



Budget Survey

WHAT WE HEARD REPORT

DATE: May 17, 2022



In preparation for the 2023 multi-year budget, Strathcona County launched a survey to hear from the community about their views.

Introduction and Methodology

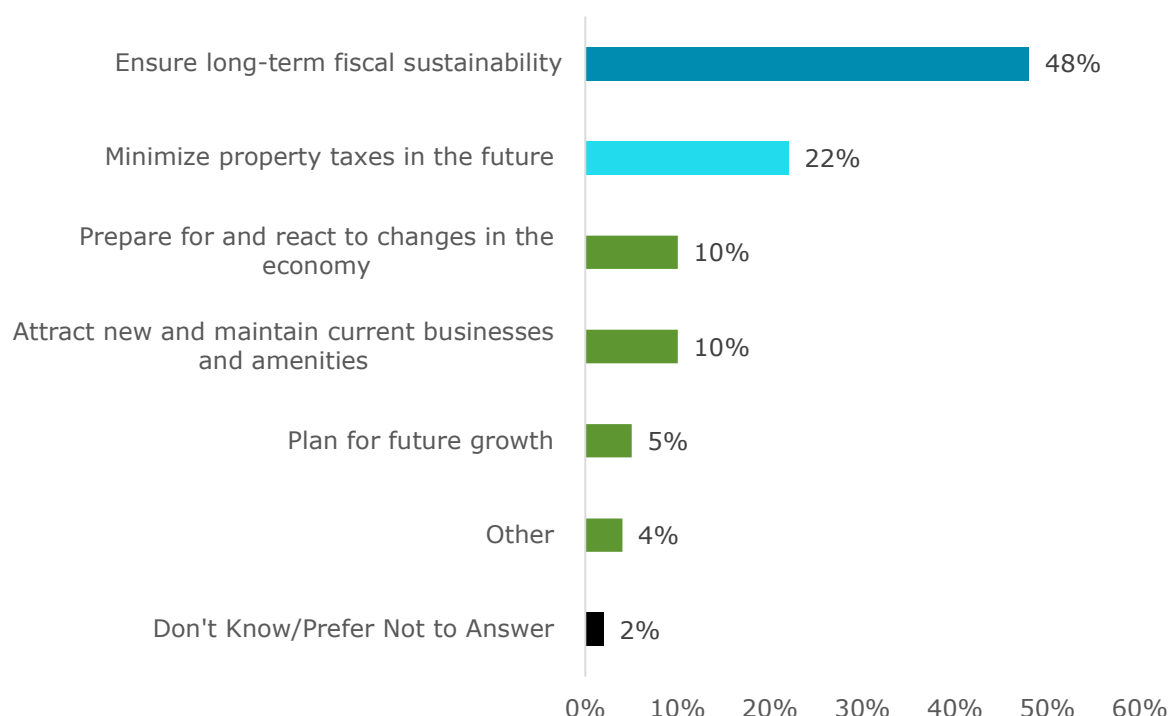
The purpose of this survey is to understand the views of residents, business owners and property owners as it relates to their priorities, property taxes, service levels and infrastructure in the County. The survey results will help in developing 2023-2026 budgets for Council approval in the fall of 2022. Public engagement is an integral part of budgetary planning, helping to inform decision-makers of resident preferences and attitudes. Public feedback will be considered alongside corporate and department level business plans, as well as other financial reporting. There will be two non-statutory public hearings in the fall of 2022 before the budget receives final approval by Council, with one hearing before the draft budget is released and the other after the draft is released.

The survey was made available via two platforms – SCOOP (the County’s online opinion panel) and Alchemer (the online platform used to obtain responses from residents of Strathcona County who are not members of SCOOP). The Alchemer version was promoted via a webpage on the County website, social media, the County Living eNews, posters at County facilities, digital signs and newspaper ads. Given the non-random methods used to implement and recruit respondents for the survey, readers should be careful when applying the results to the broader population of Strathcona County.

