

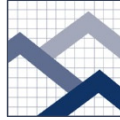
# THURSTON COUNTY

## PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF PERFORMANCE OF EXISTING COURTHOUSE AND NEED FOR NEW COURTHOUSE

APRIL 2019



**ELWAY RESEARCH, INC.**



# THURSTON COUNTY

## PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF PERFORMANCE OF EXISTING COURTHOUSE AND NEED FOR NEW COURTHOUSE

APRIL 2019

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# THURSTON COUNTY

## PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF PERFORMANCE OF EXISTING COURTHOUSE AND NEED FOR NEW COURTHOUSE

APRIL 2019

### INTRODUCTION

Thurston County commissioners are considering a proposal to replace the existing County Courthouse. As part of their consideration, this survey of county residents was conducted to assess public thinking about the current Courthouse and the proposal for a new one.

Specifically, the survey, was designed to explore county residents':

- Familiarity with, and use of, the existing Courthouse;
- Evaluation of the Courthouse complex and facilities;
- Response to features of the proposed new Courthouse;
- Opinions about county government services;
- Information needs relative to the proposal.
- Demographic information was collected to compare answers.

A total of 972 randomly-selected county residents were interviewed by telephone or online between March 22 and April 9, 2019 for this survey.

Elway Research, Inc. administered the survey, analyzed the findings and produced this report. The questionnaire was designed in close collaboration with County officials.

This report includes a description of methods, a sample profile, a summary of key findings, and the results to each question in the form of annotated graphs indicating differences in response from various segments of the sample. The full questionnaire and a complete set of cross-tabulation tables are presented in the appendix.



## METHODS

<b>SAMPLE:</b>	972 adult residents of Thurston county.
<b>SAMPLE FRAME:</b>	Households in Thurston County.
<b>TECHNIQUE:</b>	<u>Mixed Mode:</u> 117 landline telephone with live interviewers; 133 via cell phone with live interviewers; 722 via on-line survey.
<b>FIELD DATES:</b>	March 22 – April 9, 2019
<b>MARGIN OF ERROR:</b>	±3.1% at the 95% level of confidence. That is, in theory, had all similarly qualified residents been interviewed, there is a 95% chance the results would be within 3.1 percentage points of the results in this survey.
<b>DATA COLLECTION:</b>	Households in the sample for which we had telephone numbers were called. Households for which telephone numbers were not available were invited by letter to take the survey online.  <u>TELEPHONE:</u> Calls were made during weekday evenings and weekend days by trained, professional interviewers under supervision. Up to four attempts were made to contact each number in the sample. Questionnaires were edited for completeness and 10% of each interviewer's calls were re-called for verification.  <u>ON-LINE:</u> Invitation letters were mailed to households asking residents to log on to the survey website to complete the questionnaire. A reminder postcard was mailed one week later.

It must be kept in mind that survey research cannot predict the future. Although great care and the most rigorous methods available were employed in the design, execution and analysis of this survey, these results can be interpreted only as representing the answers given by these respondents to these questions at the time they completed the questionnaire.



## Mixed-Mode Survey Method

This survey was conducted using a mixed-mode sample design that combined land-line telephone and cell phone with online data collection.

We drew a systematic sample of households in Thurston County. This sample consisted of 7421 landline telephone numbers, 4628 cellphone numbers, plus 5000 households with mailing addresses but no telephone numbers.

The telephone numbers were called up to 4 times each or until someone answered and either agreed or refused to be interviewed. A total of 16,427 calls were placed. The telephone survey resulted in 250 interviews, for a *completion rate*<sup>1</sup> of 2%, and a *cooperation rate*<sup>2</sup> of 22%.

The households for which we had no telephone number were mailed a letter from the county administrator asking a designated adult<sup>3</sup> in the household to log on to our survey website and complete the questionnaire online. They were sent a thank you/reminder postcard one week after the initial mailing. The online survey resulted in 722 completed questionnaires for a completion rate of 14%.

The data from both modes were combined into a single data set. The combined data were statistically weighted by zip code, age and gender to align with known population distributions in the county.

It is argued that the inclusion of an online survey in addition to the telephone sample produces a more representative result than either a telephone or web sample alone would have produced. In this case, the online sample was, counter-intuitively, slightly older, but, had lived here less time than the telephone sample on average. The online sample was also more forthcoming about their income.

Research literature also indicates that telephone respondents tend to give more positive responses than online respondents, particularly to rating scale items where online respondents are typically less likely than are telephone respondents to give the highest rating on a scale.

In this survey, although the results followed the expected pattern described above, there were not statistically significant differences in the overall responses. The similarity of response supports the validity of the findings.

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<sup>1</sup> The *completion rate* is the percentage of completed interviews by the total number of telephone numbers dialed. It includes numbers where no one answered the call.

<sup>2</sup> The *cooperation rate* is the percentage of completed interviews by the number of qualified respondents contacted.

<sup>3</sup> Instructions were that the survey be completed by the adult (18+) in the household with the most recent birthday. This is a common practice to randomize respondents.



## Interpreting the Findings

This survey makes extensive use of scale items to measure public opinion. There are several ways to interpret the results from scale items. A common practice is to combine "definitely support" and "probably support" into "total support" and do the same on the "oppose" side of the scale. In the *realpolitik* of public debate, however, that those with the strongest opinion likely will have the loudest voices. Those who say they "definitely" support a proposal are more likely to act on that position, and more likely to engage in the debate, than those who say "probably." Thus, they are considered more likely to influence the public debate and its outcome.

