

FY25 Montpelier Budget Priorities Survey



Coded Response Data from Free Text Question

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Summary

We received three-hundred eleven (311) individual unique responses to the free-text question at the end of the FY25 Budget Priorities Survey. This is close to half of the six-hundred forty-six (646) total survey respondents. Respondents were allowed to free-type into a short-answer Single Text Box. This feature allowed the City to gather qualitative data to complement and contextualize the quantitative data collected by the survey. The prompt asked respondents: *“Is there anything else we didn’t ask you about that you’d like to contribute to the budget discussion?”* Respondents were allowed to answer this question or write about any subject they chose. This reports the summary of ideas and themes gleaned from those responses.

Methods & Data Analysis

The large amount of raw data on its own makes it difficult to “see the forest through the trees” – i.e. draw conclusions based on the most frequently expressed ideas or concerns. To improve comprehensibility and to allow for accurate, meaningful inferences from these results, I used the **enumerative method** to code the open-ended survey responses into fifty (50) codes and 13 themes. For a detailed description of enumerative methods, see Goodrich & Rodgers’ (2015) work, *Handbook for Practical Program Evaluation* by Jossey-Bass publishers.

The left-hand column in **Table 1** indicates these grouped themes of codes. I categorized two hundred sixty-one (261) individual data points from the responses into codes. The overlapping circular diagram in **Figure 1** illustrates the relationship between individual responses, codes, and themes.

The center column in **Table 1** below represents the individual codes with the number in parentheses indicating how many times this phrase appeared in the free-text responses. For example, the code “Prioritize spending on infrastructure/ Water/sewer/streets improvements” appeared in nineteen (19) free-text responses while the code “Thank you” appeared only six (6) times throughout the responses. The word cloud in **Figure 2** provides a visual representation of the frequency of the theme present in the data. The larger the phrase, the higher the number of codes identified within that theme.

Not all expressions were coded and incorporated into this report. For example, I did not code rhetorical questions, statements of fact about unrelated individual circumstances, or opinions that did not constructively contribute to the budget discussion. For instance, I **did not** code “We offer rooms in our apartment for rent”, but I **did code** “Regional flood plain restoration will have to go hand-in-hand with water/sewage upgrades.” from the same response. To view the full raw

data from the free-text question, please see the accompanying document attached to this report.

Limitations

As with any **mixed methods** survey, it's critical to consider the results *as a whole*, rather than as individual one-off statements. Many respondents echoed the tension between wanting to maintain high-quality City services while preserving Montpelier's affordability. These "Yes, but..." or "Yes, and..." statements can only truly be appreciated by reading the full comments submitted by the author in the raw data format.

Other key limitations include:

- **Proportion of Renters to Homeowners.** This survey does not account for a representative sample of the Montpelier population. The three-hundred-eleven (311) responses account for 4.7% of the population over eighteen years of age (18) in the City. Additionally, more homeowners (86.01) responded to the survey than renters (11.72%), which is a significant divergence from the actual demographics. Approximately 55% own and 45% rent their homes in Montpelier.
- **Self-Selection Bias.** This survey was voluntary and open to all who chose to respond. This inevitably leads to self-selection bias where the most passionate/motivated voices are more likely to respond.
- **Human Factors.** Additionally, it's important to consider the imperfect and subjective nature of manually coding data. All qualitative data analyses should be understood with some margin of error and the potential for discrepancies between intended and inferred meaning.

Conclusion

The community feedback on various themes related to public management in Montpelier is comprehensive and diverse. Residents expressed gratitude for the city's efforts, emphasizing the importance of prioritizing urgent needs over wants. Infrastructure improvements, staffing cuts, spending reductions, and health and safety concerns were also prominent in the responses. The community highlighted the need for innovative revenue-generation strategies beyond property taxes, while also expressing concerns about high taxes and advocating for affordable housing. There were calls to prioritize senior and community services, implement budget adjustments, and explore cost-saving strategies.

