



Town of Chapel Hill



Engagement Study Summary

April 2023

Prepared by Town of Chapel Hill
Affordable Housing and Community Connections Staff

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Last Updated April 2023

Overview

Town of Chapel Hill Engagement Study



Background

Making meaningful progress towards the Town's goal of creating a vibrant and inclusive community requires that the Town center the voices of residents most impacted by Town decisions and engage marginalized populations in the Town's decision-making processes. Historically, local governments have played a role in creating and maintaining institutional barriers to participation. While many local governments have made great strides in reversing policies and practices that exclude marginalized populations, there is still much progress to be made.

Conducting a Gap Analysis to identify populations that are under-engaged with the Town and completing an Engagement Study to deepen the Town's understanding of the reasons for under engagement aligns with the [Town Council Goals](#) and [Community Connections Strategy](#), and represents an essential step towards addressing long-standing, institutionalized barriers to participation in Town government.

Purpose and Approach

This Study aims to identify populations in Chapel Hill that the Town is not reaching, deepen the Town's understanding behind this historical lack of engagement, and identify recommendations for future community engagement consistent with the [Town's equity and inclusion goals](#). To achieve these objectives, the project team used a three-phased approach: Phase 1: Community Partner Interviews and Survey, Phase 2: Internal Analysis of Town Materials and Strategies, and Phase 3: Resident-led Community Conversations.

What We Learned

Through this Study, the project team (see Appendix) identified what populations are under-engaged by the Town and major themes related to barriers to participation and engagement in Town decision-making, programs, and services. The under-engaged populations and theme areas related to barriers to engagement are listed below.

Under-Engaged Populations

- 1. Black or African American residents**
- 2. Immigrant and refugee residents, especially speakers of languages other than English**
- 3. Low-income residents (including seniors on a fixed income, public housing residents, and manufactured home park residents)**
- 4. Students and young adults**
- 5. Renters**

Engagement Themes

The following theme areas emerged related to barriers to engagement:



Trust & Accountability



Communication



Inclusivity



Recommendations

The following 15 recommendations emerged through this Study:

1. **Expand compensated engagement:** Offer paid engagement opportunities to residents who are part of under-engaged populations.
2. **Meet people where they are:** Create more opportunities for consistent in-person interactions with Town staff to help residents feel more connected and comfortable providing input on issues.
3. **Set clear expectations:** Clearly define what type of participation the Town is seeking and be transparent about why and what results residents should expect.
4. **Improve follow through:** Follow through on action items identified by residents and share information about how the Town used input received to inform decision-making.
5. **Know the target audience:** Tailor Town communications to the intended populations most impacted.
6. **Continue and expand Language Access work:** Create additional multi-lingual communication tools, make interpretation and translation services more broadly available, and focus on hiring more multi-lingual and multi-cultural staff.
7. **Expand opportunities for face-to-face communication in the community:** Host mobile office hours in neighborhoods to provide opportunities for ongoing relationship building, information sharing, and input.
8. **Develop a services guide:** Partner with other local governments and institutional partners to develop a guide summarizing who is responsible for specific services and include contact information.
9. **Create a Town app:** This tool would allow residents to easily access Town resource information and services.
10. **Expand training and learning opportunities:** Continue Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and Language Access trainings with Town staff, as well as partner with agencies to expand the offerings of English as a Second Language (ESL) classes.
11. **Alter the structure and schedule of Town meetings:** Hold meetings at different times of day in more varied locations in the community, as well as offer a hybrid option.
12. **Intentionally focus on including renters and Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) populations:** Expand outreach and engagement of renters and BIPOC populations, in particular, given strong feelings of exclusion expressed by these populations.
13. **Expand existing incentives for participation:** Provide food, transportation, childcare, and digital support for a broader range of Town meetings.
14. **Jointly design programs and policies:** Collaborate with residents from historically under-engaged populations to design programs and policies that directly impact their communities.
15. **Make representation more inclusive:** Make marketing materials, staff, and the focus of events more inclusive of under-engaged communities. See the full Summary Report for additional details.

The Study also identifies proposed immediate next steps that the Town will take to respond to the recommendations identified through this effort.

Background

Making meaningful progress towards the Town's goal of creating a vibrant and inclusive community requires that the Town center the voices of residents most impacted by Town decisions and engage historically marginalized populations in the Town's decision-making processes. Conducting a Gap Analysis to identify populations that are under-engaged with the Town and completing an Engagement Study to deepen the Town's understanding of the reasons for under engagement aligns with the [Town Council Goals](#) and the [Community Connections Strategy](#), the Town's equitable community engagement framework.

Historically, local governments have played a role in creating and maintaining institutional barriers to participation for people of color, women, LGBTQ+, immigrants, refugees, people with disabilities, and other populations. While many local governments have made great strides in reversing policies and practices that exclude marginalized populations, there is still much progress to be made.

Through a multi-phased process, this Study engaged residents, community partners, and Town departments and examined data sources to explore who is missing from Town engagement, barriers to engagement, and recommendations for how the Town can strengthen engagement efforts to align with the [Town's equity goals](#) and the long-standing Council commitment to creating a vibrant and inclusive community.

In addition to summarizing what the Town learned and making recommendations to address key findings, this report outlines immediate next steps that the Town can take. The identified next steps respond to what the Town heard and demonstrates to those who shared their experiences and ideas that the Town is committed to change and further centering equity in the Town's engagement efforts going forward.



Purpose and Approach

This Study aims to identify populations in Chapel Hill that the Town is not reaching, deepen the Town's understanding behind this historical lack of engagement, and identify recommendations for community engagement for the future consistent with the Town's equity and inclusion goals.

Primary Objectives:

1. Identify populations currently not engaged
2. Deepen the Town's understanding of the reasons for this lack of engagement
3. Develop recommendations for new equitable community engagement approaches

To achieve these objectives, the project team, in collaboration with the Town's consultant for the project, Dr. Irma McClaurin, used a three phased approach. Dr. McClaurin assisted with the design of the study components, as well as with the synthesis of information for Phases 1 and 2. She also provided subject matter expertise throughout the process.

Phase 1: Community Partner Interviews and Survey

In the Spring and Summer of 2022, the project team distributed a survey and conducted interviews with community partners who frequently engage with populations historically under-engaged in Town decision-making processes and programs. Nineteen community partners responded to the survey and nine community organizations participated in interviews (see acknowledgement section for full list of respondents). Through the interviews and survey responses, community partners shared their perspectives on what communities they primarily serve, barriers they face in interacting with historically under-engaged communities, and ideas for how the Town can better involve the communities they serve.

Phase 2: Internal Analysis of Town Materials and Strategies

In the Spring and Summer of 2022, representatives from all twenty departments in the Town participated in interviews with the project team. The interviews focused on assessing the level of collaboration among Town departments and historically under-engaged populations, as well as questions similar to those posed to community partners focused on issues of access, barriers, and strategies for reaching under-engaged populations.

