

# **Strong Neighborhoods: Quality of Life Study in Auburn, Maine**

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## Executive Summary

This project was created in collaboration with Reine Mynahan, Community Development Director for the City of Auburn to survey Auburn residents and gather information regarding the quality of their life. The City of Auburn will receive funds from the U.S Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The purpose of the survey was to collect residents' opinions on where the HUD funds should be allocated to best benefit the community. According to the City's 2011-2014 Consolidated Plan, their main goals are to create affordable housing, safe neighborhoods, and economic development.

Our group along with two others, a total of nine students, administered the survey in three neighborhoods in Auburn: Downtown, Union Street, and New Auburn. Based on a recent city survey of blighted areas, these neighborhood boundaries were determined by areas that exhibit conditions of blight, which are in need of the most assistance. Our group was assigned to survey Downtown Auburn. Although the three groups collected data separately, we made sure to maintain the same methods while conducting the survey in order to be consistent.

The survey we administered gauged what Auburn residents would like to see improved in their community as well as what services are used and underused. Working with the other groups, we collected results that provide the perceptions of the social and physical conditions of these areas. Our results show that residents have a general discontented perception of the current state of their neighborhood. Many people were very opinionated on the subject of street safety. Changes they would like to see in the neighborhood include better housing, less traffic and more sidewalks. Other notable results are the fact that 75% of residents surveyed were renters, half of the people we surveyed have lived in Auburn for over 21 years and between all three neighborhoods, Downtown ranked as the poorest quality place to live (30%) among all three neighborhoods of study.

We reported our results to the Citizen's Advisory Committee (CAC), who will use our results to make recommendations to the City Counsel as to what projects they believe should take priority. This report includes any differences we see between the opinions of residents, similarities and differences between the three neighborhoods, and any other trends that appear important. This was presented to the CAC on December 2, 2014 and concluded our project.

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## Introduction

In order to fully understand the implications of the quality of life survey, it is important to explore the different terms and concepts that surround the topic. The area of focus for this study is downtown Auburn, which was once a bustling city in Maine. Today, the downtown has deteriorated, a fate that has befallen many American cities. This historical trend is explored, followed by a definition and exploration of the term 'blight', which is used frequently in reference to urban development and revitalization. Next, the idea of 'quality of life' is addressed as it applies to this project. This section concludes with a brief history of Lewiston-Auburn, Maine and reviews what the city of Auburn has been doing recently to address urban development projects.

Ever since the Industrial Revolution influenced people to live close to one another for employment, Americans have thought of downtowns as the heart of their cities. A thriving downtown is indicative of an economically healthy city. Robert M. Fogelson (2001) writes that "a prosperous downtown [is] as vital to the well-being of a city as a strong heart [is] to the well-being of a person." Conversely, when the downtown of a city starts to disintegrate, it reflects on the people who live there. If a city's downtown is suffering, it reflects on the city as a whole. This deterioration could be caused by an economic downturn, but it can also be a result of housing policy that restricts who can live in certain areas. Today, the shape of American cities "reflects the interaction of special markets for urban housing and a series of policy initiatives" (Bartlett 1998). The combination of policies that dictate housing prices, where housing can be built, and the process of financing housing have a major impact on the organization of urban space. It is important to consider all of these factors when one considers why a downtown looks the way it does. Areas of cities that have especially substandard housing and low quality of life tend to be deemed 'blighted' by state and local governments. It is important to recognize the evolving definition of 'blight' in order to understand the impact it has on urban revitalization projects.

Housing blight is defined as an area where the major portion of housing is detrimental to the health, safety or welfare of occupants; detrimental conditions include overcrowding, dilapidation, poor ventilation, and sanitation (Klove 1941). Typically, areas categorized by the city as being "blighted" are demolished or renovated. The term "blight" has political, economic, and social connotations, most of which are negative. Bales (1985) offers yet another definition of blight as "visually demeaning and aesthetically depressing." Colin Gordon (2003) follows the broadening of the term's definition from the nineteenth century through the Progressive Era and into the 1990s. Initially, "blight" referred to substandard housing, but eventually broadened to suggest "sub-optimal" economic development (Gordon 2003). This important shift illustrates two key points: first, how the word "blight" is fluid and can change over time; second, how "blight" has increasingly been discussed in economic terms.

Gordon (2003) addresses both of these points and argues that courts have granted governments "carte blanche in their creative search for 'blighted' areas eligible for federal funds

or local tax breaks.” This suggests that areas that have been deemed “blighted” may not really be in as bad shape as they are made out to be. Governments could be using the highly politicized word to seek funds and/or tax breaks fueled by the long history of anxiety surrounding urban, inner city housing (Gordon 2003).

One possible reason why local governments have had to resort to these creative measures in order to help stimulate the economic growth of city centers is the post-World War II boom. As the interstate highway systems developed, more and more people (middle/upper class white people) left the city for the suburbs and much of the financial capital of cities went with them. Discussions of blight became strategic endeavors on the part of city officials and planners to take back some of this financial capital. As Gordon (2003) helps point out, the term “blight” was thrown around loosely, causing it to take on many meanings and appropriations, which illustrates its inherent subjectivity.

As we further unpack the notion of blight, it becomes clear that its varied meanings all point to an underlying assumption that blight negatively affects quality of life. As we shall see, quality of life also rests in subjective determinants. Marans & Stimson (2011) and Prakash (1982) offer two different takes on quality of life by refining their focuses to quality of *urban* life and quality of *working* life, respectively. Just as blight cannot be understood in strictly economic terms, it is nearly impossible to assess all aspects of quality of life. As modern technology has made our world smaller, especially in terms of communication, the once-distinct lines between the home and the workplace, for example, have become much more ambiguous. However, by disaggregating our lives into more digestible units, such as the workplace, or specifically the city, we can begin to put together the larger puzzle that underlies an investigation of quality of life. With this theoretical framework in mind, we can now discuss the historical processes in Lewiston-Auburn, Maine that produced the present blight conditions and investigations of quality of life.