The data underscores a nuanced set of perspectives, with residents suggesting specific projects and services, such as social worker support, childcare, and park maintenance. It also provides a snapshot in time of public opinion on a complex issue that the city can use as a benchmark in future analyses. Overall, the feedback provides a valuable foundation for city officials to consider as they navigate budgetary decisions and address the diverse needs and preferences of the Montpelier community.

Results

Table 1

Coded Data from Free Text Question: *“Is there anything else we didn’t ask you about that you’d like to contribute to the budget discussion?”*

Themes	Coded Responses	Total # of Responses in Each Theme
<i>Gratitude</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Thank you (6) - The City does a good job (1) - We support you to make hard decisions (1) 	8
<i>Wants vs. Needs</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Prioritize Montpelier’s urgent, core needs over future needs/wants/nonessential items (33) - “Don’t be Burlington”/focus on “real” issues, not “progressive” or “social justice issues (6) 	39
<i>Infrastructure</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Prioritize spending on infrastructure/ Water/sewer/streets improvements (19) - Prioritize flood mitigation and resilience/climate resilience along with infrastructure (7) - Continue to maintain plowing (1) 	27
<i>Staffing Cuts</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Remove the City Manager or the Asst. City Manager (12) - Cut administrative staffing at City Hall (13) - Cut staffing in general (9) 	34
<i>Spending Cuts</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cut arts/events spending (1) - Unspecified cuts (7) - Cut police budget (1) 	9
<i>Health & Safety</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Do not cut staffing for essential public safety services/Prioritize spending on Fire/EMS and Police (3) 	3
<i>Revenue Generation (non-property tax based)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increase tax base/increase population (6) - Increase grant funding (6) - Increase non-resident fees for Montpelier services (3) - Explore other revenue streams other than property taxes (5) - “Get creative” (6) 	31

	- Impose a wealth tax/tax on luxury items/housing (3)	
	- Increase economic activity downtown (2)	
<i>Decrease Taxes & Fees</i>	- Taxes too high (5)	15
	- Cap taxes and fees for low-income/senior/owner-occupied homes (2)	
	- Do not raise taxes/lower taxes (8)	
<i>Housing</i>	- Prioritize housing (9)	16
	- Re-zone to make new housing easier to build (4)	
	- Impose rent control for low-income residents (3)	
<i>Senior & Community Services</i>	- Support MSAC/new director (8)	10
	- Make MSAC a non-profit organization (1)	
	- Hire new Community Services directors (1)	
<i>Budget Adjustments</i>	- Start with zero-based budgeting (1)	23
	- Create a Community Budget Advisory Board to advise the budget process (1)	
	- Host budget-build focus group(s) (1)	
	- Incorporate Participatory budgeting methods to involve the community (1)	
	- Look for spending/budget efficiencies (11)	
	- Adjust the School Budget/education funding (3)	
	- Allow line-item budgeting/separate items within the budget (5)	
<i>Cost Saving Strategies</i>	- Eliminate property tax exemptions for State buildings, churches, and non-profit organizations (4)	34
	- Consolidate functions with other State/Local municipalities/share the work regionally (4)	
	- Utilize existing human capital in the City for assessments, studies, consulting services, and evaluations (1)	
	- Increase volunteer opportunities to absorb paid staff work (2)	
	- Sell the Elks Club property/abandon the Confluence Park project/discontinue new Rec Center (19)	

*Specific
Projects and
Services*

- Impose a higher tax on non-primary residencies/second homes (3)
- Increase taxes (1)
- Increase social worker support (1)
- Support families by prioritizing childcare, recreation, and community spaces (5)
- Maintain the Actionable Plan for the Elks Club site (3)
- More public transportation (1)
- Increase/maintain spending in Parks & Trees (2)