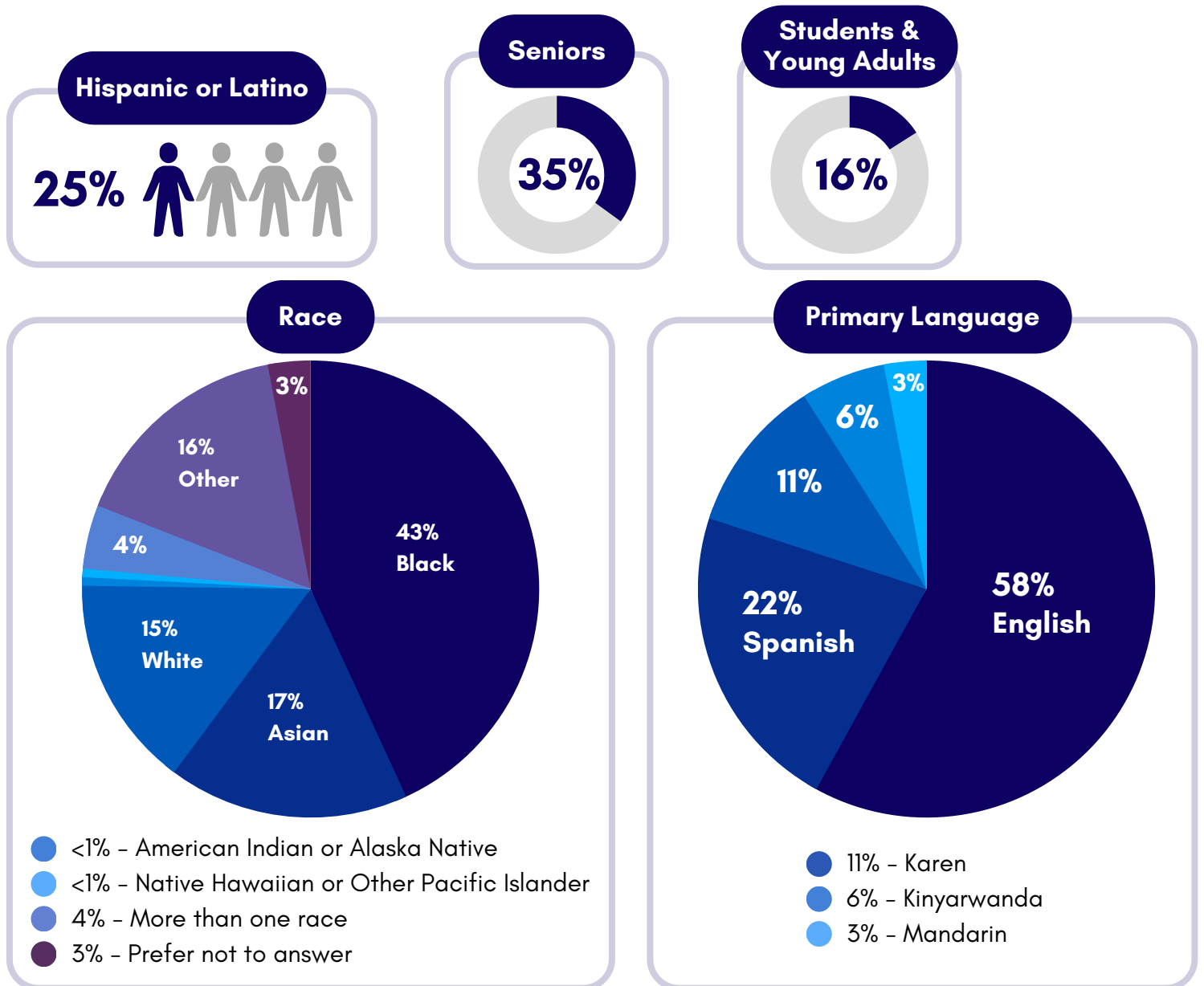
The project team, in conjunction with Dr. McClaurin, used the findings from Phases 1 and 2 to guide the final Phase of the Study. The information provided from the community partners and Town departments, as well as data on who the Town typically engages provided in the appendix of this report, helped identify population gaps in current engagement efforts.

Phase 3: Resident-Led Community Conversations

In the Fall and Winter of 2022, the project team launched the final phase of the Study where we engaged directly with residents who have been historically under-engaged by the Town. This phase of the Study involved compensating community members from the groups identified to lead community conversations with their friends, neighbors, and broader social networks.

Community partners provided recommendations to the project team on community leaders that would be excellent facilitators. The project team worked with the Town's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Office to design and provide an orientation and training on meeting facilitation for the community facilitators. The community facilitators hosted nine sessions involving 169 residents in various locations throughout the community and in five languages.

The demographic data for the participants of the Community Conversations shows that this Study successfully reached the populations identified as being historically under-engaged in Phases 1 and 2 and reflect a notable distinction from the demographics of the populations typically engaged with the Town (see Appendix for additional details).



What We Learned

Through this Study, which included engagement of residents, community partners, and Town departments, the project team identified what populations are under-engaged by the Town, and major themes related to barriers to engagement in Town decision-making, programs, and services. Each of the barriers noted below were reflected in all three phases of the Study. Where there were substantial differences across populations in the results, the team disaggregated the data and noted the specifics in this section. In addition to summarizing key findings, this section also includes recommendations for the Town to consider to address barriers and better align the Town's community engagement practices with the Town's equity goals.

Under-Engaged Populations

Through engagement of community partners and Town departments and a review of data on who the Town typically engages (see Appendix), the project team identified populations that the Town is under-engaging. The data reveals that historically, the populations the Town has engaged skew White, older, and non-Hispanic/Latino (see Appendix). Conversely, the data also reveals that the following populations have been historically under-engaged by the Town:

- 1. Black or African American residents**
- 2. Immigrant and refugee residents, especially speakers of languages other than English**
- 3. Low-income residents (including seniors on a fixed income, public housing residents, and manufactured home park residents)**
- 4. Students and young adults**
- 5. Renters**

Engagement Themes

Through this Study, three main theme areas emerged related to barriers residents face to engagement with the Town:



Trust & Accountability



Communication



Inclusivity

Trust & Accountability



Trust was the number one overarching theme area that emerged through this Study. Residents noted trust is the key barrier to engagement with the Town. Community partners and Town staff also emphasized trust as a key challenge. Lack of accountability was also mentioned in relation to trust. Under-engaged residents often do not feel heard or know who they can hold responsible if they are dissatisfied.

Key words related to this theme area include: dependability, consistency, relevance, perseverance, transparency, and integrity.

"What is the Town going to do about the trust issues? We have done surveys before, and nothing has changed."

"To what extent are these surveys being used to say underserved communities were considered, these communities' interests are not being translated into policies."

Across demographic groups, residents indicated that trust needs to be improved in order for residents to feel compelled to engage with Town programs and decision-making processes.


- **Leadership interactions:** Residents frequently equated the "Town" with the elected officials and advisory board members, both groups with which they had limited interaction. Residents reported that their interaction at public meetings often led them to not feel heard. They indicated that it is hard to feel heard in the public meeting setting because of the rigid processes, three minute time limit, and structured agendas. Northside residents, Public Housing residents, and student populations noted that they have shared information with the Town Council and felt that little change resulted, which made them feel unheard.
- **Institutional - systemic disenfranchisement:** Given the history of local governments in perpetuating racism through policies and practices, as well as the lived experience of many immigrant and refugee residents with government corruption and political persecution in their countries of origin, many residents expressed their reluctance to trust government. Black/African American residents and immigrant and refugee groups highlighted this as a key barrier to trusting the Town and expressed that it is hard to believe that local government systems are changing and feel welcome.
- **Purpose of engagement:** Residents expressed frustration that they were frequently asked for their opinions but felt that their input was not used to create policies. Town staff also noted that they are frequently asked to gather input from the community on various topics, but it is not always relevant to the whole community, the request is unclear, and the results do not often impact policy decisions.
- **Relevance:** Community partners also expressed concern about the relevance of the topics on which they were asked to provide input. Many of the planning topics, which often become highly technical and detailed, are not aligned with the concerns and issues impacting the lives of many of the residents they serve, especially those from marginalized populations.