Lewiston-Auburn has quite a tumultuous history that has led to economically depressed areas and blighted neighborhoods. In the 1870’s, Auburn experienced a surge of capital and population when it was able to create a successful shoe manufacturing industry, using the Androscoggin River as its main source of power (Bethel Historical Society 2007). The development of the canal system in 1875 facilitated the formation of half a dozen mills, bringing great economic success to Lewiston-Auburn. In the 1940s, the mills recovered from the economic depression and were increasing production to keep up with wartime demands. But with increased production, came increased waste. The mills discharged an incredible amount of toxins into the river and into the air. The river’s dissolved oxygen levels were so low that almost all aquatic life died each winter. The air was filled with so much sulfite that people suffered from effluvia and the smell alone was enough to deter people from living close to the river. Families who could afford to leave, did. There was an exodus out of the Lewiston-Auburn area and the economy suffered immensely as a result (Bethel Historical Society 2007). This process falls directly in line with the nationwide migration of people (middle/upper-class) and capital out of the city, into the suburbs. More specifically, to return to our previous definitions of blight, the

environmental toxins in Auburn's air and water certainly indicate poor sanitation and substandard quality of life.

Finally, by way of moving towards a more detailed discussion of our methodology, we will situate our survey process within the larger scope of urban planning and collaborative planning. Within the past couple decades, there has been a new trend in urban planning to use collaborative visioning methods to include the needs and wants of individuals in a community in order to combat blight. Traditionally, urban planning has been an arena for political struggle between employed planners and interest groups (McCann 2001). This new collaborative visioning method is an attempt at inclusivity in the decision-making process by "develop[ing] goals for the future of a city through consensus-based meetings open to all interested parties" (McCann 2001). While full of good intentions, the collective visioning process is sometimes viewed as an exercise in appeasement; a way to let people voice their grievances and "feel better about themselves" (McCann 2001). It is very important for Auburn planners to distribute surveys to residents in order to make policy-making a more collaborative and inclusive process even though the HUD grant does not specifically require survey methods.

In recent years, the City of Auburn has written several 5-year Consolidated Plans as a prerequisite to receiving funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The end of the 2010-2014 Consolidated Plan has arrived and our group has helped collect the community's opinions on where the upcoming HUD funds should be allocated. The City of Auburn's overarching goal, based on their 2010-2014 Consolidated Plan is to create affordable housing and promote neighborhood revitalization and economic development. In terms of blight, a low-income, inner-city core has developed in Auburn as wealthier neighborhoods have appeared on the outskirts of the city. As a result, the inner city of Auburn has high resident turnover rates and deteriorated buildings and streets. With the HUD funding, the City of Auburn hopes to invest money into these areas; improving infrastructure, public facilities and providing environmental protection to the residents (City of Auburn 2010). Our community partner, Reine Mynahan, employed data collected from a housing census study and has set up definitive boundaries of blighted areas: Downtown Auburn, New Auburn, and Union Street area (Map 1). In a similar study of Chicago, Robert Klove (1941) stressed the importance of setting up these boundaries in order to fully understand the magnitude of the problem and move forward with a suitable solution. The ultimate goals of investing in these areas are to establish walkable, integrated neighborhoods with safe buildings, conserve natural resources and land with development potential, and provide services to prevent families and individuals from becoming homeless (City of Auburn 2010). Our role in this long term improvement of the City of Auburn has been to collect information through surveying in order create an understanding of where the residents' priorities lie in the specific areas that will be affected. Our survey gives a voice to the community and enables them to express their opinions and take part in changes to their immediate environment.

## Methodology

This project required three groups to edit, implement, and analyze surveys across three neighborhoods in Auburn. The survey used had already been created by the City of Auburn prior to our work on the project. Throughout September 2014 we worked with our community partner, Reine and the two other survey groups to cut down the length of the survey in order to make more concise and direct. Since each neighborhood used the same survey, it was extremely important that our survey methods were consistent not only between immediate group members, but also between groups assigned to different neighborhoods. This way, analysis and comparison of the results would be feasible across all three groups. With Reine's approval, we were able to finalize the survey and begin our fieldwork in downtown Auburn on October 2, 2014.

Surveys were collected from October 2, 2014 until Election Day on November 4, 2014. Survey implementation varied by time and place in order to try and maximize subject diversity within neighborhoods. Surveys were conducted on various days of the week at different times of day in order to gather opinions from as many different kinds of people as possible. Community members were approached to take the survey in public places such as outside the Auburn Library, on the sidewalks of some of the main streets, and on their property in residential blocks. Instead of using a tablet to record responses as was originally suggested, the survey was implemented on paper in order to make the surveyors more approachable and relatable. While some respondents chose to complete the survey themselves, more often than not the surveyor conducted the survey orally and recorded the respondents' answers on paper copies of the survey. Depending on weather and the time of day, we sometimes administered surveys together as a group of three, but also broke off by ourselves or in pairs to cover more ground.

While every effort was made to get a representative sample of the downtown neighborhood, we recognize that some group's voices may have gone unheard due to the constraints of our surveying dates and times. For example, we found it difficult to administer the survey to individuals who worked regular office jobs because the times during which we went out were normal working hours. Both qualitative and quantitative data were recorded. The quantitative survey data was recorded by hand and later inputted to an online data analysis program, SurveyMonkey.