Only respondents who currently reside in the County, or own property or operate a business in the County were eligible for the survey. 636 respondents completed the survey via Alchemer and 759 completed the survey via SCOOP, for a total of 1,395 respondents. Only 19 respondents indicated they were business or property owners, but not residents. With such low counts, no specific analysis of these respondents was conducted. As questions were not mandatory and some respondents only partially completed the survey, the base of respondents varies question to question. Analysis of open-ended response was conducted using NVivo software and coded by a single analyst to maintain consistency. The survey ran from April 8 to May 8, 2022.

Engagement / Survey Results

As Strathcona County prepares for the future, which of the following is most important to inform and shape 2023-2026 budgets and business plans?



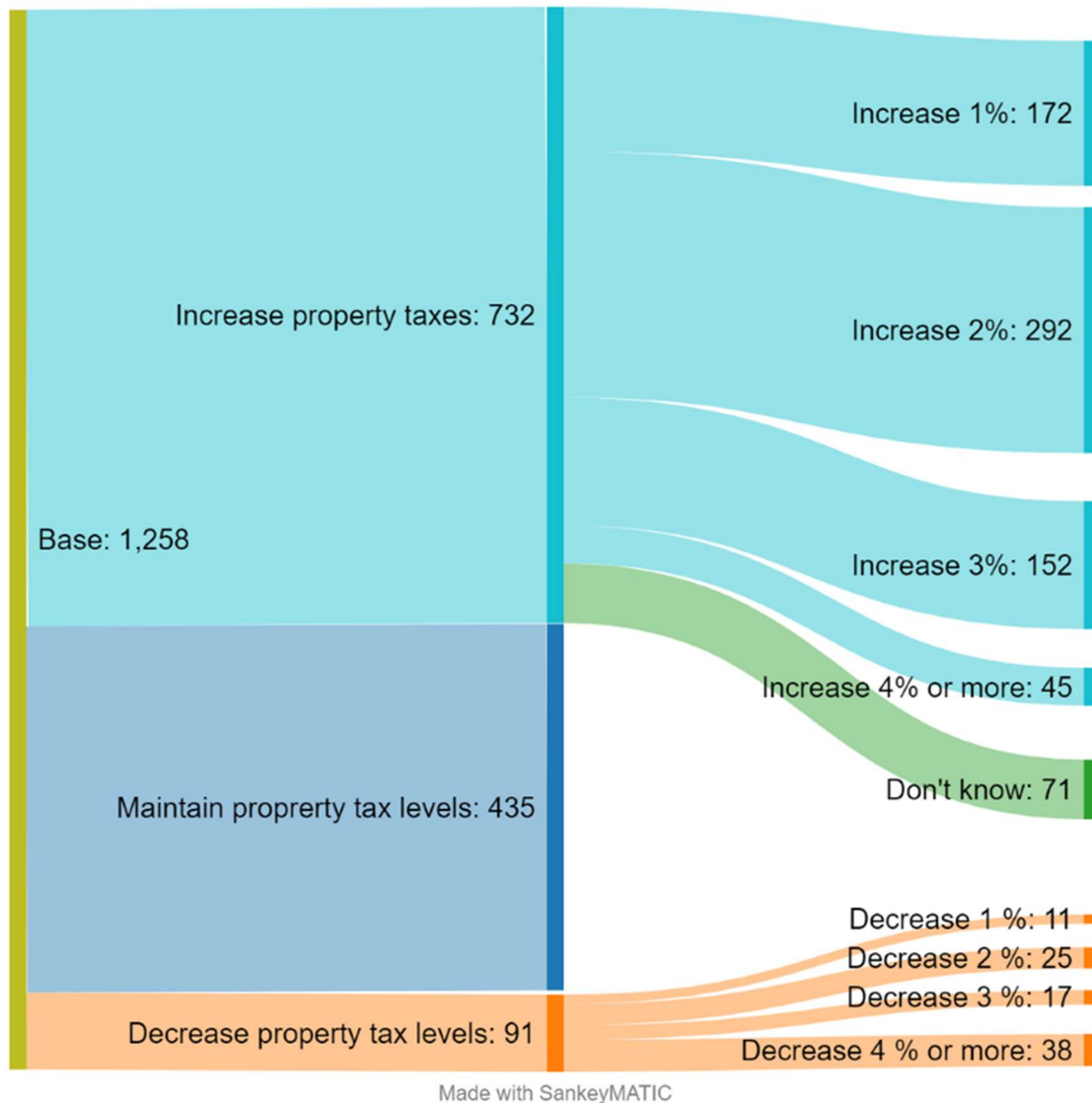
Our first question asked respondents to choose between five different priorities and judge which is the most important to them. Just under half of respondents chose “Ensure long-term fiscal sustainability.” The second most popular priority was “Minimize property taxes in the future,” chosen by 22% of respondents. “Prepare for and react to changes in the economy” and “Attract new and maintain current businesses and amenities” were chosen by 10% of respondents each, while “Plan for future growth” was the least popular response at 5%.