Trust & Accountability (cont.)

Recommendations:

- **Expand compensated engagement:** Residents and community partners recommend that the Town should continue to offer paid engagement opportunities to residents who are part of under-engaged populations to lead community engagement efforts, in collaboration with Town staff.
- **Meet people where they are:** Create more opportunities for consistent face-to-face interactions with Town staff within under-engaged populations to help residents feel more connected and comfortable providing input on issues.
- **Set clear expectations:** Clearly define what type of participation the Town is seeking and be transparent about why and what results community members should expect.
- **Improve follow through:** Build trust by following through with action items identified by residents. Develop a follow-up process that includes circling back to residents to let them know how their input was considered and what the outcome was. The Town should also establish a new standard for reflecting back community input on planning efforts to the Town Council, including information about who was engaged and how the Town engaged populations most impacted.

The [International Association for Public Participation](#) Spectrum of Public Participation is used to help with selecting the level of public participation in a process, showing the public participation goal and the promise made to the public for each level of public participation.

INCREASING IMPACT ON THE DECISION 					
	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION GOAL	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision making in the hands of the public.
PROMISE TO THE PUBLIC	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.

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Communication



Through the Study we also learned that communication is another key barrier to further engagement with the Town. The Study highlighted that different populations have varied communication needs and preferences. The engagement of community organizations and residents, also highlighted the importance of targeting and tailoring Town messages to these needs and preferences, including preferred language.

"When the Town is conducting these surveys or posting on social media, they need to take into account that some of our residents cannot read and write."

"When we see things on social media, the time has already passed [for that event/resource]. It gets to us too late."

"I have gone to community meetings twice, but the Town has not offered interpretation."

- **Diverse preferences:** Residents and community partners shared varied preferences in terms of communication. The Study highlighted that race/ethnicity cannot be used as singular indicators – age and other demographics and life experiences also matter.
 - Seniors expressed a preference for newsletters, door to door interaction, and in person meetings.
 - Students preferred digital communications almost exclusively, including email, apps, and social media.
 - Speakers of languages other than English preferred in person meetings with trusted partners and text and audio through WhatsApp.
- **Reliance on community partners:** The Town's reliance on community partners to share key messages with residents sometimes leads to delays in messages being shared and prevents residents from being able to ask immediate follow-up questions. It also places an undue burden on community partners.
- **Lack of awareness of services:** Many residents are unaware of where to go for information because they do not know who is responsible for which services: school system, Town, County, or state. Many speakers of languages other than English assume there are not services and accept this instead of asking for guidance.
- **Literacy barriers:** Residents indicated that literacy is a significant barrier to written communications, especially among residents who speak languages other than English. Even for those who are literate, the use of jargon and technical language prevents many in the community from understanding Town communications.

Biggest challenge Residents face when interacting with the Town

50%

of residents are unaware of services, resources, and events

Communication (cont.)

- **Language Access:** Many residents and community partners are not aware of the Town's [language access services](#) and the Town's heavy use of digital platforms and written communications is not accessible to many residents who speak languages other than English.

Recommendations:

- **Know the target audience and tailor the communications to the intended populations:**
 - Rely less on written communication (flyers, website, and surveys).
 - Use plain language and graphics.
 - Look at opportunities to diversify communication methods, expanding on video, voice, and text message delivery systems already in place or under development.
- **Continue and expand Language Access work underway:** Residents recommend that the Town create additional multi-lingual communication tools, make interpretation and translation services more broadly available, and focus on hiring more multi-lingual and multi-cultural staff.
- **Expand opportunities for face-to-face communication in the community:** Across under-engaged populations, residents expressed a preference for face-to-face interactions with Town officials out in the community, rather than at Town facilities. Residents suggest that the Town should consider hosting mobile office hours in neighborhoods to provide opportunities for ongoing relationship building information sharing, and input from residents.
- **Develop a services guide:** Residents and community partners encourage the Town to partner with the County, School System, OWASA, and UNC to develop a succinct explanation of key services, including who is responsible for each service and contact information.
- **Create a Town app:** This tool would allow students and residents to browse resource information and services on a mobile device. The app could send Town news alerts and engagement opportunities.
- **Expand training and learning opportunities:** Residents and community partners recommend that the Town continue Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and Language Access trainings with Town staff, as well as expand partnerships with community agencies that offer English as a Second Language (ESL) classes.



The third and final engagement barrier that emerged through this Study was related to the lack of inclusivity. Residents indicate that they feel excluded from participating in Town services and processes due to inaccessibility and institutional marginalization.

"I used to regularly attend Council meetings. Now, it is too great of a health risk to attend in-person and I can't stream it on-line."

"How do they make decisions about our neighborhood without asking for our opinion? I feel like many of the decisions are made without even asking us what we think."

- **Meeting location and schedule:** Residents and community partners shared that Town meetings are not hosted in locations that are convenient to the community and are viewed as symbols of exclusion. They also expressed that the format, length, time meetings are held, and schedule of Town meetings makes it difficult for residents to participate consistently and meaningfully.
- **Layers of barriers to participation:** Residents shared that there are other serious barriers to participation in Town meetings include transportation, childcare, limited digital access, and language access. While some noted that the Town had done some work to address these barriers, much more needs to be done.
- **Renters feel particularly excluded:** Renters perceive that the Town values and listens to homeowners more than other groups, which discourages renters from sharing their perspective with the Town.
- **BIPOC (non-white, non-immigrant) residents:** Non-white residents feel that the Town values and listens to white residents more than BIPOC populations. This is a sentiment that came up in multiple community conversations with BIPOC residents and in interviews with community partners.

Recommendations:

- **Alter the structure and schedule of Town meetings:** Residents and community partners suggest that the Town should consider holding meetings at different times of day in more varied locations out in the community. They also suggest offering a hybrid option, particularly for Council meetings.
- **Intentionally focus on including renters:** Residents suggest that the Town should expand its outreach to renters. In particular, including them in all notifications about development applications.
- **Purposefully conduct greater outreach to BIPOC populations:** The Town should focus specifically on engagement with BIPOC populations, given the strong feeling of exclusion, through sustained efforts in BIPOC spaces.

Inclusivity (cont.)

Recommendations:

- **Expand existing incentives for participation:** Residents and community partners recommend that the Town should provide food, transportation, childcare, and digital support for a broader range of Town meetings. They also suggest that the Town continue and expand paid engagement opportunities that acknowledge and reward residents for their lived experience and expertise.
- **Jointly design programs and policies:** Residents encourage the Town to collaborate with residents from historically under-engaged populations to design programs and policies that directly impact their community.
- **Make representation more inclusive:** Residents and community partners recommend that the Town should make marketing materials, staff, and the focus of events more inclusive of diverse communities.