# CDBG Target Areas



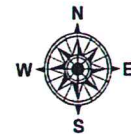
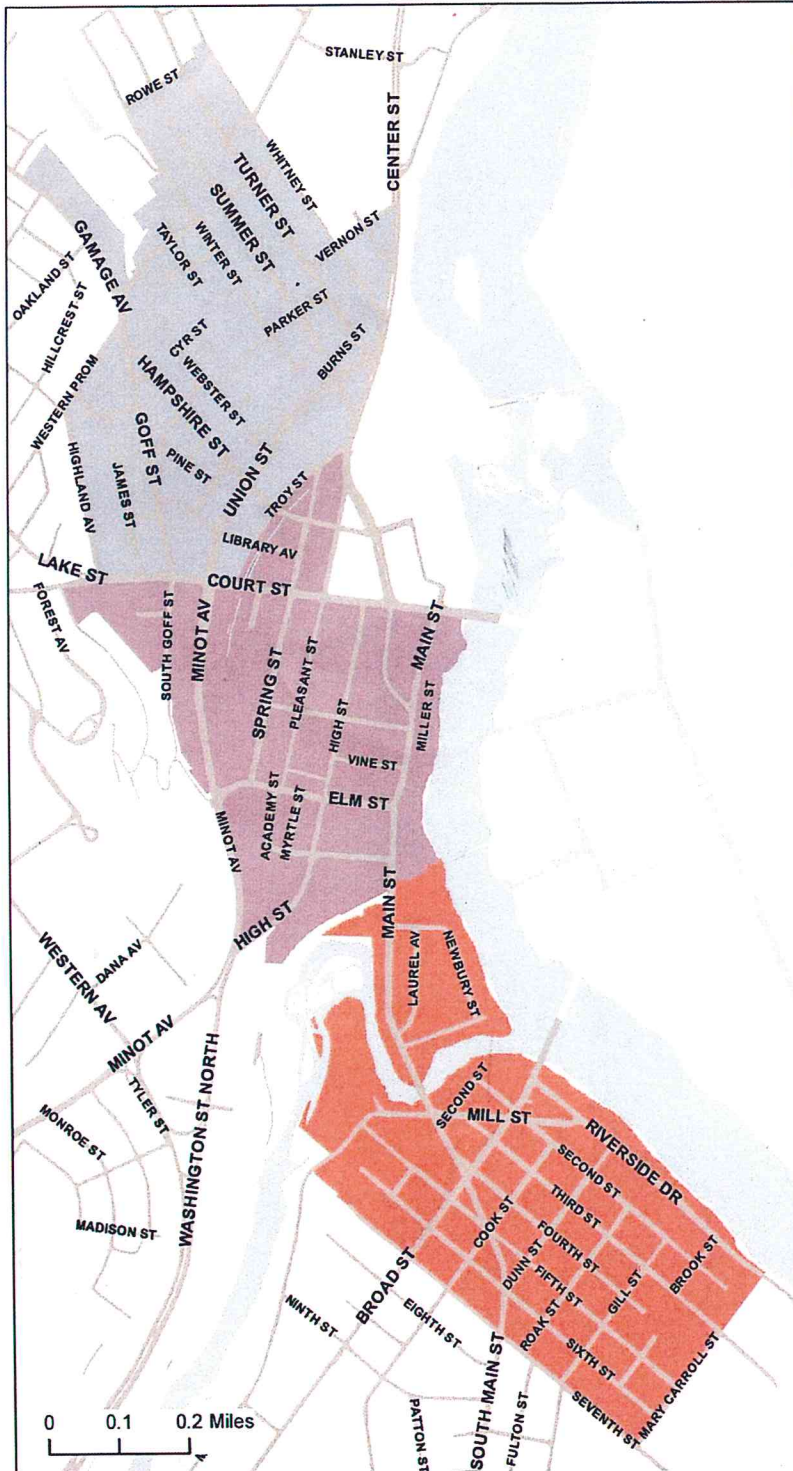
## City of Auburn

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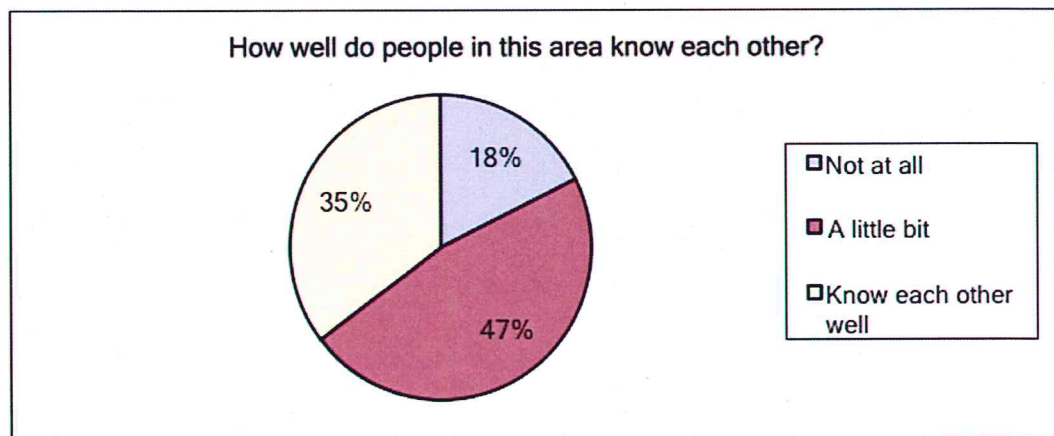
**DISCLAIMER**  
While every effort has been made to ensure that these data are accurate and reliable, the City of Auburn cannot accept any responsibility for any errors, omissions, or positional accuracy, and therefore, there are no warranties which accompany this product. Users of the information displayed on this map are strongly cautioned to verify all information before making any decisions.