Moreover, there is a known tendency on the part of survey respondents to answer positively. Most survey respondents tend to want to be helpful and polite. It is therefore practical to treat "probably support" answers as less reliable than "strongly support." Think of it as latent support. Those who say they "probably support" a proposal are positively inclined, but not convinced and less likely to act.

Because of this positivity bias, it is useful to consider "oppose" and "strongly oppose" responses to be reliable estimates of active opposition. If people naturally tend to give positive answers in surveys, then those who say they are opposed are likely to be genuinely opposed. Comparing the "definitely support" versus the total "opposed" provides a prudent (some would say realistic) assessment of public thinking.



## RESPONDENT PROFILE

In interpreting these findings, it is important to keep in mind the characteristics of the people interviewed. This table presents a profile of the respondents in the survey. The results have been statistically adjusted by zip code, age and gender to align with the population distribution in the county. The "Combined" column displays the weighted sample profile used in this report

NOTE: Here and throughout this report, percentages may not add to 100%, due to rounding.

### Sample Profile by Survey Mode

		PHONE	ONLINE	COMBINED <sup>1</sup>
<b>GENDER</b>	Female	50%	50%	52%
	Male	50%	49%	47%
	Other	<1%	1%	1%
<b>COMMUNITY</b> <sup>2</sup>	Bucoda	1%	-	*%
	Lacey	9%	19%	19%
	Olympia	19%	41%	41%
	Ranier	2%	1%	2%
	Tenino	1%	1%	3%
	Tumwater	8%	11%	11%
	Yelm	4%	4%	8%
	Other	--	3%	3%
	Unincorporated	56%	19%	14%
<b>AGE:</b>	18-35	9%	13%	13%
	36-50	28%	19%	24%
	51-64	32%	29%	32%
	65+	28%	38%	30%
<b>LENGTH OF RESIDENCE</b>	0-2 years	3%	7%	6%
	3-5 years	6%	16%	14%
	6-10 years	11%	12%	12%
	11-20 years	21%	18%	19%
	21+ years	59%	47%	48%
<b>EMPLOYMENT</b>	Self/ Owner	14%	7%	10%
	Private Sector	26%	22%	25%
	Public Sector	19%	26%	26%
	Not employed/ Student	4%	4%	5%
	Retired	32%	38%	33%
<b>HOME OWNER</b>	Own	81%	81%	82%
	Rent	15%	17%	16%
<b>INCOME</b>	\$50,000 or less	20%	21%	22%
	\$50 – 75,000	17%	21%	21%
	\$75-100,000	14%	19%	19%
	\$100,000+	26%	32%	31%
	No Answer	22%	7%	9%

<sup>1</sup> Combined telephone + online results, then statistically weighted by zip code, age and gender.

<sup>2</sup> The "community" variable presented a particular challenge. It was copied directly from the sample for the phone survey but had to be self-reported in the online survey. This resulted in under-reporting of residences in unincorporated areas of the county, since most have "city" addresses. It is for this reason that the final results were weighted by Zip code, as a more reliable indicator of geographic distribution of population across the county.



# KEY FINDINGS

## Use of the County Courthouse

- ◆ 83% of respondents had visited the Courthouse.
  - 55% had been there in the last 5 years.
  - Of those who had *not* been there, 53% knew where it is – meaning that 92% of all respondents know where the Courthouse is.
  - Jury duty was the single most common reason for having gone to the courthouse: 25% of visitors named that reason and another 12% cited another court-related reason.

## Assessment of Current Courthouse

- ◆ Most respondents considered the current Courthouse to be satisfactory.
  - Majorities rated the Courthouse “Satisfactory” or better (“Excellent” or “Good”) for all five of the attributes tested:
    - ~ The Feeling of safety and security (86%);
    - ~ Convenience of its location (85%);
    - ~ Condition of the buildings and facilities (76%);
    - ~ Ease of finding your way around (76%);
    - ~ Availability and convenience of parking (51%).

## Proposal for a New County Courthouse

- ◆ Just over one-third of respondents (36%) had heard anything about the proposal to build a new Courthouse.
- ◆ Fewer than half (44%) saw a need for a new Courthouse.
  - Those who said there was little or no need outnumbered those who said there was a “great need” by 5:2.





- ◆ Each of 8 features of the proposed Courthouse was seen as an improvement by most respondents.
  - Majorities rated each feature presented to them as an improvement over the existing Courthouse.
  - Only 4 of the 8 were rated as a “significant improvement,” by a majority, however:
    - ~ Consolidating 16 departments in 7 buildings into 2 buildings (61%);
    - ~ Increased accessibility and parking (59%);
    - ~ A one-stop customer service desk (57%);
    - ~ Improved security for the courts (52%).
- ◆ The proposed location was the most controversial feature of the proposal.
  - The same number of respondents (32%) said that site would be a “significant Improvement” as said it would *not* be an improvement.
- ◆ The cost also raised concern.
  - 21% of respondents expressed opposition to the idea of spending \$250 million for a new courthouse designed to last 50 years.
  - Although 43% said that was a “significant improvement,” the 21% was the second-highest number for “not an improvement.”
- ◆ Sharing court facilities with the City of Olympia was not a particularly compelling feature.
  - Although 58% considered that an improvement, only 34% said the improvement was “significant.”
  - On the other hand, 19% said it was *not* an improvement for a positive ratio of motivated opinion on this feature of only 3:2.