The option to write-in a custom priority was also provided, which 4% of respondents selected. The three most notable write-in responses were preparations for climate change or environmental concerns, maintaining current service and

growth levels, and prioritizing affordability. Some other ideas included additional social supports, additional supports for seniors, and supports for local business.

Which answer best describes your comfort level and/or preference relating to municipal property taxes for 2023?

Next, we asked respondents to pick an overall approach to property taxes. To help inform the decision, we highlighted that a decision to increase property taxes could improve services, while maintaining or decreasing property tax levels would likely decrease services levels. To this end, we asked respondents who chose to increase and decrease property tax levels to select the percentage amount they would either increase or decrease property tax levels.



As seen in the above chart – 732 respondents, or 58% of respondents, selected an increase to property tax levels. Of those respondents, 40% selected a 2% increase. 23% chose a modest 1% increase. 21% chose a 3% increase. Only 6% of respondents chose an increase of 4% or more. A tenth of respondents that preferred a property tax increase were not sure about the specific amount of increase.

Maintaining current property tax levels was chosen by 435 respondents, or 35% of respondents.

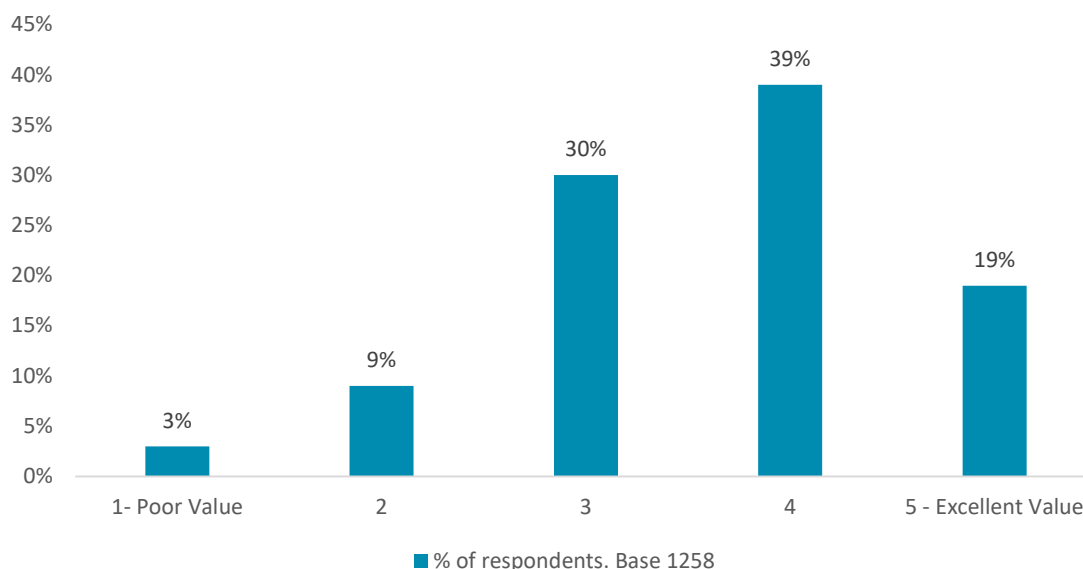
Decreasing property tax levels was chosen by 91 respondents, or 7% of survey respondents. 42% of these respondents selected a decrease of 4% or more and 27% chose a decrease of 2%. 19% chose a decrease of three percent and 12% chose a decrease of 1%.

A summary table of the percentages of respondents that selected each response is provided below.