**Map 1.** Map of the three surveyed neighborhoods: blue is Union Street, purple is Downtown, and orange is New Auburn.

## Results & Discussion

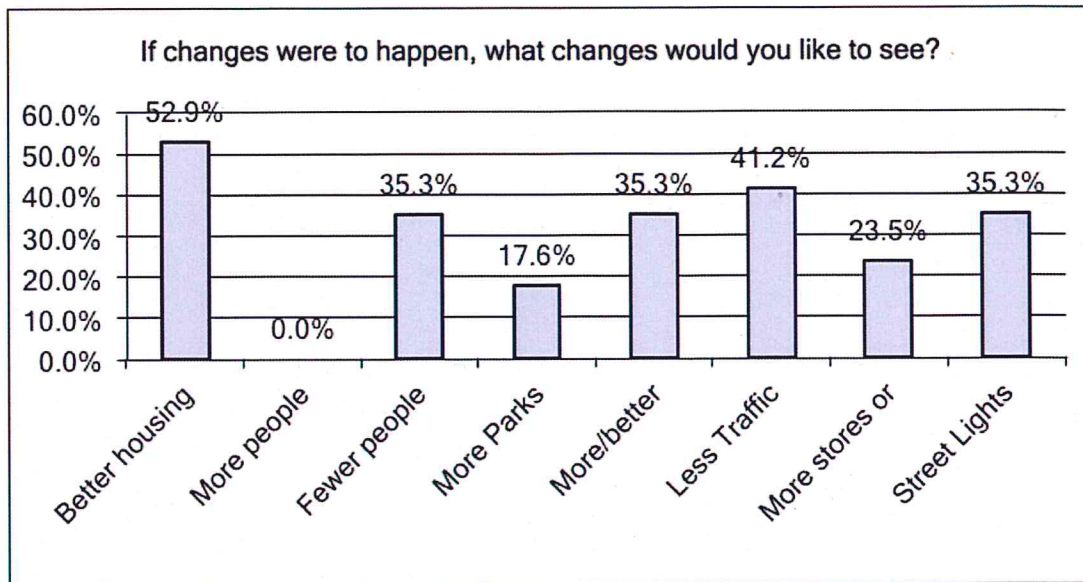
The preliminary quantitative results suggest that an overwhelming majority of residents (93%) would like to see significant changes in the Downtown neighborhood of Auburn, Maine. Items that arose from the surveys as sources of issues are neighbor-to-neighbor communication, street/pedestrian safety, lack of bus system use, and the physical conditions of houses. Downtown resident's most important future priorities include an expansion of park facilities and increased availability of family housing.

A current issue in Auburn that Reine Mynahan mentioned is the high transience rates in these blighted areas due to a large portion of the population being renters. A majority of those surveyed are renters (80% in Downtown; 75% in Union Street; 35% in New Auburn). Because of the high transience rates, neighbors do not get a chance to get to know each other. As shown in Figure 1, about one-fifth of Downtown respondents said that they do not know their neighbors at all. The rate of non-communication between Downtown residents is quite high especially compared to New Auburn where everyone interviewed said that they know their neighbors, at least a little bit. Downtown Auburn also reported having the lowest percentage of residents who often chat with their neighbors at 17% (Union St: 28%; New Auburn: 37%).



**Figure 1.** Downtown residents' response to "how well do people in this area know each other?" Only 35% of respondents know their neighbors well.

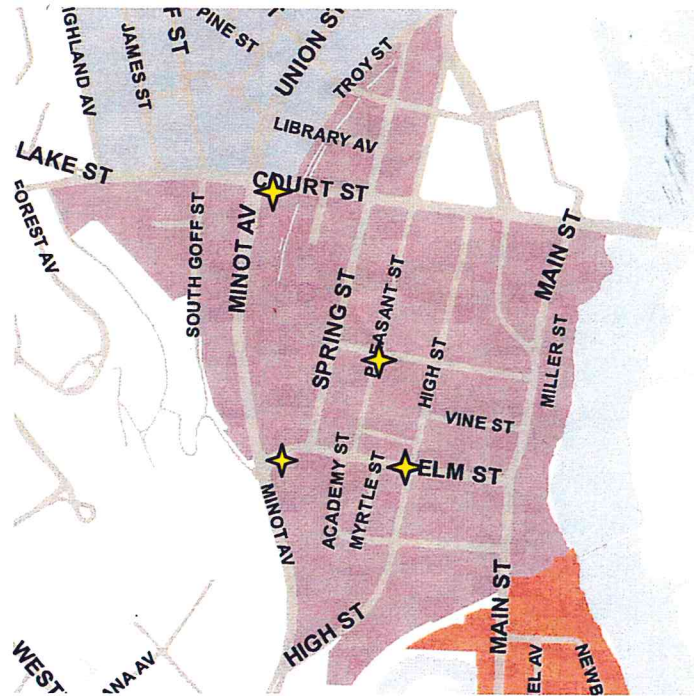
Alternatively, residents also voiced a desire for there to be fewer people in Downtown Auburn. Figure 2 shows the response to the question: "If changes were to happen, what would you like to see?" 35% of respondents said that they would prefer fewer people in their neighborhood, compared to 17% in New Auburn and 33% in Union Street. Downtown is a place where many people pass through or only stop by for an errand, which is why the presence of too many people is an issue for Downtown residents. It appears that residents are unhappy with the large number of transient people because of the resulting increase in traffic. The Downtown neighborhood has the most people passing through it compared to the other two neighborhoods, which raises the issue of street safety and traffic, a problem we will examine in the next section.