## Opinions about County Services

- ◆ Most respondents agreed with 7 of 8 statements about County Government services, however:
  - ◆ None were “strongly” agreed to by a majority of respondents.
    - Nearly all agreed that a courthouse is necessary, and yet
    - Nearly all said that the county should develop more ways for people to access services online so they don’t need to go to the courthouse.
    - Adding capacity for growth was seen as necessary, but maintenance and repair was favored.
    - Few disagreed that the cost of county services will increase over time.
  - ◆ The only majority to disagree was to the assertion that “Increasing taxes to pay for new buildings is an appropriate way to provide more county services.”

## Information Needs

- ◆ When asked “What more would you like to know about the proposal to build a new County Courthouse?”
  - 35% named some information they would like to have; and
  - 14% made a comment about the proposal rather than ask a question.
- ◆ Taken together, the questions listed indicate a low level of awareness and of the proposed project, and a desire to know more about it – from the rationale to the floor plans.
  - The #1 question asked (26% of all respondents) was related to cost/funding/taxes.



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# FINDINGS

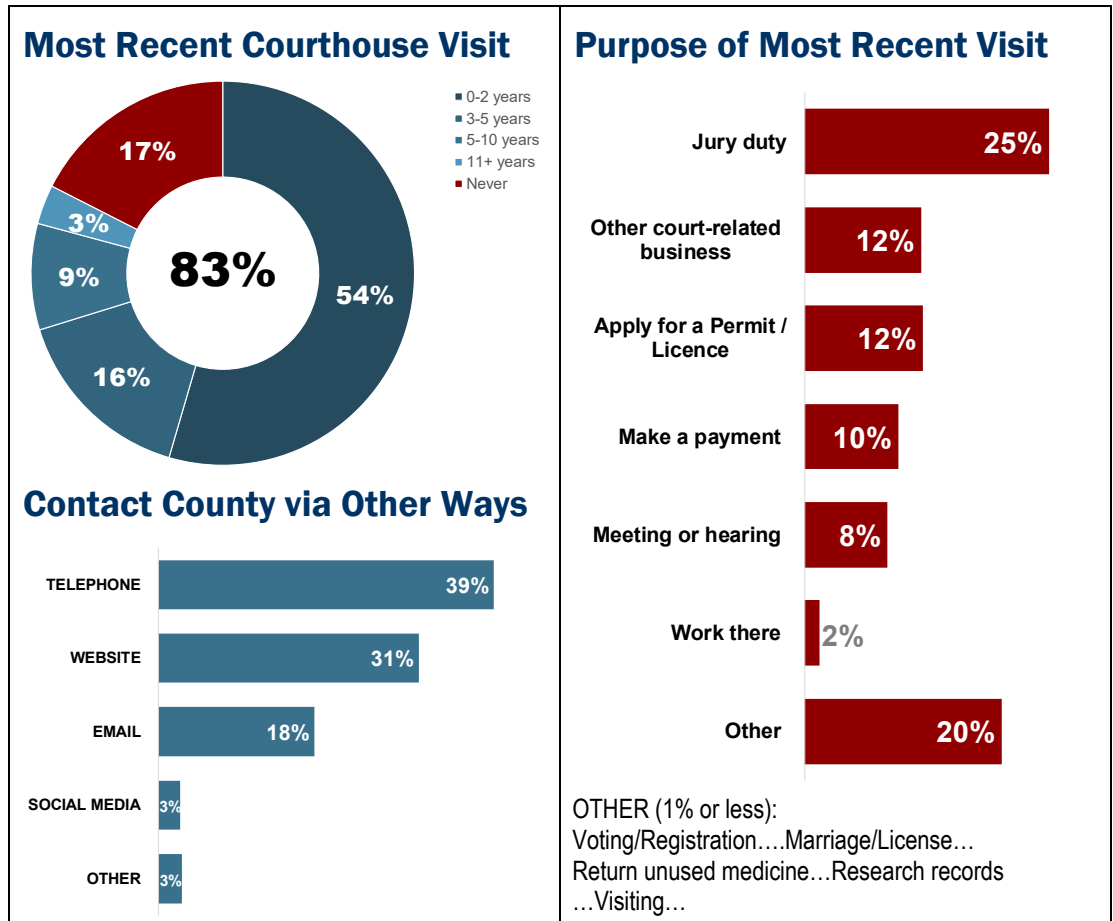
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- This section presents the survey findings in the form of annotated graphs.
- Bullet points indicate significant or noteworthy differences among population subgroups.