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Total # of Themes = 13

Total # of Codes = 50

Total # of Coded Data Points = 261

Figure 1

Relationship Between Responses, Codes, and Themes Hierarchy

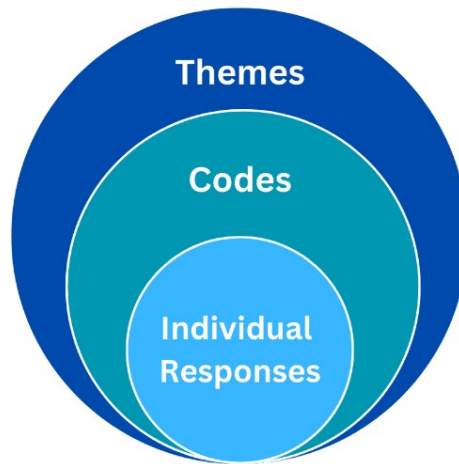
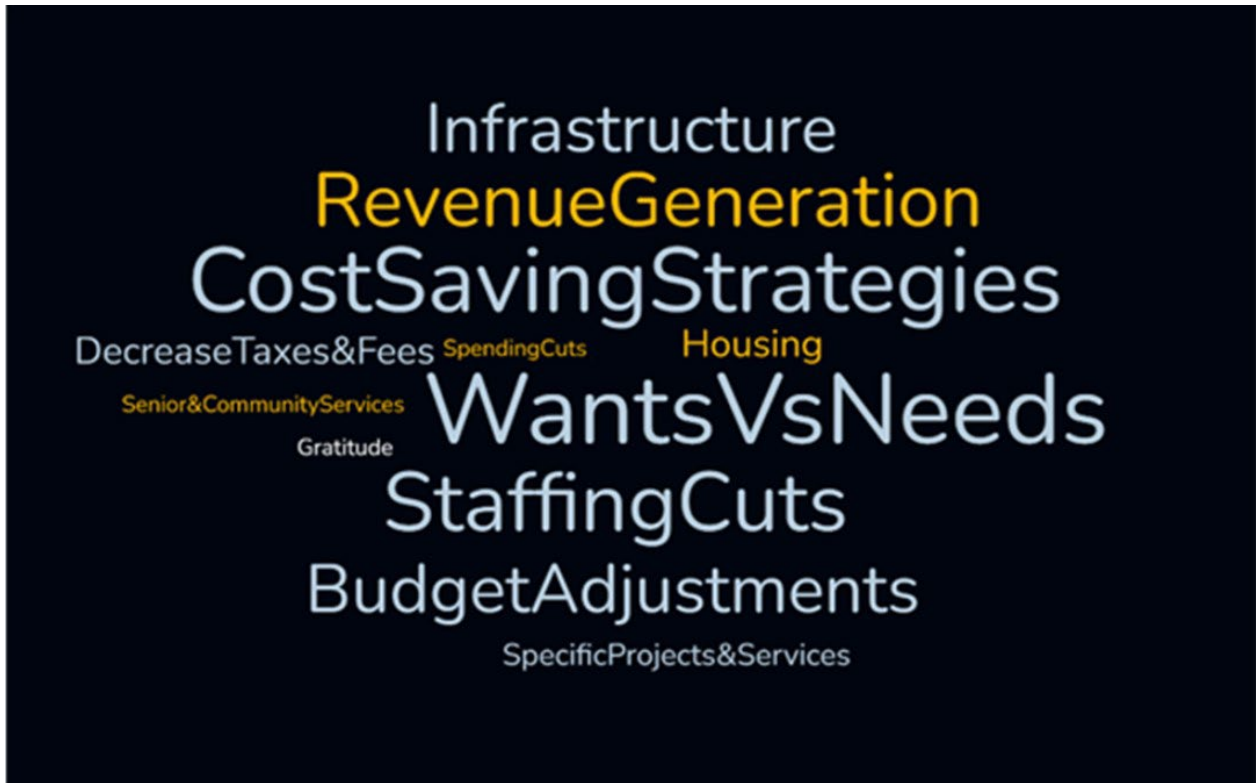


Figure 2

Themes Word Cloud



Glossary

Enumerative method - A method of qualitative data analysis that seeks to code qualitative data so that it can be understood quantitatively.

Mixed methods – surveys that incorporate and glean both quantitative and qualitative data.

References

Goodrich, D., & Rodgers, P. J. (2015) Qualitative data analysis. In K. E. Newcomer, H. P. Hatry, & J.

S. Wholey (Eds.), *Handbook for practical program evaluation* (pp. 561-635). Jossey-Bass.