**Figure 2.** Response to question, “If changes were to happen, what changes would you like to see?”

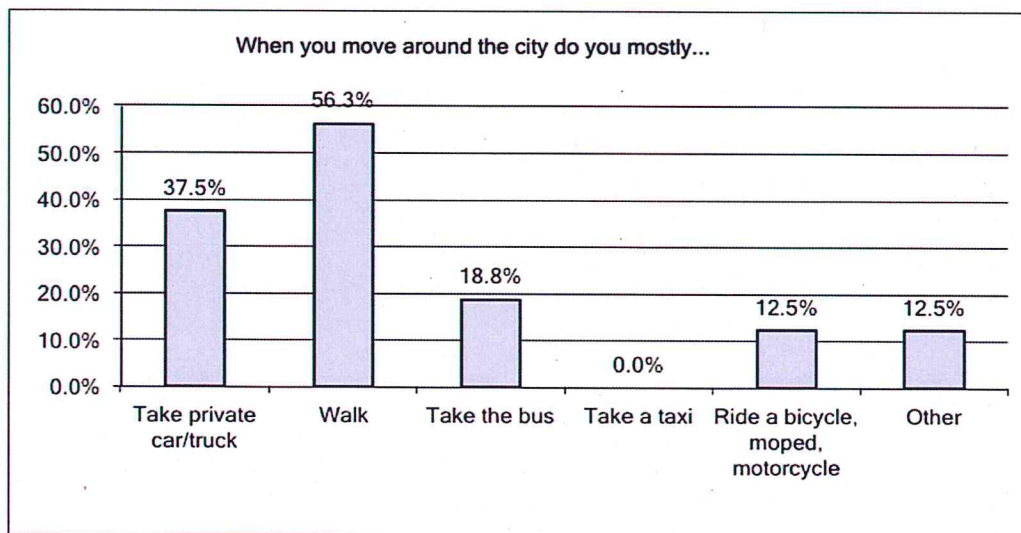
Many Downtown residents noted issues with dangerous roads, referencing specific streets and intersections where accidents frequently occur. Intersections at Pleasant Street and Drummond Street and High Street and Elm Street were cited as particularly notable (Map 2). A majority of residents explained that these streets, which are frequented by children, have high rates of collisions. These collisions are usually due to poor visibility -- High Street is uphill and one-way and the cars going up this street are often speeding and do not have time to see vehicles crossing at Elm Street. One resident, a nurse and mother of one, could recall a handful accidents that had happened at this intersection and explained that as a healthcare worker, she felt obliged to go assist those involved in the accident until emergency services arrived. Another cause for collisions in Downtown Auburn is confusing intersections where there is only a two-way stop when it would be more logical to have a four-way stop.

An additional factor that makes these areas dangerous is speeding. Many residents noted that speeding is a widespread issue, especially on Pleasant Street. Several respondents suggested that speed bumps be added to the street to reduce speeding, especially because many children live in these neighborhoods. 38% of those surveyed rated Downtown as being a poor place to raise children. This number could be a result of the dangerous street conditions and parents feeling uncomfortable having their children play and walk around outside of their homes. An important part of neighborhood revitalization is the creation of a community where children and their parents feel safe. Focusing on the improvement of street conditions and community interaction will promote a sense of safety and accountability among residents.

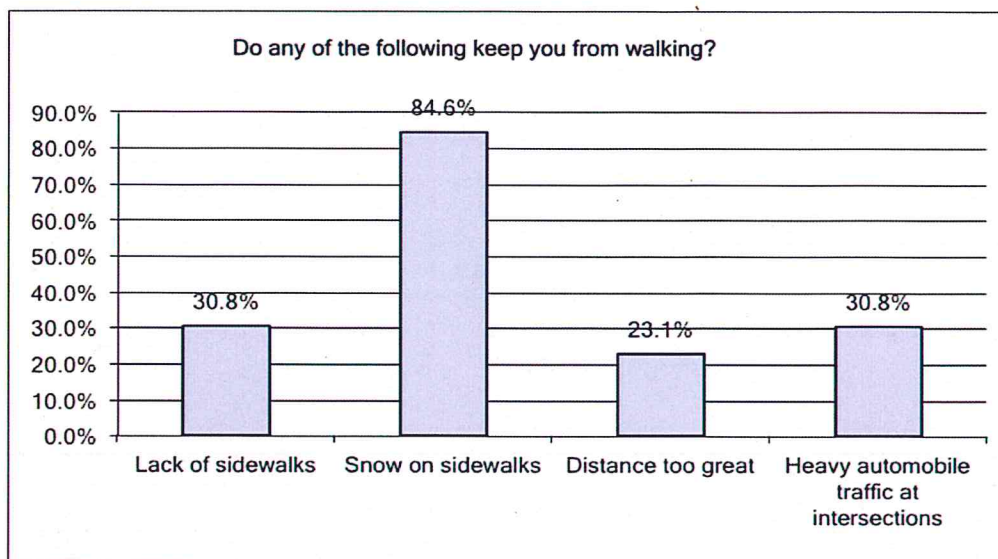


**Map 2.** Close-up of Downtown Auburn. The dangerous intersections reported by Downtown residents are marked with a yellow star.

Pedestrian safety is also a very important issue for Downtown residents, especially because an overwhelming majority of residents in this area walk as their dominant mode of transportation (Figure 3). Several residents reported that busy intersections cause them trouble when walking to their destination (Figure 4). One respondent suggested that pedestrian walk signals be added to more of the busy intersections such as along Court Street to ensure safe pedestrian crossing.