Immediate Next Steps

The project team identified the following immediate next steps the Town will take to respond to what we learned through this Study:

1. Develop a detailed implementation plan for the recommendations outlined in this report.
2. Meet with Town departments to share issues identified by residents not related to engagement.
3. Expand paid engagement opportunities for residents, building off the success of the community conversations piloted in this project. Explore opportunities for funding through the budget process.
4. Pilot having staff “office hours” at various spaces in the community to build relationships with residents, share Town information, and gather input on issues.
5. Provide food, childcare, transportation, and language services for a broader range of Town meetings. Explore options for adding back a hybrid option for Town Council meetings.
6. Update the Community Engagement Toolkit to reflect the results of the Engagement Study. After updating the Toolkit, staff will be trained and implementation will begin Town-wide. Staff propose operationalizing the Toolkit in the Planning Department first, where much of the Town’s community engagement is focused.
7. For initiatives that include community engagement, staff will share a summary of engagement demographics and key takeaways with the Council and community. Staff will develop an engagement summary template to begin using immediately.
8. Pilot the use of video and oral communication tools to share Town information and updates in the Town’s primary languages.
9. Create a multi-lingual pocket service guide that summarizes the roles and services provided by the Town and other local government and institutions. Staff will work with residents and community partners engaged in this Study to distribute the guide.
10. Explore opportunities to implement the pay incentive outlined in the Town’s Language Access Plan through the budget process for next fiscal year.
11. Continue and expand DEI and language access training for Town staff, in collaboration with the Town's DEI Officer and Human Resources staff.
12. Expand the recognition and visibility of historically under-represented communities through proclamations, community cultural events, images used in Town materials, and more (i.e. Burmese and Karen refugees, Latinx residents, etc.).
13. Continue to build out and implement the Town’s Neighborhood Liaisons program, with a focus on recruiting under-engaged populations to serve as Liaisons.

Acknowledgements

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Kathy Atwater
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Daniella Runyambo

Compass Center:

Diiv Sternman

Acknowledgements (cont.)

Community Partners Surveyed:

Amity United Methodist Church: Sandra Benavides

Club Nova: Karen Kincaid Dunn

Community Empowerment Fund: Donna Carrington

Community Home Trust: Daniele Berman

Dispute Settlement Center: Frances Henderson

El Futuro: Christa Atkinson

Exchange Club: Sarah Black

Hope Renovations: Sarah Campbell

Orange County Rape Crisis Center: Tracey Miller

Pathways to Change: John Williamson

Pee Wee Homes: Erika Walker

Planned Parenthood South Atlantic: Karina Martinez Romo

Rogers Eubanks Neighborhood Association: Robert L. Campbell

Soltys Place Adult Day Health: Melissa Bryant

The Arc of the Triangle: Michelle Foy

Transplanting Traditions Community Farm: Ree Ree Wei

Volunteers for Youth: Susan Worley

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Consultant

Dr. Irma McClaurin, Irma McClaurin Associates

Town Departments Surveyed:

Affordable Housing & Community Connections

Building & Development Services

Business Management

Communications & Public Affairs

Community Arts & Culture

Economic Development

Fire

Human Resource Development

Library

Ombuds

Parks & Recreation

Planning

Police

Public Housing

Public Works

Technology Solutions

Town Attorney

Town Manager

Transit

Graphic Design:

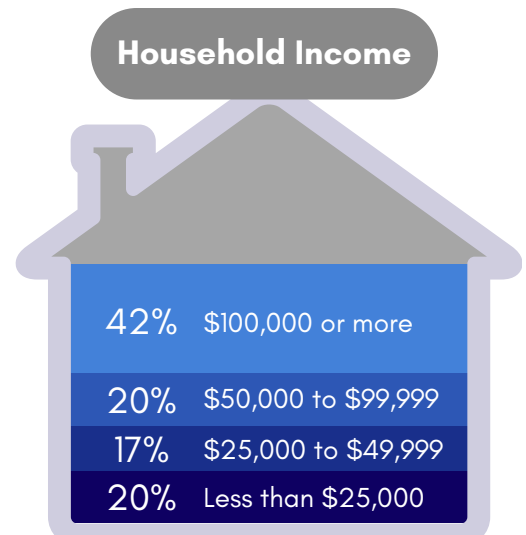
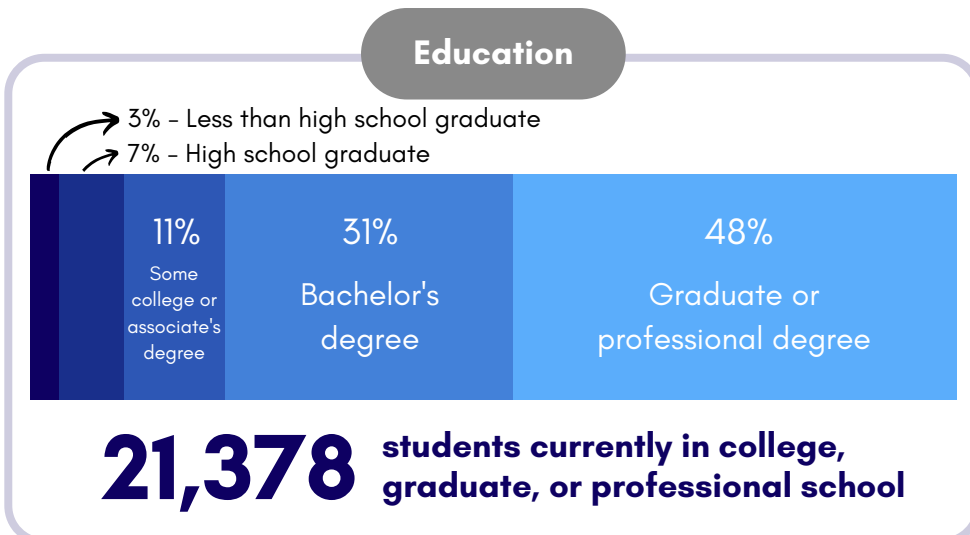
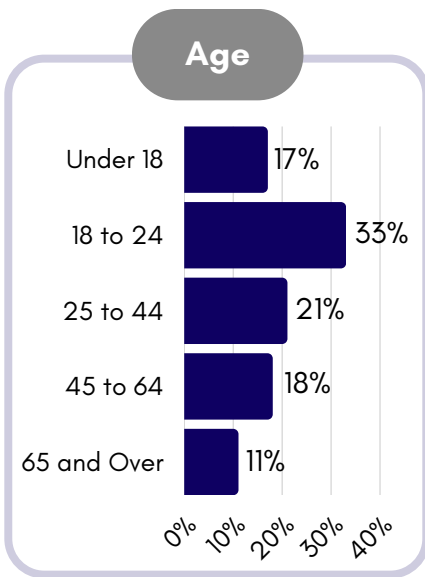
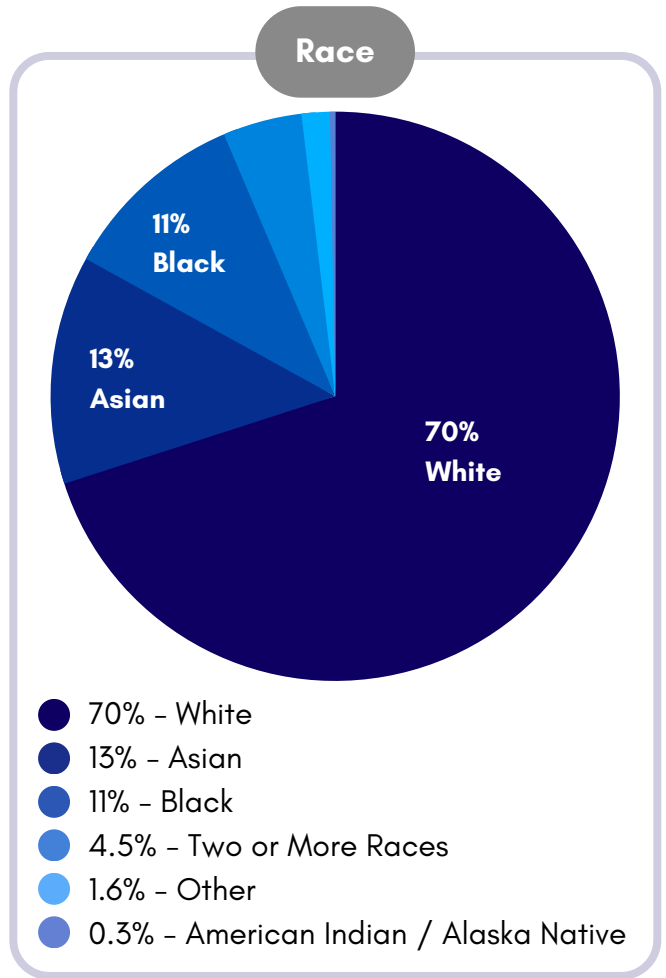
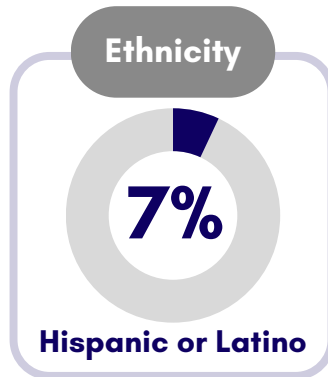
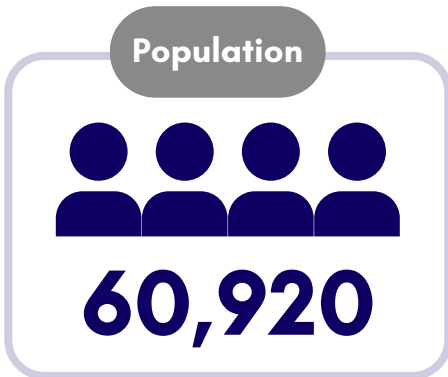
Thomas Chen, Research and Communications Specialist

