

Senior Housing Survey – Summary of Findings

December 2020

Survey Respondents

The 130 survey respondents represent an appropriate mix of Harvard's seniors. They are roughly balanced by gender and across age categories. They live all over Harvard – no one neighborhood dominates.

Most live with a spouse, partner or at least one family member. Only about 15% live alone

An overwhelming majority (95%+) own their own home. For the vast majority (95%), that home is a single-family home.

Given that the survey's target was residents over the age of 50, it is not surprising that most respondents have lived in town for many years. More than 70% have lived here for over 20 years. Another 12% have lived here between 10 and 20 years.

Their Perceptions of Harvard

What They Like About Harvard (*open-ended question...responses here are grouped into like categories*):

Three attributes stand apart from the rest:

An overwhelming majority of respondents (87%) identified Harvard's "**rural environment**" as what they liked about living in Harvard. Comments included: "rural environment", "natural environment", "green spaces", "natural beauty", "farmland," and "land, sky, birds, and trees".

The second-most mentioned characteristic of Harvard that respondents like is its "**engaged community**". 34% of respondents identified this attribute. Comments included: "town spirit", "community engagement", "active community", and "kind and generous and engaged residents".

Harvard's "**small town atmosphere**" came in as a close third mention. 29% of respondents identified this attribute. Comments included: "lack of commercial development", "quaintness", "limited car traffic", and "distance from big cities".

Six additional attributes were also identified by respondents:

- Friends and Family (13%)
- Institutions / Organizations (12%)
- Culture / History (5%)
- Everything / Almost Everything (4%)
- Large House Lots (3%)
- Other / Miscellaneous (6%)

What They Don't Like About Harvard (*open-ended question...responses here are grouped into like categories*). This question was intended to elicit responses of what Harvard seniors felt were lacking in town. The following categories were identified and are listed below in rank order of most mentions to least:

- **Local Government and Services (24 responses)** The service-oriented single responses include no gas (natural or gasoline?), no town water, poor cell service, power outages, lack of recreational or playing fields, lack of ISP options, no community center, and no public transportation. Inadequacies cited include too few cultural activities, poor upkeep of buildings, need for new high school, too dependent on volunteers, and lack of highway department responsiveness.
- **Cost of Living, Housing Costs, Taxes (22 responses – tied with below)** High taxes were the predominant comment in this set with specific aspects including huge increases and rapidly or quickly rising. Comments included that town services other than schools were not satisfactory given the high taxes; it appears that the Town is trying to drive seniors out; and the high cost of living in Harvard.
- **Commuting and Access to Shopping/Services (22 responses)** A large number of respondents lamented long commutes to Boston or long drives to shopping, services, and other activities. Specifically, destinations like grocery stores, drugstores, cultural activities, restaurants, and recreation were mentioned.
- **Homogeneity, Culture, and Social (20 responses)** There were a set of comments in this category that were critical of what they perceived as a homogenous local culture with a distinct lack of diversity, generally relating to socioeconomic diversity. Other terms to describe this included insular, monoculture, closed/gated community, small-minded, curmudgeonly, irrational, cliques, entitled, inequities, ostentatious, and cloistered. The school community was called out for not engaging with the greater community and leaving when kids graduate.
- **Noise, Traffic, Safety, and Other Nuisances (16 responses)** Noise was the principal concern in this category (Devens' firing range, 495 traffic, trucking and other sources from Devens.) Traffic issues included increasing in-town traffic, speeding, scary winter driving, narrow roads, commuter through traffic, and truck traffic.
- **Growth, Progress, or Change (14 responses)** As should be expected, this category displayed a wide range of strong opinions related to whether Harvard should stay the same or be open to change. Comments included: "increasing", "new", or "creeping" development as a problem; critical of the Planning Board and Town Administrator for attempting to build and develop the town; and not liking the development already present in Ayer Road commercial district and the traffic in that area. Opposing that were respondents that were critical of a resistance to "progress" citing local opposition to housing, cell towers, and development. Other responses noted a "talk but no action" perspective, lack of vibrant commercial center, and a "one size fits all" zoning.