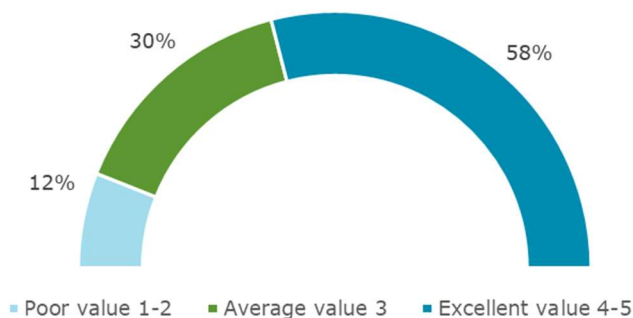
	% of respondents (base 1,258)	Tax % Change	% of respondents
Increase property taxes	58%	1% increase	23%
		2% increase	40%
		3% increase	21%
		4% or more increase	6%
		Don't know	10%
Maintain property taxes	35%	0%	-
Decrease property taxes	7%	1% decrease	12%
		2% decrease	27%
		3% decrease	19%
		4% or more decrease	42%
		Don't know	0%

What value do you receive from County services?

We asked respondents to consider what value they receive from County services, and to rate that value on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 meant poor value and 5 meant excellent value. The full breakdown of ratings is indicated in the chart below.



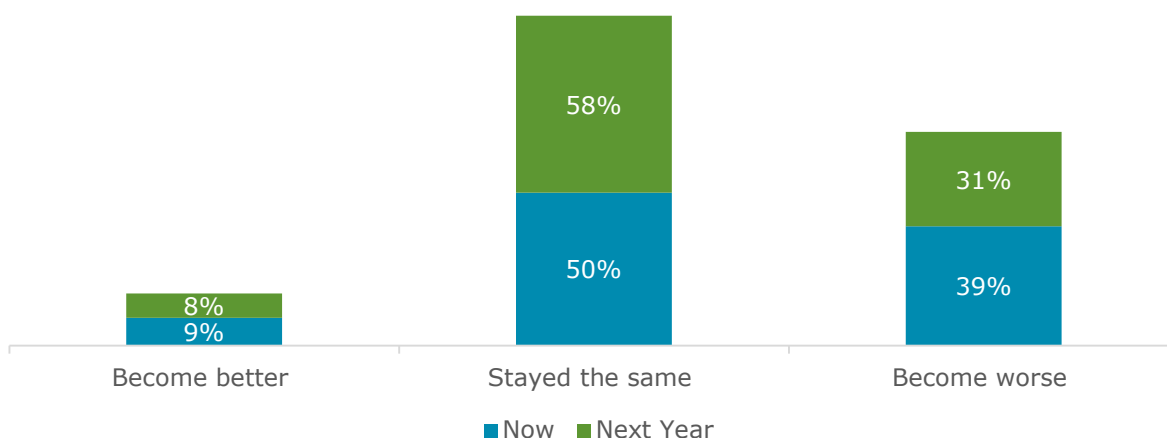
Only 3% of respondents rated County services at the lowest ranking, while 19% rated County services at the highest available rating. The majority of respondents rated County services to be of good or excellent value, with 58% of respondents giving a rating of either 4 or 5. Only 12% of respondents rated County services poorly with a rating of a 1 or 2. Middling ratings of 3 were given by 30% of respondents.



Personal financial situation

Strathcona County is cognizant of several economic challenges confronting County residents and businesses, such as inflation and increases to cost of living. As such, we wanted to understand how respondents rated their current financial circumstance and what they anticipate happening in the future (next year).

Personal Financial Situation, Now and Next Year



Excludes prefer not to answer results. Base 1,311.

Only 9% of respondents believed their personal financial situation improved, and only 8% believed it would improve over the next year. Half of respondents believed that their situation was unchanged, and 58% believed they would stay the same over the next 12 months. Almost 40% of respondents indicated their personal financial situation had worsened this year, with 31% predicting that their circumstance would deteriorate in the coming year.

When comparing responses to these two questions – we find some interesting results.