Affordable Housing & Community Connections

Appendix

Demographic Overview of Chapel Hill

The following data is from the 2021 American Community Survey, 5-Year Estimates:



Appendix (cont.)

Who the Town is Currently Engaging

In addition to collecting data from Town departments and community partners on who is under-engaged by the Town, the project team also looked at existing Town data sources to assess what populations are engaged/under-engaged. The data sources available include:

- Community Survey
- Town Meeting Demographic Survey
- Town Boards and Commission Composition
- Planning Department Public Input Surveys

These data sources reveal that the populations currently engaged with the Town tend to skew White, older, and non-Hispanic/Latino. The section that follows provides additional details about the demographics of those who are engaged with the Town.

Community Survey

The [Community Survey](#) is conducted periodically to gather information about Chapel Hill residents' perceptions of Town programs and services. The Survey is sent to a randomized sample of households that is statistically significant. The Survey highlights important information about residents' perceptions of current engagement efforts and preferences related to communication and engagement. See below for additional details.

Key Findings Related to Engagement

50% of residents feel either neutral or like they do not have opportunities to participate in Town decision making.

48% of residents have not provided input to the Town.

47% of residents receive information through neighborhood associations

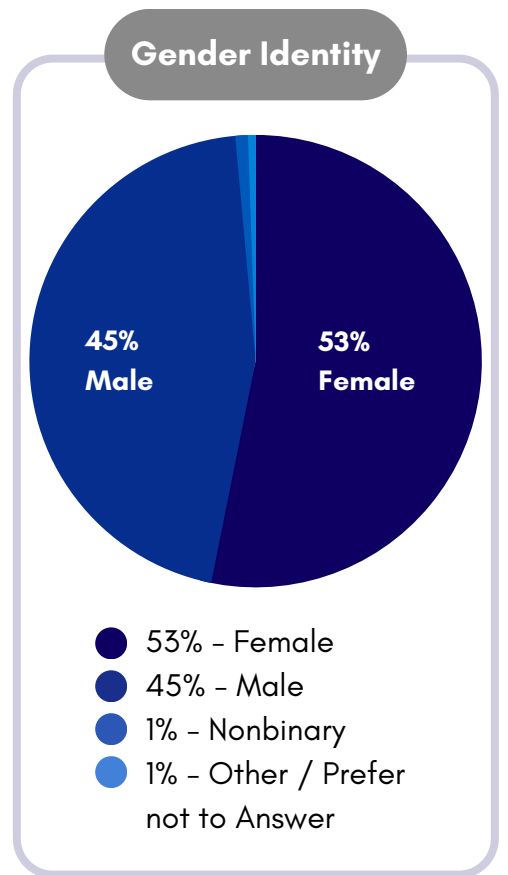
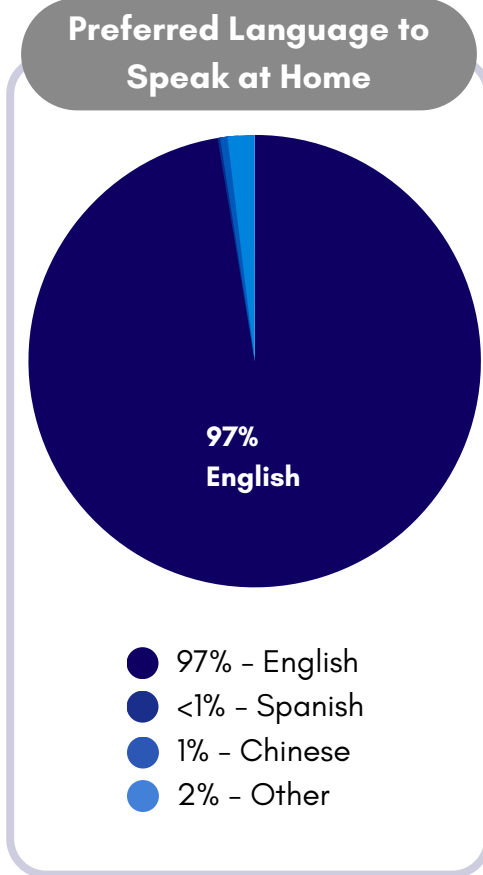
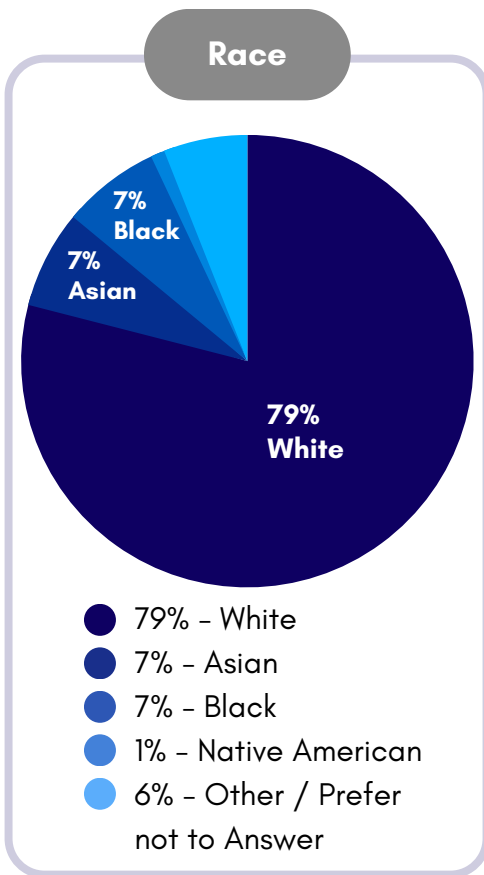
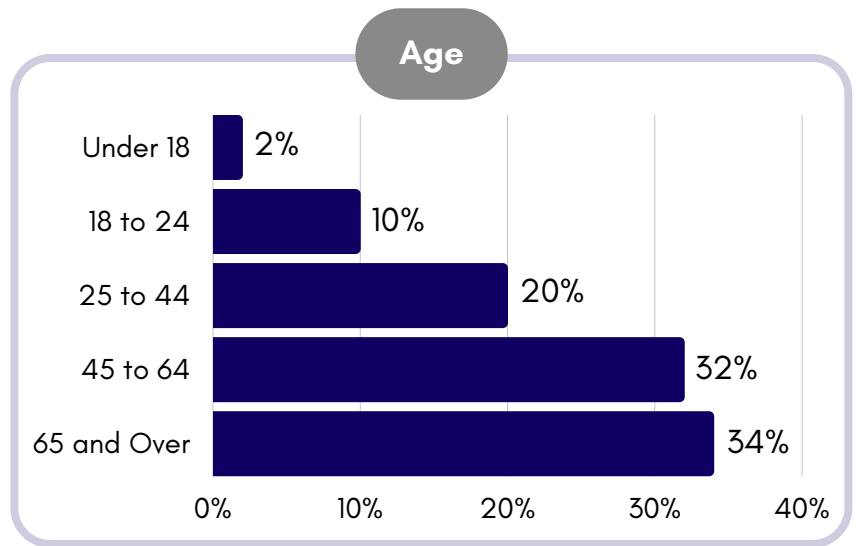
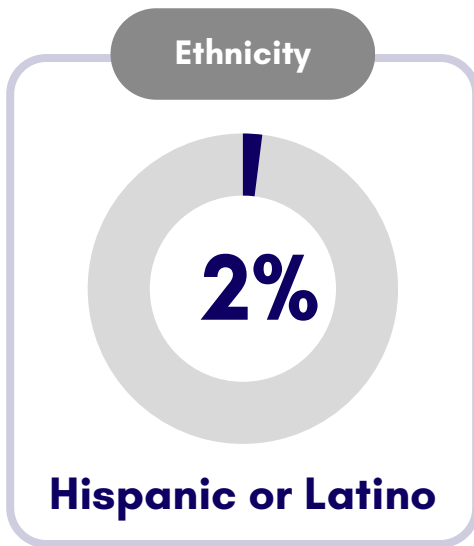
46% of residents receive information through the Town website

30% of residents prefer to receive Town news and information through a Town email subscription

Appendix (cont.)

Town Meetings Demographic Survey

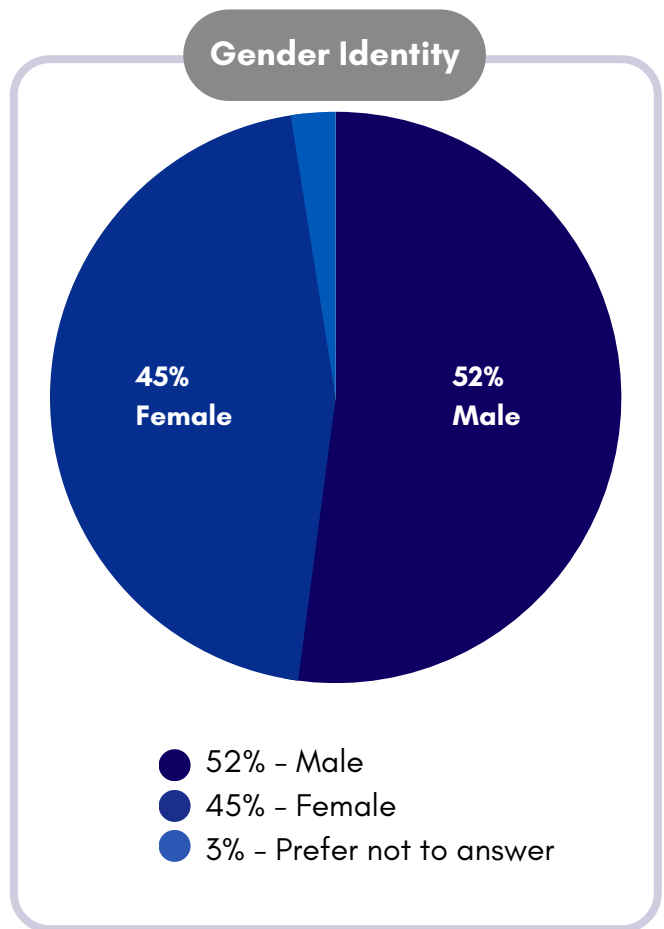
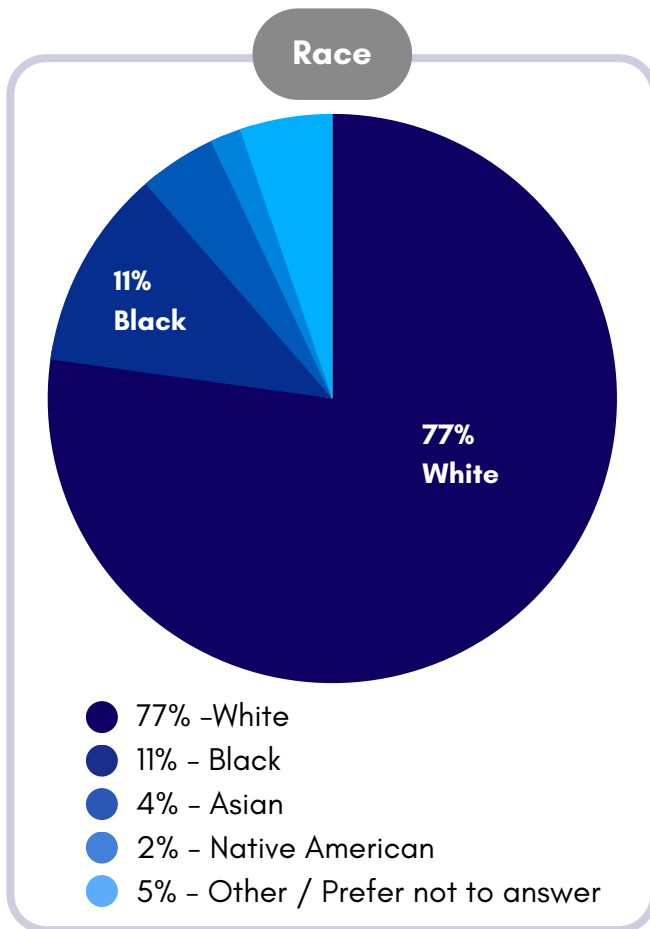
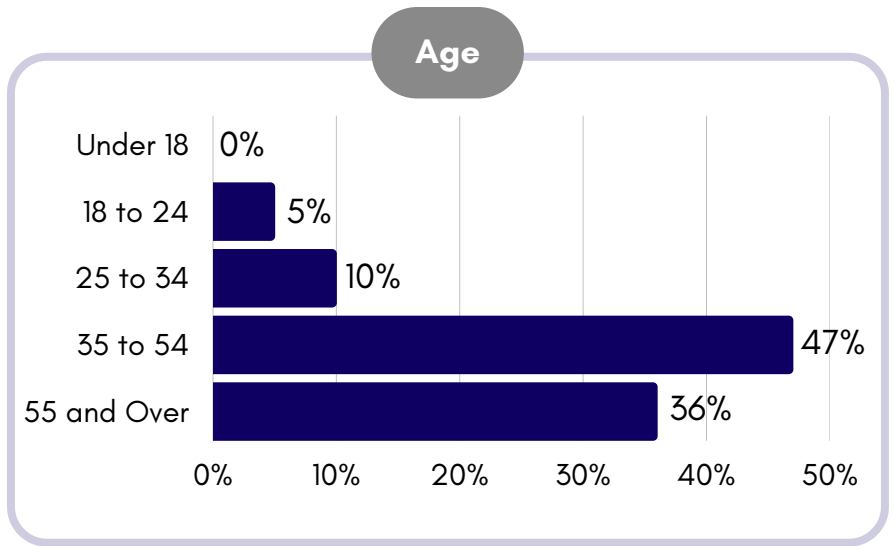
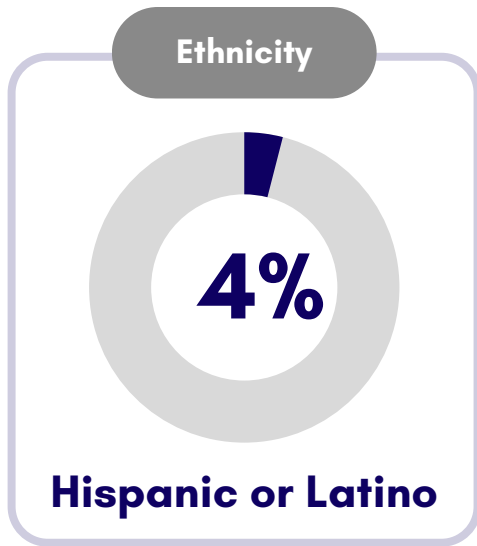
The [Town's demographic survey](#) is used to better understand who is participating in the Town's programs and processes, including Town Council business meetings and work sessions. It's important to note that the sample size is relatively small and the survey is voluntary.