Use of Current Courthouse

### Most Respondents Familiar with Courthouse



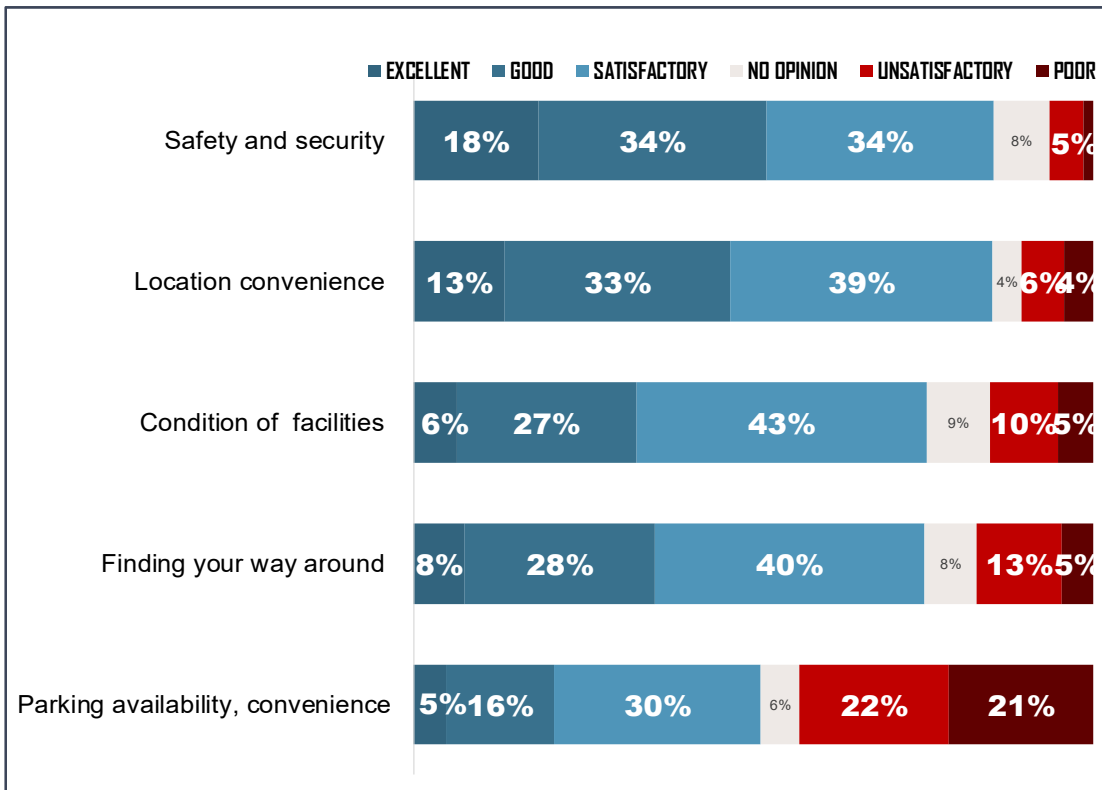
Q2 Have you ever been to the Thurston County Courthouse or other county office or department at the Courthouse complex? When was your most recent visit to the Courthouse?  
What was the purpose of your most recent visit to the Courthouse?

- **More than 8 in 10 respondents (83%) had been to the courthouse, more than half (54%) within the last 2 years.**
  - Of those who had not been there, more than half (53%) knew where it is, which translates to 92% who were aware of the location of the courthouse.
- **Jury duty was the most common reason for visiting the courthouse, followed by other court-related business:**
  - 25% had gone for jury duty, and 12% for other “court-related” reasons.
- **Majorities in every demographic category had been to the Courthouse. Most likely to have visited were:**
  - Self-employed of business owners (92%);
  - Home owners (85% v. 72% or renters).
- **Of those who had never physically been to the Courthouse**
  - 25% had communicated with people their by telephone, and 25% had been to the County website.



Evaluation of Current Courthouse

Assessment of Current Courthouse



Q3 For these next questions, I would like your opinions about the County Courthouse. For each of these descriptions, rate the courthouse as: Excellent, Good, Satisfactory, Unsatisfactory or Poor

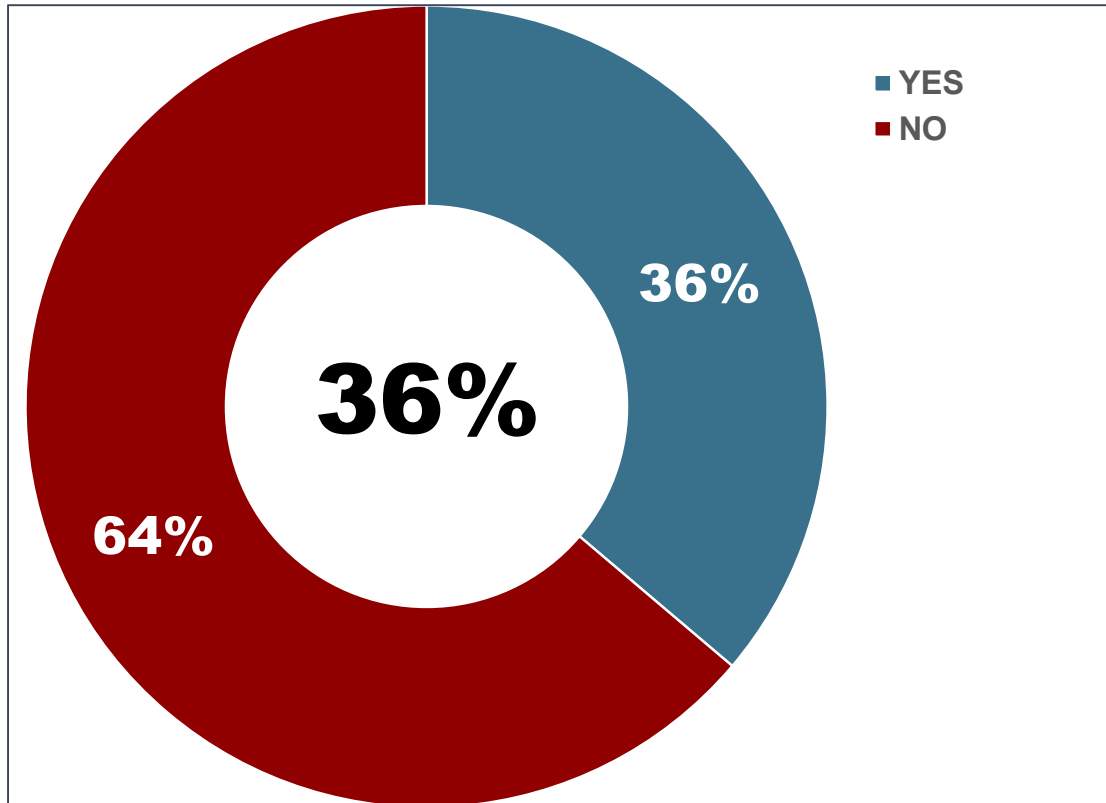
- \* The feeling of safety and security
- \* The convenience of the location
- \* The condition of the buildings and facilities
- \* The ease of finding your way around
- \* Availability and convenience of parking

