: Things Work Better with a Plan (by sub-segment)**

SEGMENT	SUB-SEGMENT	% AGREE
Political Affiliation	Democrat	93%
	Republican	92%
	Independent	94%
Race/Ethnicity	White	94%
	African American	93%
	Hispanic	89%
Type of Community	Urban	92%
	Suburban	92%
	Rural	93%
	Small Town	94%

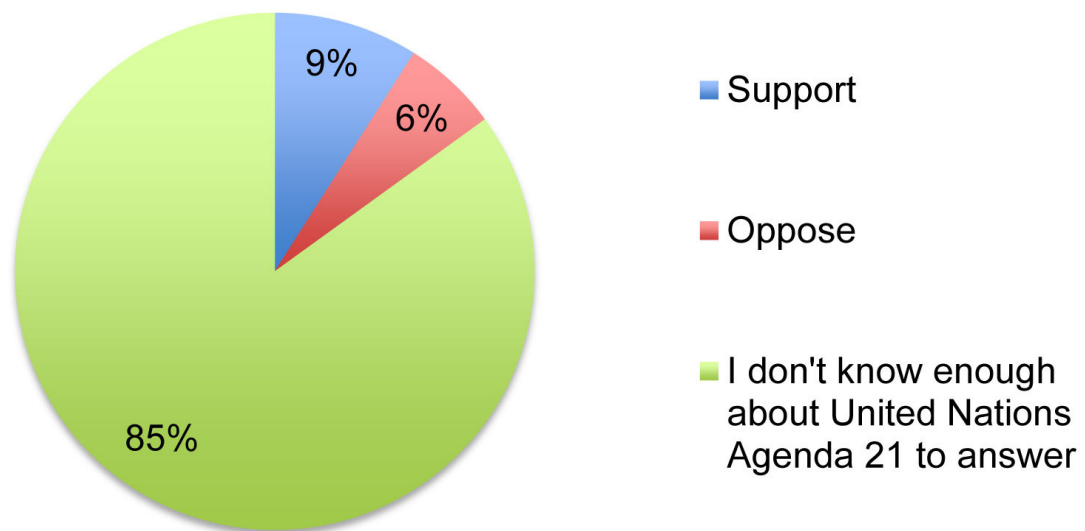
**FINDING 8**

**85 percent of Americans do not know enough to hold an opinion about United Nations Agenda 21.**

**QUESTION**

*Do you support or oppose United Nations Agenda 21?*

Chart 10: Support for United Nations Agenda 21



**Table 10: Support for United Nations Agenda 21 (by sub-segment)**

SEGMENT	SUB-SEGMENT	% SUPPORT	% OPPOSE
Political Affiliation	Democrat	8%	2%
	Republican	3%	14%
	Independent	3%	11%
Race/Ethnicity	White	3%	11%
	African American	9%	7%
	Hispanic	14%	7%
Type of Community	Urban	11%	9%
	Suburban	5%	10%
	Rural	3%	11%
	Small Town	3%	7%