Appendix (cont.)

Town Boards and Commissions

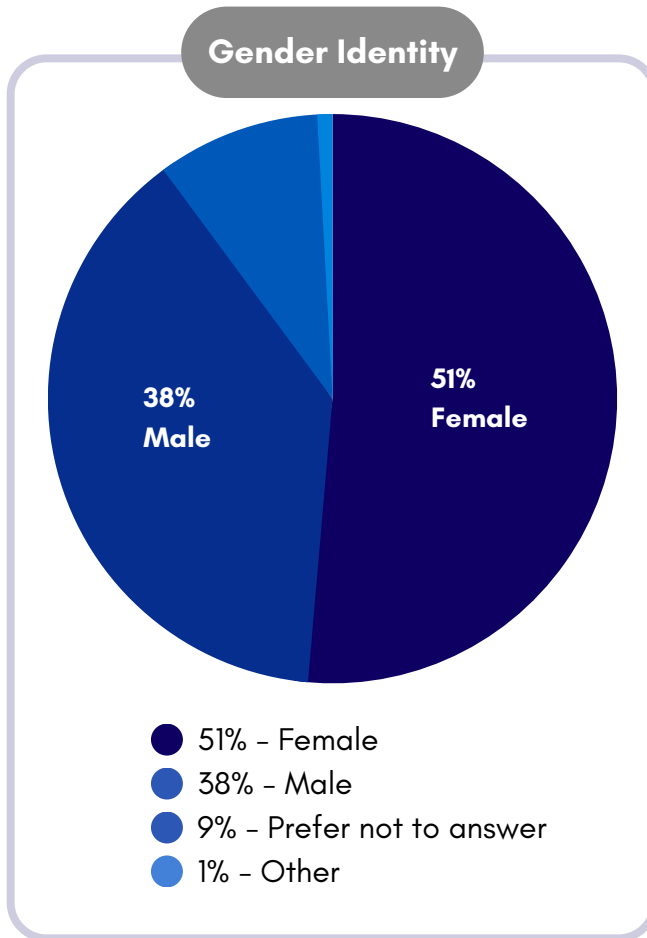
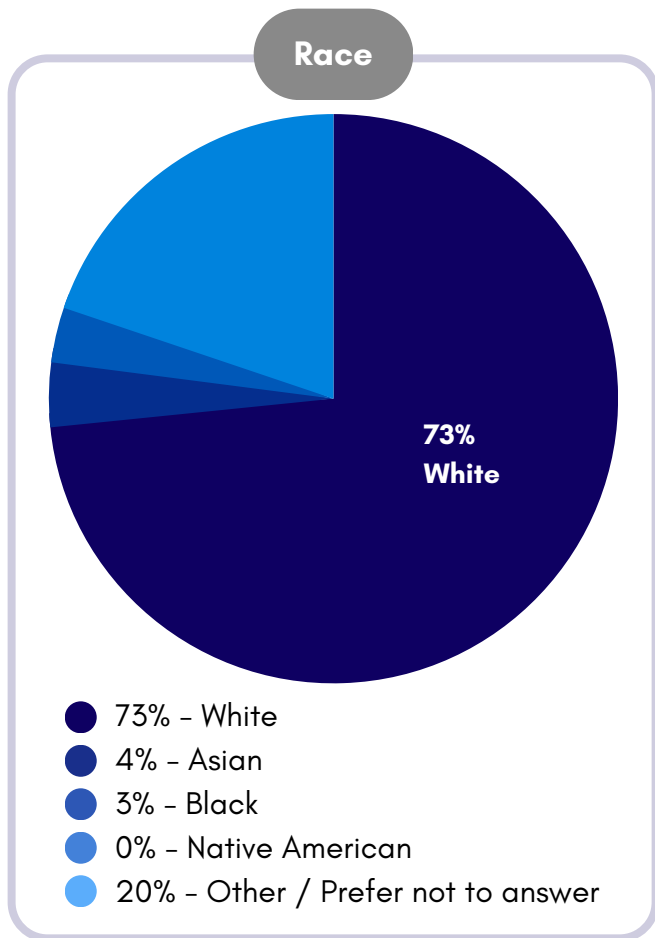
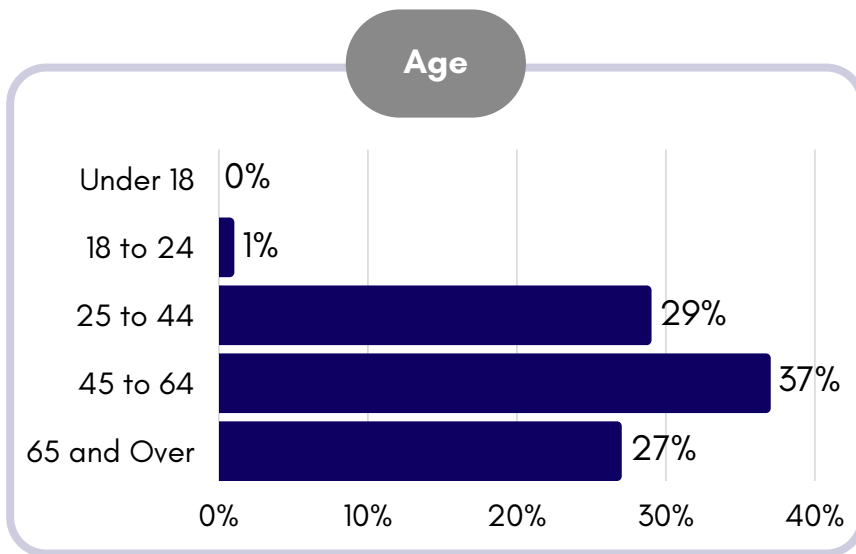
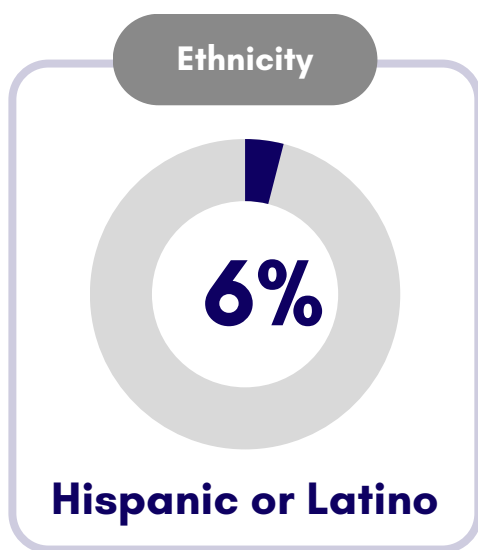
The Town has various boards and commissions that advise the Town Council on a wide range of issues. The Town's boards and commissions are comprised of residents who are appointed by the Town Council.