Most respondents considered the current Courthouse to be satisfactory.

- Majorities of respondents considered the current Courthouse to be “satisfactory” or better for each of the 5 attributes tested.
- For every attribute except parking, the percentage of respondents rating it “excellent” or “good” far outnumbered the percentage who said “unsatisfactory” or “poor.”
- However, only one attribute – the feeling of safety and security – had a majority rate it as “good” or “excellent.”
- The only attribute for which a sizeable proportion of respondents said the Courthouse was “unsatisfactory” or “poor” was parking availability and convenience.
- For every attribute except parking, recent visitors to the Courthouse rated the Courthouse more positively than those who had not been there for 5 years or more, or who had never been there.

*New Courthouse Proposal*

## Just Over 1 in 3 Aware of Proposal for a New County Courthouse



Q5 There is a proposal being discussed to build a new County Courthouse. Have you heard anything about that proposal?

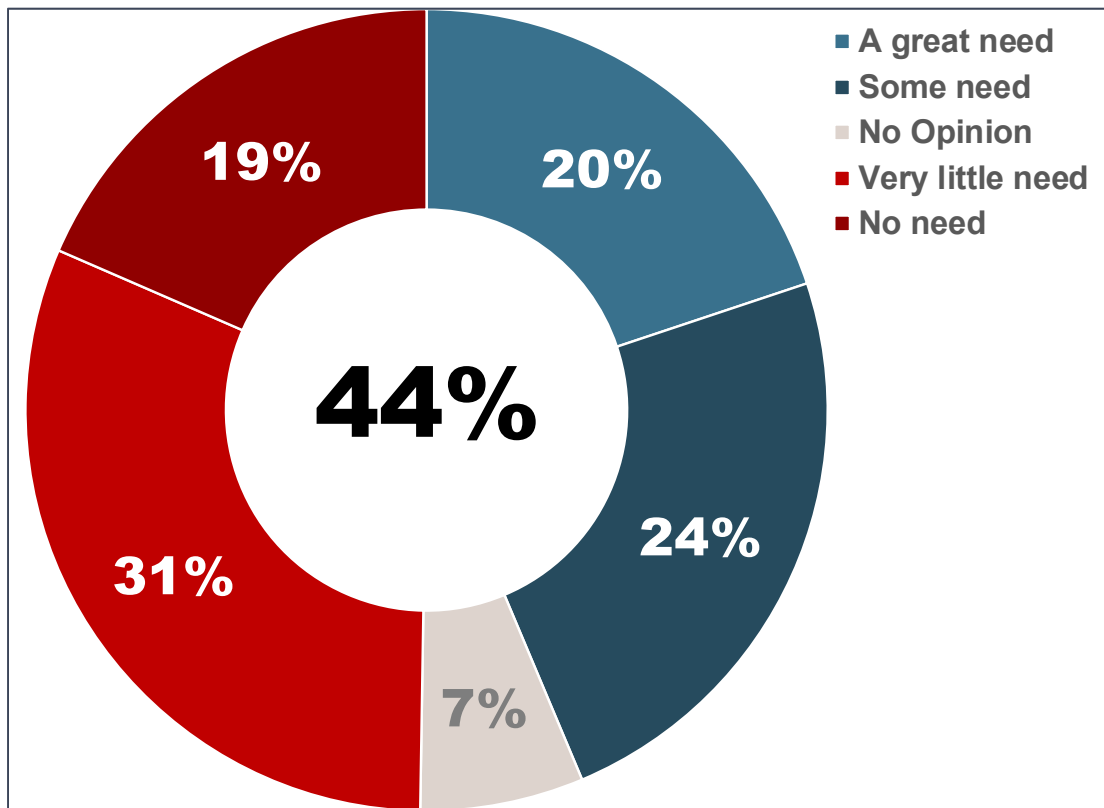
**Just over one-third of respondents (36%) had “heard anything” about “a proposal being discussed to build a new County Courthouse.”**

- **Awareness of the proposal was highest among:**
  - Residents of unincorporated North Thurston County (47%);
  - Those over age 65 (45%);
  - Long-time residents (44% of those here 20+ years);
  - People who had been to the Courthouse in the last 2 years (44%).
- **Awareness of the proposal was lowest among:**
  - South County residents (19%);
  - Those who had never been to the Courthouse (19%)
  - Those under age 50 (28%);
  - Short-time residents (28% of those here less than 5 years);
  - Renters (30%).