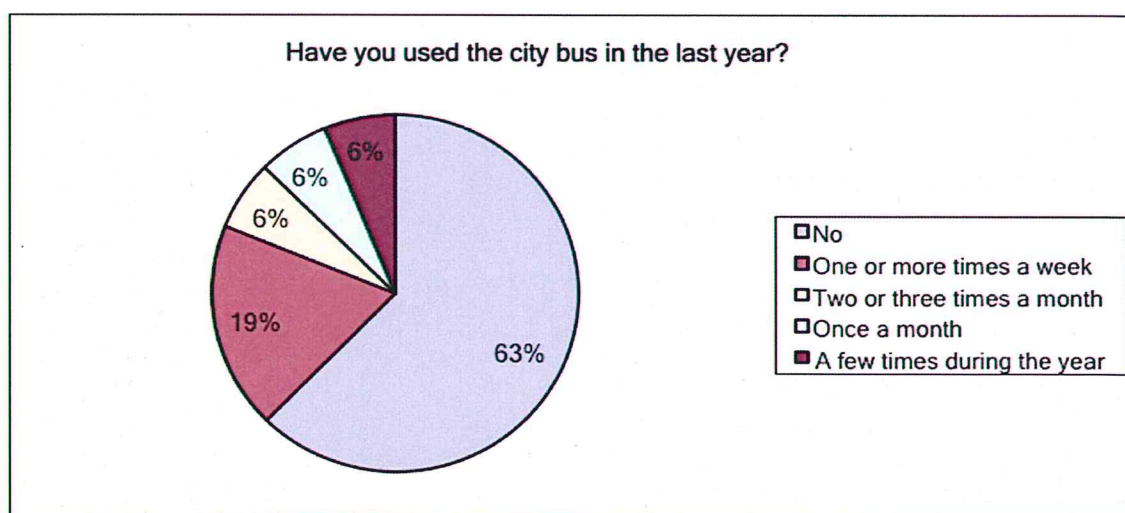


**Figure 3.** Resident's answer to how they usually move around the city.



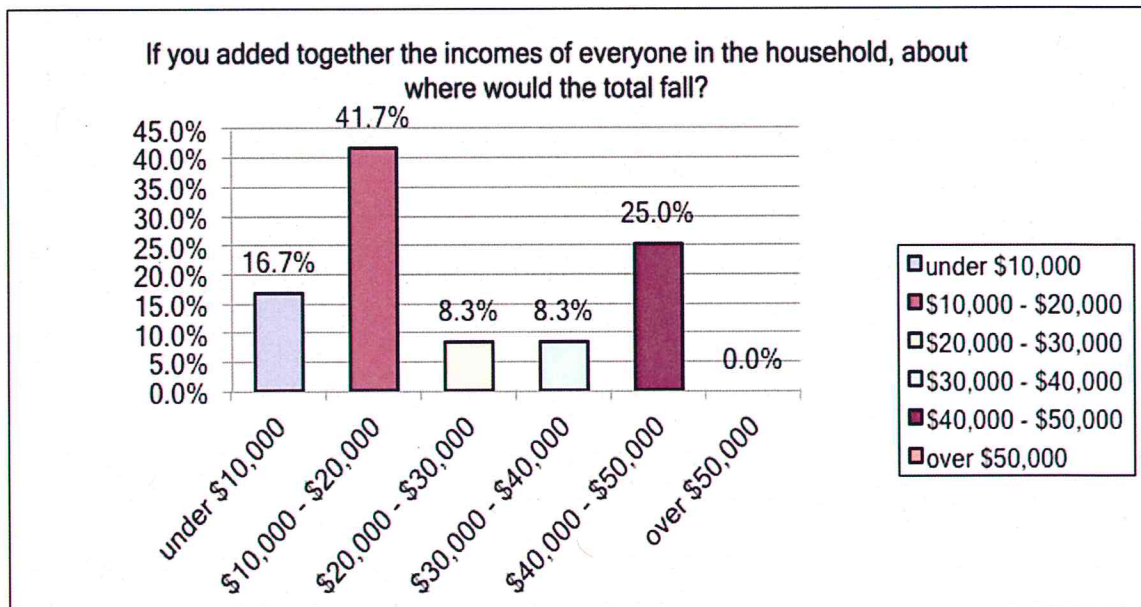
**Figure 4.** The major barriers that respondents said keep them from walking around Downtown Auburn

Another important finding is the general lack of bus use within the Downtown neighborhood. Very few respondents (14%) had a printed map/schedule for the bus routes, although 19% of Downtown residents claimed to use the bus at least a few times annually, which is notably higher than New Auburn (0%) and Union Street (12%) (Figure 5). It was reported that the main reason that people do not use the bus on a regular basis is simply because they do not think to use it (70%). Many residents explained that they would rather ask a friend to drive them or use Western Maine Transportation Services. Improving bus ridership in Downtown would be extremely helpful to poorer residents who may not earn enough to own a car.