Of those who thought their financial situation **improved** over the past 12 months:

- 28% think it will improve next year
- 51% think it will stay the same next year
- 20% think it will become worse next year

Of those who thought their financial situation **stayed the same** over the past 12 months:

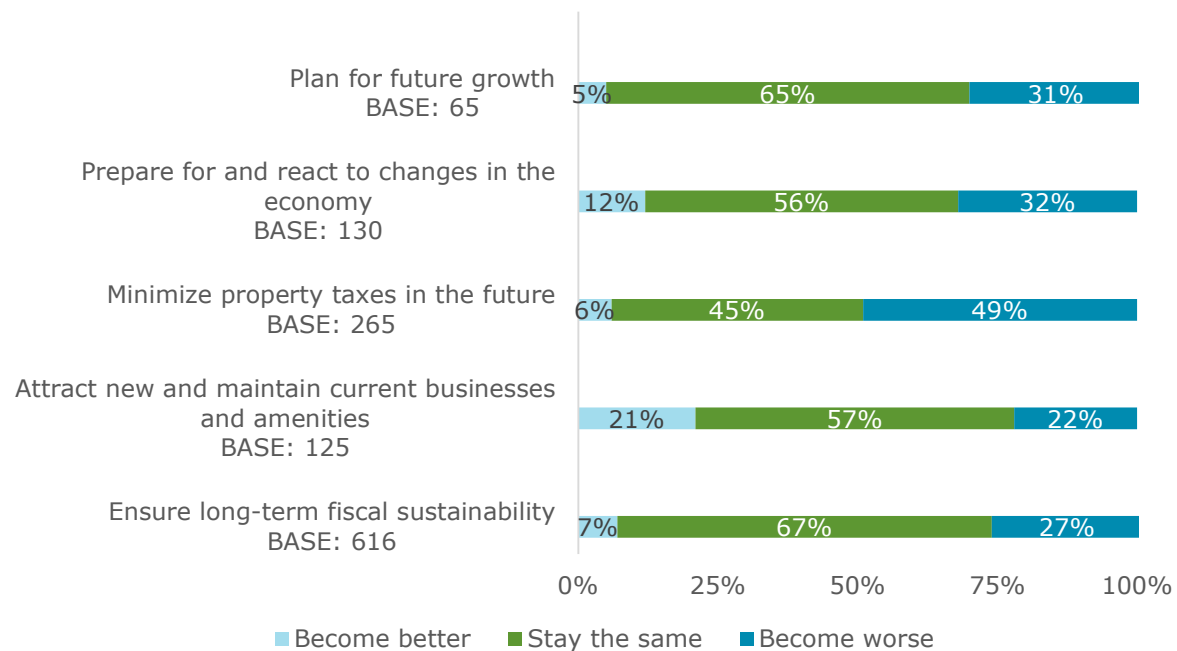
- 4% think it will improve next year
- 72% think it will stay the same next year
- 24% think it will become worse next year

Of those who thought their financial situation **worsened** over the past 12 months:

- 7% think it will improve next year
- 33% think it will stay the same next year
- 61% think it will become worse next year

We were also interested in seeing how people perceptions of how their financial situation would change stacked up against their preferred financial strategy.

Preferred Fiscal Strategy vs. Next Year's Financial Situation



*Due to rounding, percentages may not exactly equal 100%

Respondents who expected their financial situation to worsen were more likely to prioritize “Minimize property taxes in the future.” Business oriented priorities such as “Prepare for and react to changes in the economy” and “Attract new and maintain current businesses and amenities” were more popular among those who anticipated their personal financial situation to improve. “Ensure long-term fiscal sustainability” and “Plan for future growth” were popular amongst those who predicted their personal financial situation to remain the same.

Additional comments on priorities, tax rates and/or services

We invited all respondents to provide additional comments on any topic related to tax rates and services in Strathcona County. We received 209 comments from respondents. The following is a brief summary of the major themes we heard in the comments, with select examples of comments for every theme identified.

A third of comments were recommendations and ideas to lower future property tax.

Although prices have increased, peoples' wages haven't and a large amount of people don't have spare cash to manage an increase in taxes.

There should also be reviews of programs that are not efficient or are not necessary.

Inflation is a hidden tax that is making all frustrated and increasing costs is going to hurt the average Strathcona resident.

I am a single parent and it is expensive to raise children in Strathcona - I cannot afford an increase with enormous increase in everything else.