New Courthouse Proposal

### Fewer Than Half Saw Need for New Courthouse



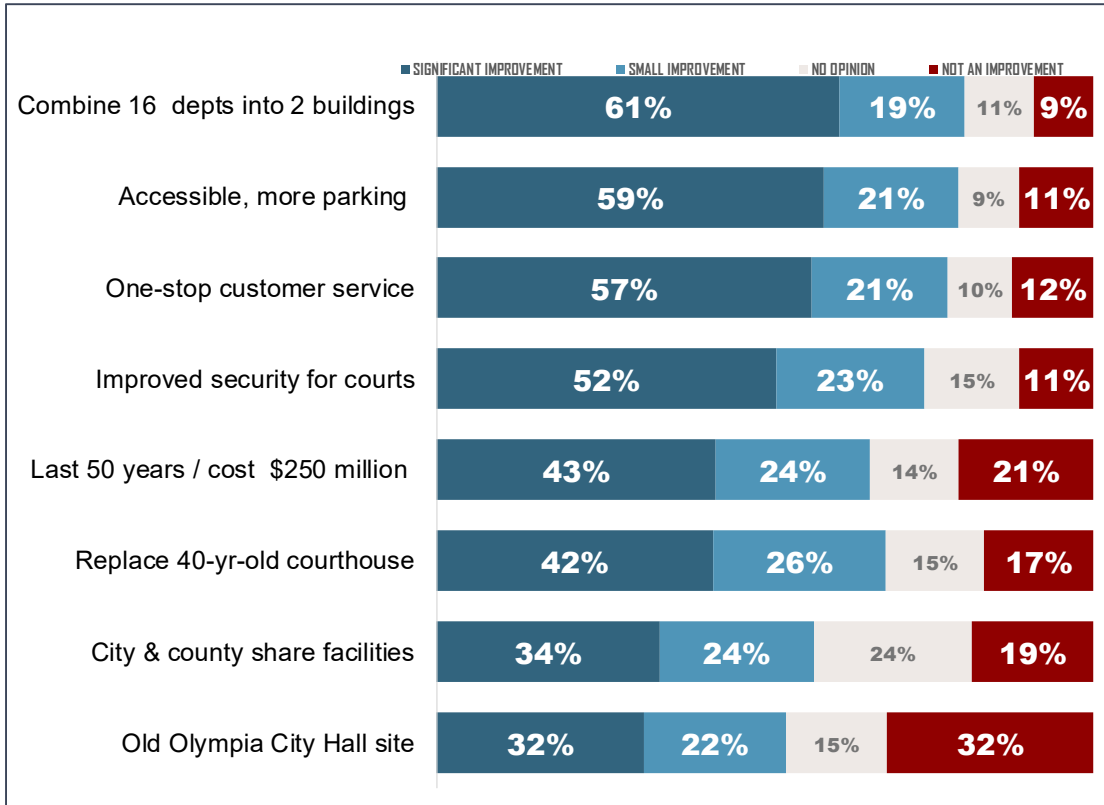
Q6 Do you think there is a need for a new Thurston County Courthouse? Would you say there is [READ LIST] for a new courthouse? [ Great need, Some need, Very Little need, No need]

- **When asked if there was a need for a new County Courthouse, doubters outnumbered supporters by 5:2:**
  - 50% said there was “very little” (31%) or “no need” (19%);
  - 20% said there was a “great need” for one.
- **Most likely to see a “great need” were:**
  - Residents of unincorporated North Thurston County (27%);
  - Those who had never been to the current Courthouse (26%).
- **Most likely to see “little” or “no need” were:**
  - Lacey residents (64%);
  - Long-time residents (55% of those here 20+ years);
  - Those who had been to the Courthouse in the last 5 years (54%);
  - Residents of unincorporated North County (54%).



New Courthouse Proposal

Each Feature Tested of Proposed Courthouse Seen as Improvement



Q7 Next are some of the features of this proposed new Courthouse. For each one, indicate whether you think would be a Significant Improvement, a Small Improvement, or Not an Improvement over the present courthouse.

- The new Courthouse would combine 16 County departments that are now in 7 buildings into 2 buildings next to one another.
- The new Courthouse location would be accessible by foot, bike, car or bus, with more parking, frequent bus service, and ADA access.
- The new Courthouse would have a one-stop customer service desk for people having business with many county services.
- The new Courthouse would include improved security and separation for defendants, jurors, witnesses, and observers.
- The new Courthouse would have 50% more space. It would last 50 years and cost about \$250 million to build -- compared to \$50 million to maintain the current facility for 10 years.
- The new Courthouse would replace the current 40-year old courthouse complex.
- The new Courthouse would replace the Olympia Municipal Justice Center. The city and county would share courtrooms and other facilities.
- The new Courthouse would be built on the site of the old Olympia City Hall, near downtown on Plum Street.