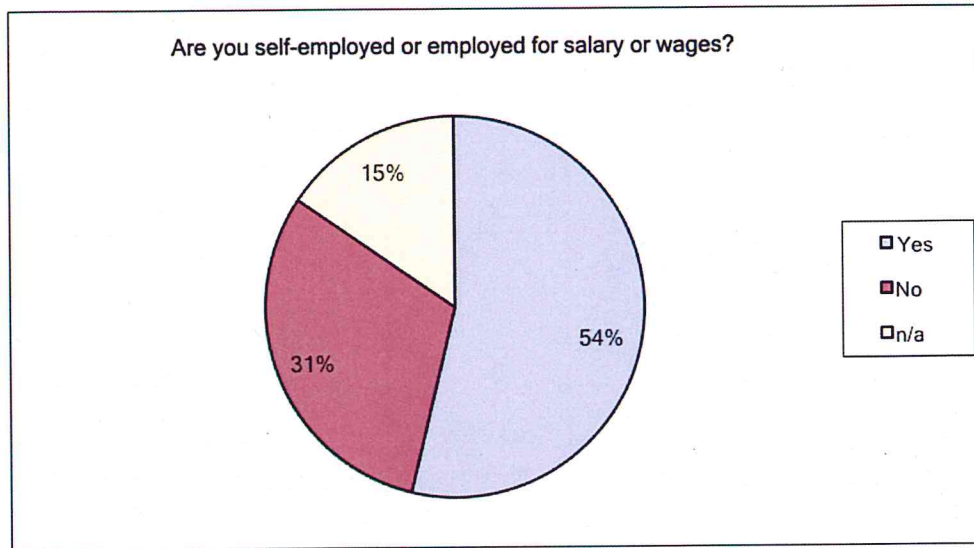


**Figure 5.** Downtown residents' response to the question "Have you used the city bus in the last year?" An overwhelming majority did not take the bus at all over the past year.

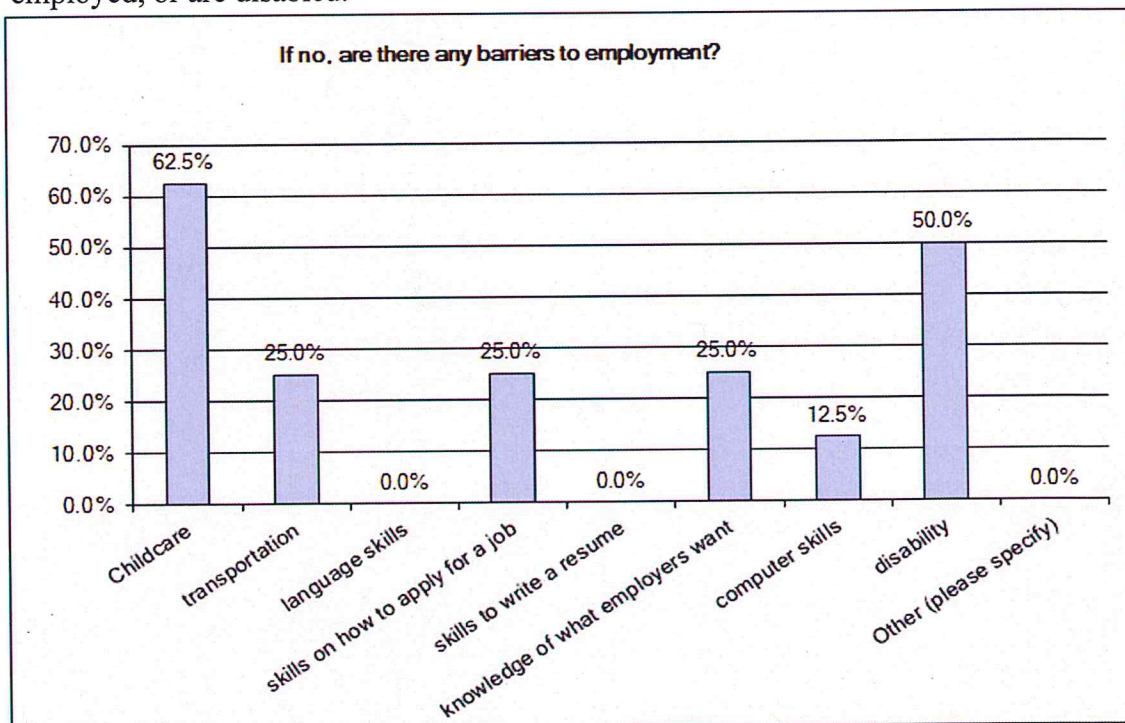
The condition of housing and the availability of low-income family homes is an important issue within this community and is something that the HUD grant funds will focus heavily on. Not only did it rank highest on the question of future priorities (60%) and on the question of changes residents would like to see (53%), there was also a consensus (100%) that rundown houses are a feature that detract from the aesthetic appeal of the neighborhood. The presence of rundown houses downtown may be attributed to the low income of the neighborhood. The majority of residents in the area report their household income as falling between \$10,000-\$20,000 annually (Figure 6). Only a little more than half (54%) of respondents were self-employed or worked for a salary/wages, while the remainder (46%) of residents were not employed or cannot work because of a disability (Figure 7). The main barriers attributed to unemployment in the neighborhood are disability (50%) and lack of childcare (63%) (Figure 8). One way to increase employment and thus the earnings of Downtown residents would be to address the lack of available and affordable childcare. This is the main cause that prevents parents from working and could help a significant portion of the population obtain full-time or part-time employment.



**Figure 6.** The annual household income of Downtown Auburn residents.



**Figure 7.** Residents' current employment status in Downtown. A little over half are currently employed for salary/wages or are self employed. The remainder are not employed, or are disabled.



**Figure 8.** The main barriers to employment that Downtown residents report facing. Child care and disability ranked the highest.

The purpose of this study was give Downtown neighborhood community members a space to voice their opinions on what aspects of their community could be adjusted in order to improve their quality of life. The results from the quality of life survey in Downtown Auburn reflected a general discontent with transportation, pedestrian safety and low income housing

opportunities. In the following section, we will delve into what the City of Auburn can do with these findings and how they will incorporate this data into future development decisions.