A smaller subset of comments focused on limiting capital expenditures, believing that now was not the time for new County recreation facilities.

I think we need to spend cautiously right now until we see some economic stability return.

During periods of high inflation, nice to have projects should be cancelled.

Some respondents went above and beyond – suggesting new forms of service delivery, revenue collection and County operations.

Prioritize financial stability and readiness for the future.

Universal taxation is much more acceptable to me over user fees.

We heard several different ideas regarding services levels in the County. The largest group of these comments were concerned about inadequate County services levels.

Impossible to get into swimming lessons, no support to ensure residents have first access to programs.

Please stop trying to do more with less money.

Issues with road repair, snow removal and waste removal were the most common concerns.

Snow removal was sub-standard this year, with large windrows blocking driveways.

Right turn on roads need to be cleared better in the winter.

I think bus service could improve. Road maintenance and trail maintenance.

Some commenters also expressed a preference for the County to prioritize or focus upon core services, and to deprioritize services on the periphery of the County's mandate.

Please prioritize road maintenance, library/FCS/Parks funding, and snow removal.

The County needs to stop chasing the "shiny" things and work to maintain current assets.

Several commenters were focused on rural service delivery, with many comments expressing frustration with inadequate service delivery to rural residences.

Our area does not benefit from many county services. Roads are in poor condition, fire/police too far away.

Rural Strathcona County should see the same services as within Sherwood Park with regards to snow removal, highway/roadway maintenance, bridge maintenance etc.

We also heard from a smaller subset of comments that expressed general approval or satisfaction with current tax levels and/or service levels in the County.

I understand that a city has to adjust their taxes etc. to ensure we have the services we need. Strathcona county is a wonderful city and has everything we need.

Since moving here last year, I've been INCREDIBLY impressed by how responsive the county is to addressing snow removal, looking after the parks (fixing them, keeping them up to date), and lots of others. It's amazing!

Respondent Profile

All percentages have been calculated to two decimal places, total may not exactly equal 100%.

Current employment status	% of respondents	Count
Work full-time	44.38%	581
Work part-time	6.87%	90
Homemaker	2.06%	27
Caregiver of dependent children/adults	0.76%	10
Permanently unable to work	0.61%	8
Currently looking for work	2.21%	29
Retired	37.20%	487
Student	0.38%	5
Other	2.90%	38
Prefer Not to Answer	2.59%	34
Total	100%	1309

Rent or own current residence	% of respondents	Count
Own	95.31%	1242
Rent	3.37%	44
Prefer not to answer	1.30%	17
Total	100%	1303

Age	% of respondents	Count
15 to 24	0.38%	5
25 to 34	8.37%	109
35 to 44	14.20%	185
45 to 54	18.27%	238
55 to 64	23.57%	307
65 to 74	22.58%	294
75 to 84	7.60%	99
85+	0.76%	10
Prefer Not to Answer	4.22%	55
Total	100%	1302

Do you live in:	% of respondents	Count
Neighbourhood in Sherwood Park	74.69%	977
Rural Hamlet in Strathcona County (Antler Lake, Ardrossan, Collingwood Cove, Half Moon Lake, Hastings Lake, Josephburg, North Cooking Lake, South Cooking Lake)	2.29%	30
Rural Subdivision in Strathcona County	15.44%	202
Rural area in Strathcona County that is not within a subdivision	6.26%	82
Non-Applicable	0.38%	5
Prefer Not to Answer	0.91%	12
Total	100%	1308

Household income	% of respondents	Count
Less than \$30,000	2.02%	25
\$30,000 to \$49,999	2.91%	36
\$50,000 to \$69,999	6.56%	81
\$70,000 to \$89,999	8.83%	109
\$90,000 to \$109,999	9.48%	117
\$110,000 to \$129,999	8.26%	102
\$130,000 to \$149,999	6.23%	77
\$150,000 to \$169,999	6.40%	79
\$170,000 and over	12.88%	159
Prefer Not to Answer	36.38%	449
Total	100%	1234

What's Next?

Results from this survey will be used to inform budgetary planning processes for the 2023-2026 multiyear budget that will go to Council for approval in fall of 2022.