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## *New Courthouse Proposal*

### **Each Feature Tested of Proposed Courthouse Seen as Improvement**

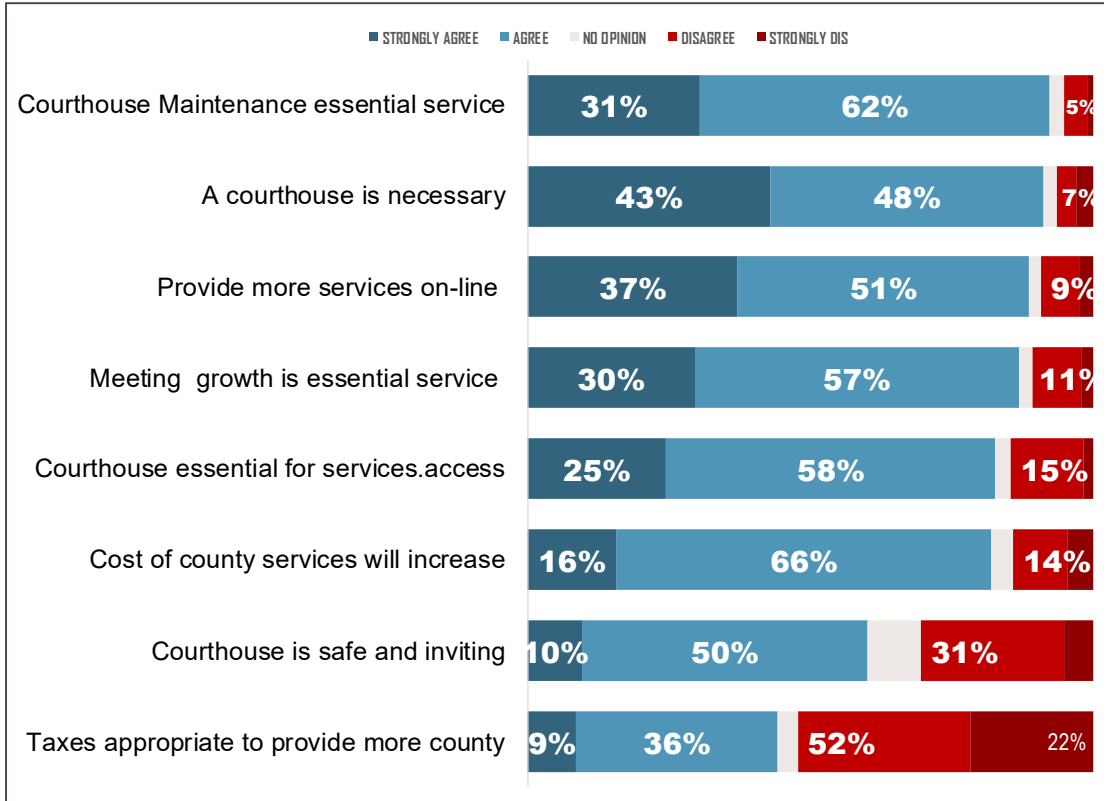
All 8 of the features of the proposal courthouse tested in this survey were rated by majorities as improvements over the existing Courthouse. However, only 4 of the 8 were seen as “significant” improvements.

- **Taken together,**  
31% of respondents considered all 8 features as improvements, but just 13% rated all 8 as “significant” improvements, while 21% rated *none* as a significant improvement.
- **The most attractive features of the propose Courthouse was layout – consolidating departments and buildings with more convenient and ample parking:**
  - 61% thought consolidating 16 departments in 7 buildings into 2 buildings would be a “significant” improvement.
  - 59% said that increased accessibility and parking would be a “significant improvement.”
- **Customer convenience also rated highly:**
  - In addition to the 59% who rated improvements accessibility and parking as significant,
  - 57% said the “one-stop” customer service desk would also be significant.
- **The proposed location:**
  - While 59% said that increased accessibility by all forms of transportation (a feature of the Plum Street location) would be a significant improvement,
  - Locating it on the site of the old Olympia City Hall had the highest percentage of respondents who said that would *not* be an improvement (32%).
  - The same number of respondents (32%) said that site would be a “significant Improvement” as said it would not be an improvement.
- **The cost also raised attention:**
  - Spending \$250 million for a new Courthouse raised opposition from 21% of respondents – even for a 50-year building.
- **The City of Olympia and the County sharing court facilities:**
  - The ratio of “significant improvement” to “not an improvement” was 3:2.



New Courthouse Proposal

### Opinions About County Services Pertinent to the Courthouse



Q8 Below are some of statements about public services. As I read each one, tell me whether you Disagree Strongly, Disagree, Agree or Agree Strongly with that statement.

- Maintenance and repair of the Courthouse buildings is an essential service of county government.
- A courthouse is necessary for the administration of justice and public safety.
- The County should look for more ways to provide services on-line so that citizens don't need to travel to the Courthouse.
- Adding capacity to meet future population growth is an essential service of county government.
- The courthouse is an essential place to access county services.
- The cost of county services will increase over time.
- The current Courthouse is a safe and inviting place
- Increasing taxes to pay for new buildings is an appropriate way to provide more county services.