- **Commercial or Business (13 Responses) Respondents** spoke either of too few commercial opportunities in town or the fact that the existing commercial district did not measure up to what it needs to be. Specific commercial deficits included restaurants, grocery store, theatre, and stores and services in general. Other key phrases included needing a gathering place, recognizing the Harvard General Store, needing commercial to offset taxes, and describing the commercial district as a desert with too much of an industrial feel.
- **Residential Options for Seniors (6 responses)** A few comments that noted the lack of (reasonably priced) housing for downsizing. Note this question was addressed in the survey.
- **Municipal Fiscal Issues (6 responses)** The Town was criticized for not spending money on needed projects, both spending too much and mismanaging money, struggle budgeting for needs, and finally a reluctance to consider moderate development to strengthen finances. The school budget was cited as being too much vs. the rest of the town's needs.
- **Sidewalks and Pedestrian Environment (4 responses)** The lack of sidewalks and concern over pedestrian safety in town were the comments in this category
- **Senior-Friendly Community (2 responses)** Two responses expressing that Harvard is not a senior- or age-friendly community and that is no place for seniors to congregate.

Their Thoughts About Moving As They Age

Plan on Moving?

Almost 50% of respondents say yes - they plan on moving from their current residence as they age...whether that's within 5 years (19%) or beyond 5 years (30%).

Although the question does not specify moving away from Harvard, an additional handful of respondents apparently took it that way and wrote in comments suggesting that although they have no definitive plans for moving, they will move away from Harvard eventually unless alternatives re taxes and housing options appear.

About 40% of respondents noted that they do not plan on moving in the near future.

Prefer to Remain in Harvard?

There is a strong love for Harvard across all age groups. Whether they anticipate moving or not, they want to remain in Harvard. Overall two-thirds of all respondents would prefer to remain in Harvard as they age. However, The younger the survey participants, the more likely they are to move and the more they want to move wherever their needs are met. At 55+ the overwhelming majority want to remain in Harvard. But approximately 25% in the 71-75 and 76-80 age groups reported a need to move within the next five years together with a move to wherever their needs are met.

Of the remaining participants, one-third, most say they could stay or leave - it doesn't matter, as long as their needs are met (23% of total).

Only 10% of the overall respondents report they would prefer to leave Harvard.

Reasons They Would Move (*"choose as many options as apply" question – 123 people answered, giving 335 responses; % given are % of respondents*):

Although only about half of the respondents said that they anticipate moving within or beyond 5 years, virtually all had opinions about what would cause them to move.

The top four reasons concern their current home:

- Property taxes on my current home are too high. (42%)
- My current home or yard is larger than I need or want now (38%)
- My current home or yard needs too much maintenance or repair. (35%)
- My current home does not have the accessibility accommodations I expect to need (27%)

Lower on the list, but still significant are access to services, shops, activities, and more. A bar chart of responses is included in the survey response packet and is worth reading.

Their Thoughts about Senior Housing in Harvard

Would They Consider Moving to Senior Housing in Harvard?

35% of respondents said yes. Adding in the "maybes" to this group brings it to 73%.
Only 27% said no.

What Type(s) of Housing Would They Consider Moving To?* (116 respondents – 241 responses)

The top three responses are: Independent Living Community Small Homes/Cottages (46% of respondents), Independent Living Community Townhouses/Apartments (35% of respondents), and Small Homes/Small Lots (34% of respondents). The next most-chosen option is a bit further down in popularity is CCRC (22% of respondents).

If they move, the overwhelming majority still prefers to own (37.8% own in simple fee, 33.3% own in condominium)

What they want in their new senior residences?

- 2 bedrooms (62.1%), extra bedroom for caregivers or guests (50.4%)
- First floor living: all rooms on first floor (34.2%), master on first floor (54.7%)
- Between 1,00 – 1,500 sq. ft. (44.3%) and 1,500 – 2,000 sq. ft. (25.5%)
- Want to accommodate their needs as they age: universal design (48.7%), accessibility (28.2%)
- A home that replicates their current home with: a washer/dryer (64.2%), a full kitchen (63.3%), private outdoor space (60%), and a common green or open space (52.5%)

What services do they want?