Appendix (cont.)

Planning Department Public Input Surveys

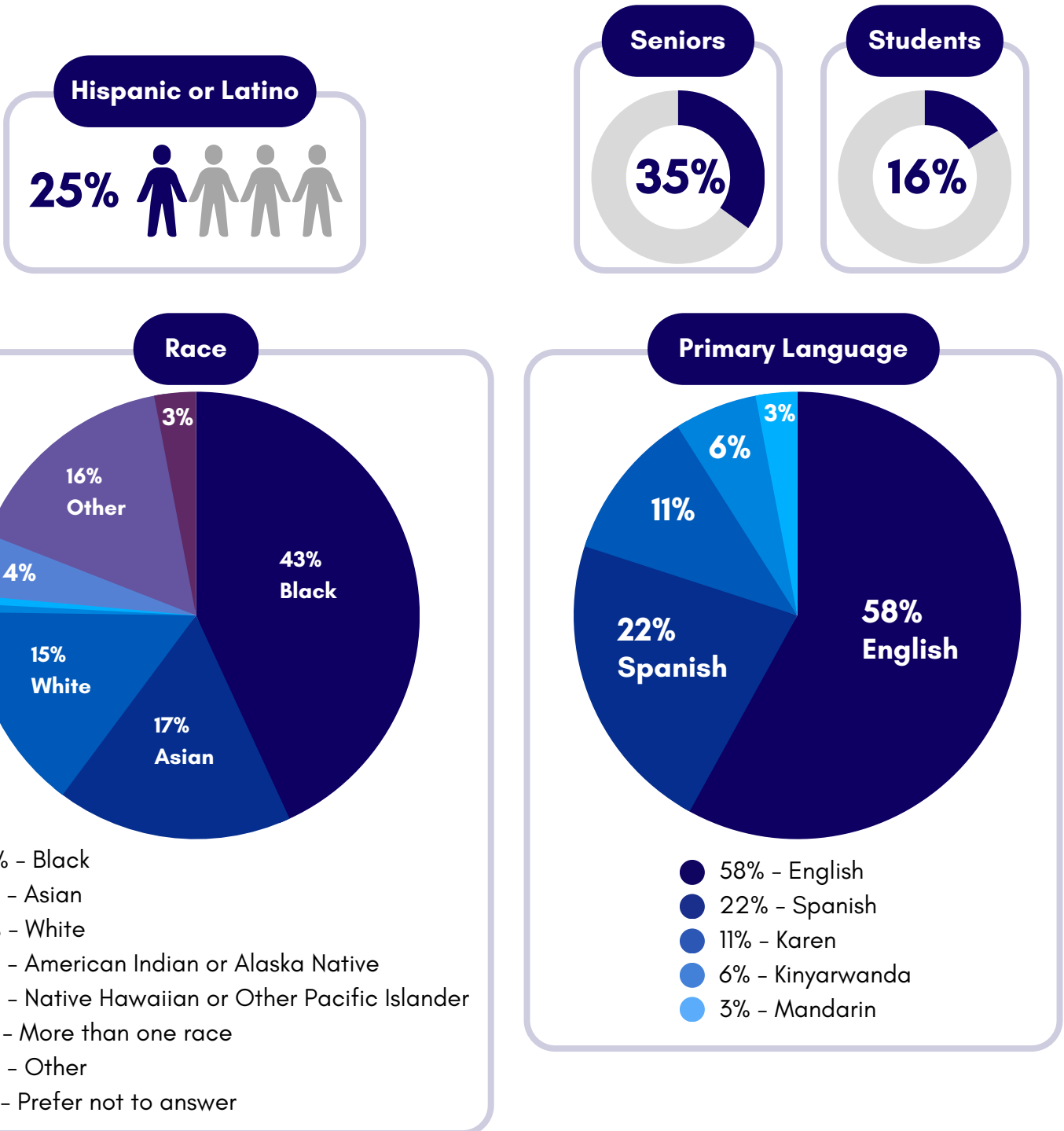
The Town's Planning Department uses Public Input, an online platform, to gather input from residents on various topics. Below is a summary of the demographics of those who have responded to all Town Public Input surveys and input opportunities.



Appendix (cont.)

Demographic Overview of Phase 3

As noted in the Report, the Engagement Study was purposefully designed to hear from residents most impacted by Town decisions and engage historically marginalized populations who have had limited engagement with the Town. Below is a demographic summary of who participated in Phase 3 of this Study.



Appendix (cont.)

Locations of Community Conversations and Participants for Phase 3