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*New Courthouse Proposal*

## Opinions About Public Services Pertinent to the Courthouse

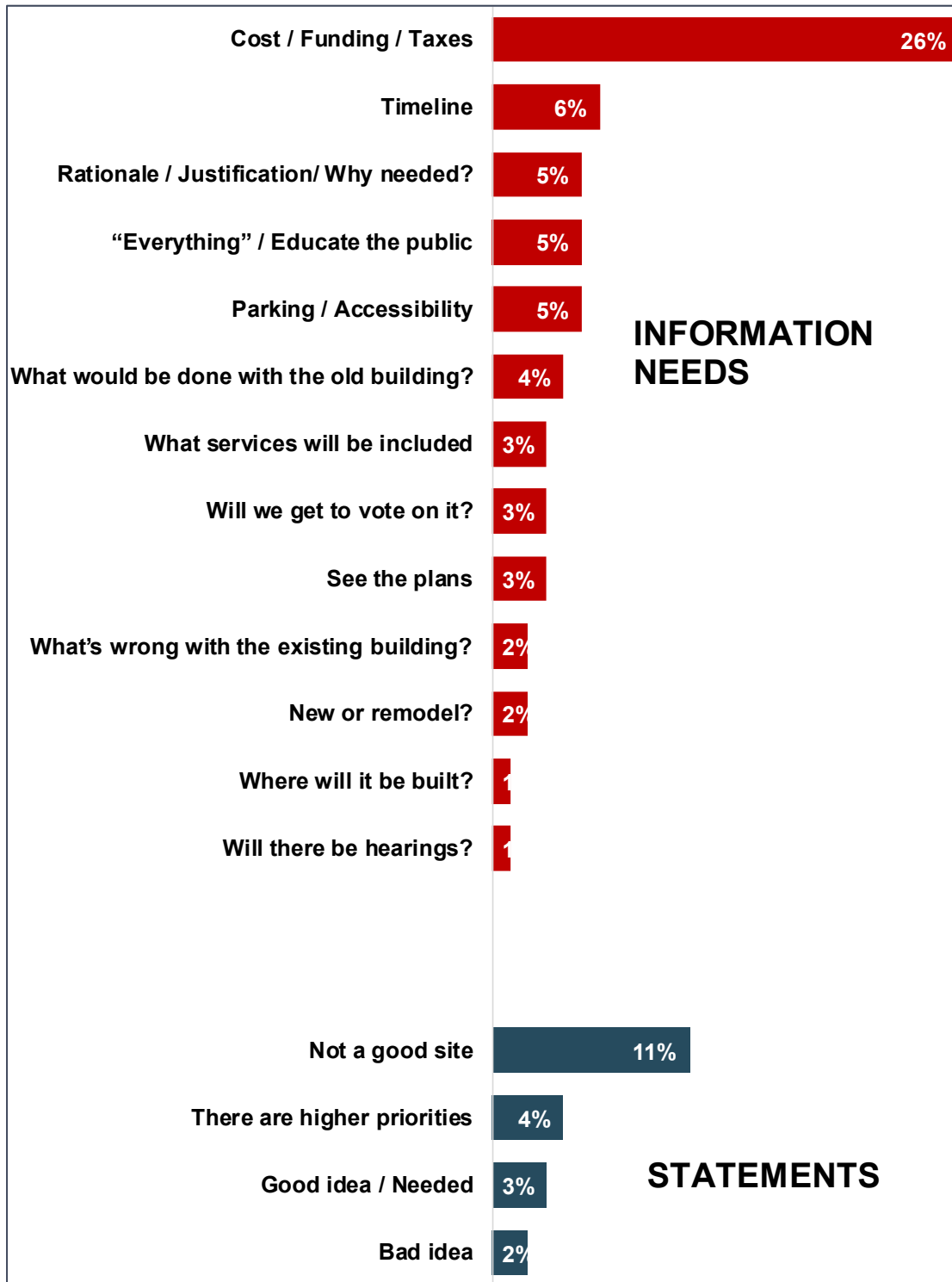
Respondents were presented with eight statements about County Government services pertinent to the proposal for a new Courthouse. All but one met with agreement, although none were “strongly agreed” to by a majority of respondents.

- **Almost all agreed that a courthouse is necessary:**
  - 93% agreed (only 31% “strongly”) that “a courthouse is necessary for the administration of justice and public safety”; and
  - 83% agreed (only 25% “strongly”) that “The courthouse is an essential place to access county services.” However,
- **88% also agreed (37% strongly) that “The County should look for more ways to provide services online so that citizens don’t need to travel to the Courthouse”.**
- **Planning for growth was seen as necessary, but maintenance and repair was favored:**
  - 87% (30% strongly) agreed that “Adding capacity to meet future population growth is an essential service of county government.” However,
  - 93% (31% strongly) agreed that “Maintenance and repair of the Courthouse buildings is an essential service of county government.” This suggests the possibility that more respondents would rather maintain and repair than build new.
- **82% agreed (16% strongly) that the cost of county services will “increase over time.”**
- **Most (52%) disagreed that “Increasing taxes to pay for new buildings is an appropriate way to provide more county services.”**
  - The ratio of those who disagree with that statement to those who strongly agree is almost 6:1.



New Courthouse Proposal

Information Needs



Q9 What more would you like to know about the proposal to build a new County Courthouse

CONTINUED ►



## *New Courthouse Proposal*

### **Information Needs**

In the last of the substantive questions, respondents were asked “What more would you like to know about the proposal to build a new County Courthouse?”

- **Just over half (56%) answered this question, including**
  - 35% who mentioned some information they would like to have; and
  - 14% who responded with a comment on the project rather than citing something they wanted to know, including
- **Taken together, the questions listed indicate a low level of awareness and of the proposed project, and a desire to know more about it – from the rationale to the floor plans.**
  - 26% wanted to know either how it would be funded or what it would cost.
  - 10% wanted to know “everything” or the rationale for the proposal – essentially a call for basic information about the need for a new courthouse and how the proposal would meet that need.