### **Outcomes & Implications**

The community priorities and opinions collected from these surveys will inform future development decisions in the City of Auburn, Maine. In 2015, the City of Auburn will receive a grant from the U.S Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The overarching goal to be reached with the help of the HUD grant is primarily the creation of affordable housing. But according to the City of Auburn, the grant money will also be used to revitalize neighborhoods, promote economic development by investing money, and improve public facilities and green spaces. All of these changes are in an attempt to combat blight conditions in the inner city of Auburn, which has high resident turnover, and deteriorated buildings and streets.

Our findings suggest that the future goals for the improvement of the quality of life for residents of Auburn are: the implementation of social services, development of a stronger sense of community and creation of adequate housing for low-income residents. In the 2011-2014 Consolidated Plan, which was written in 2010, the City of Auburn had a vision for what the Auburn neighborhoods would look like by 2014. They envisioned that the New Auburn, Downtown and Union Street neighborhoods would have “safe, affordable, energy-efficient, good quality housing” and the community would have “an atmosphere of friendliness” with high neighbor-to-neighbor interactions. Goals stated in this plan include the existence of safe intersections, convenient public transportation, and the creation of a neighborhood children would want to return to (City of Auburn, 2010). Based on our results, it appears that these same goals are still relevant for today. Ideally, this grant and the opinions of the community presented in this report will further these visions in accordance with the City of Auburn’s plans as well as the ideals of the community members.

An important outcome from the HUD grant is the improvement of family housing. It is imperative to the grant that the City of Auburn use the funds to provide quality housing to families in need as a social service, as well as to maintain the vibrancy and attractiveness of the Downtown neighborhood. Quality affordable housing is the primary goal in eliminating blight and establishing neighborhood viability and pride. Not only are run down houses an eye sore for tourists and neighbors alike but they are also extremely unsafe for the resideThe HUD grant defines substandard housing as a building that does not provide safe and adequate shelter by not having one or more of the following: indoor plumbing, usable shower/bathtub, electricity, safe source of heat, or a kitchen. Housing improvements will improve the overall quality of life for residents living in the Downtown area. The implementation of affordable, safe housing in accordance with the HUD grant and the development of local economic opportunities will foster a sense of strength within the community.

Overall, the findings from this study support the development and neighborhood revitalization goals of the City of Auburn. The information we collected from the community



members were presented to the Auburn Citizen's Advisory Committee who will then bring our findings to the attention of the City Council.

### Next Steps

Completing this project has raised further questions and areas of research surrounding the quality of life in downtown Auburn, Maine. By this time next year, the HUD funds will have already been allocated and programs decided on in the Consolidated Plan will be underway. Ideally, areas of importance highlighted by the Quality of Life Survey will be the focus of some of these projects. Considering this possibility, there are opportunities for continuation of this project for another Capstone course in Fall 2015. This section will also contain project recommendations for the City of Auburn to pursue upon receiving the HUD grant money.

Another goal that requires more attention is the issue of street safety. Many residents strongly voiced their concerns with dangerous intersections and many had personal experiences with either being part of or witnessing vehicle collisions. It is important for community members to feel safe while driving or walking in their neighborhood. Thus, a portion of the HUD Grant funds should go towards putting in stop signs and speed bumps along the dangerous roads and intersections reported by residents to help abate future accidents. This includes the intersections of: Pleasant Street and Drummond Street, High Street and Elm Street, Elm Street and Minot Avenue, Minot Avenue and Court Street and along Goff Street (see Map 2). Improving the safety of these areas is crucial, considering that a majority of Downtown residents get to their destinations by walking. Once these improvements are made, there will be opportunities for further study of the area in future Capstone 417 classes.

One possible direction that a future Capstone project could follow is an investigation of the lack of city bus use in Auburn. Our results found that the use of the public transportation, specifically the bus system, is limited. The City of Auburn may want to consider reevaluating the current system in order to increase passenger usage. This was one area that residents were fairly unanimous about. Most people do not use the bus on a daily basis, some because of the poor condition the buses are in and some because they would rather ask a friend for a ride. Many of those surveyed reasoned that they did not use the bus simply because they had never thought about it which suggests perhaps the need for an increase in the advertisement and promotion of the bus system to locals. This could be an interesting focus for the Capstone course because of the energy costs associated with taking public transportation as opposed to private transportation.

Downtown residents voiced a need for the expansion of park facilities. The creation of more recreational facilities would not only improve mental and physical health of the community members but it would also increase personal interactions, thus improving the general cohesion of the neighborhood. Limited community cohesion is reflected through the lack of pride reported by residents in the downtown neighborhood. Therefore, another possible focus for the course could involve looking into starting a community garden in one of the neighborhoods. This was something that most people agreed would be beneficial to their neighborhoods. The addition of a

community garden to neighborhoods in Auburn could be a great way to increase families' access to local foods as well as serving as a place where community ties can be forged and strengthened.

A final possible project focus could be to investigate how the City determines which residential buildings receive development funding from the grant money. The neighborhoods surveyed in this project were all deemed "blighted" by the City's standards. This implies that they all need to be improved in some way or another. The grant money will presumably be used to improve some residential buildings in these areas, but it probably is not enough to help one hundred percent of the affected areas. How the city decides the funds will be allocated would be an interesting project for future Capstone projects to focus on.

## **Acknowledgements**

First and foremost, we would like to thank Reine Mynahan, our community partner, for all of her help setting up meetings, working through the survey formatting and being flexible with all of our different schedules. Thank you to the people in the two other groups involved in this project Katie Polio, Gunnar Manchester, Shana Wallace, Rebecca Culp, Gabe Nudel and Rachel Ryan for their dedicated work. Finally, we would like to thank our ENVR 417 classmates for their helpful feedback and our ENVR 417 Professors, John Smedley and Sonja Pieck for providing continued support and direction throughout this semester.

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