Falls under the category of maintenance. Now that they have downsized, they want maintenance related services:

- Home maintenance services (52.7%), house cleaning service, (44.6%)

Their Thoughts About Financing Their Senior Housing *

Own or Rent

The majority of participants currently own their single-family homes.

In a future move as they age, the majority would still prefer to own (71.1%) in either simple ownership or in condo ownership.

Renters are a minority, however the desire to rent as they age more than doubles, from approximately 4% to 12.6% respectively.

Monthly Expenses

A large number of participants preferred not to say how much they were willing to spend on a monthly basis for housing costs, but of those who did participate, the middle mark was between \$1500 - \$2000 per month. The remaining participants were equally distributed on either side of that amount, spending more or less per month.

Importance of Affordability

When asked how important is housing affordability to you, the participants reported it as being important, a surprising number were in the middle, and for over 20%, it was not an important decision maker.

Affordable Housing

When asked if they would like more information about affordable housing a large number (46.3%) said "no." Many were undecided and the remainder did want more information on affordable housing (17.9%). In combining this interest in affordable housing information with our 71-80 year old participants who anticipate moving within the next five years and will move to wherever their needs are met, indicates a need to address affordable housing in the near future to serve our aging Harvard residents.

Additional Thoughts

How Do They Think Harvard Should Balance the Need for Senior Housing with the Desire to Preserve the Town's Rural Character?

The 80 respondents who gave substantive answers to this question (3 basically said "I don't know") had much to say on this topic – enough that even the summary write-up is a multi-page document. (See attached). Several messages come across loudly and clearly:

- First: a small percentage of respondents (6%...5 people) suggest we should not or cannot achieve such a balance, and therefore should do nothing. "Don't build". An equally small group (8%...6 people) apparently take the opposing view. They provide no thoughts on how to preserve our rural character

and simply emphasize the need for senior housing. (As one says, “*Phooey on the town’s rural New England character! How about services that actually help the residents?*”).

But the vast majority of respondents (86%...69 people) provide thoughtful opinions on how to add the housing but not lose the character. The strong message here is that they have no desire to add the very housing they need at the cost of damaging all that they love about the town.

- Second: The second message here is that those 69 suggest there are many ways the balance between senior housing and rural environment can be struck. The detailed comments illustrate the range of opinions and possible solutions. (See the detail page in the attached PowerPoint presentation.)

- 41% of respondents say the answer lies in **specifying what the senior housing can/should look like** (building design + setback requirements + open space preservation)).
- 24% argue that **where we put senior housing** is the key to maintaining that balance.
- 13% say that **defining the types of buildings we allow** is the key.
- 13% say that size - **limiting the number of buildings we allow** in a development is the key.

More broadly -- 61% advocate **some combination of “where”, “what type we allow” and “how many buildings we allow”** is the key.

What Do They Think Could Be Done to Make Harvard More Age-Friendly?

The following summarizes mentions in rank order of most mentions:

- **Want sidewalks or paths:** Our seniors want safe, well maintained sidewalks and trails.
- **Want better transportation access or availability:** van service weekends and evenings and public transportation to medical facilities and grocery stores.
- **Want housing alternatives to large single-family homes on large lots:**
 - Smaller one-story homes on small lots
 - Low cost to reasonably priced homes
 - Mixed residential and shopping services village
 - Cluster type housing
 - In-law apartments
 - Senior housing in town center
 - Townhouses and condos
 - Affordable housing
 - Graduated facility – independent to assisted

The following categories received the same number of mentions:

- **Want a larger senior center and more integrated activities:** more activities, larger groups and multigenerational activities
- **Stated taxes and cost of living were a problem**
- **Want shopping and restaurants**

(See attached for details.)

**Note: Those who said “no” to the above question were asked to skip the next set of questions, which are about what type of housing respondents prefer and what elements it should include. Theoretically, then, we should have no more than ~95 responses to each of these questions. We have more like 115 respondents...some of those “no”s answered anyway.*