

Survey: Athenians love walking

45 percent say county is on right track

By [Blake Aued](#) | Staff Writer | Story updated at 10:42 PM on Tuesday, June 12, 2007

What do Athenians love to do most?

Hint: It's not watching University of Georgia football games, drinking in downtown bars or listening to music.

It's walking.

When asked in a recent survey to fill in a blank describing their favorite thing to do in Athens, 21 percent responded "walking," far outpacing playing sports, looking at art or any other activity.

"Whether it was walking downtown or walking around the (State) Botanical Garden (of Georgia), which we heard a lot, walking was the main thing," said Richard Clark, a public service assistant with the Carl Vinson Institute of Government.

Clark, the survey's author and lead analyst, was at a loss to explain why so many favor foot travel.

While the unparalleled love for walking was the survey's biggest head-scratcher, Athens-Clarke planners now have a wealth of new information they'll use to craft a new comprehensive plan, a state-mandated document that will guide growth over the next decade.

The survey results generally were positive, Clark said. More than 80 percent of respondents called Athens a good or excellent place to live, and 45 percent said the county's on the right track, compared to 20 percent who said it's on the wrong track.

"The takeaway here is that there's a lot of positives in this data," Clark said.

Not all the news is good. Athenians have little faith in the Clarke County School District. Though those with children in public schools rated them higher, the community at large - 69 percent of respondents - said the schools are fair or poor.

Danny Sniff, chairman of a land-use subcommittee that's examining education and other government services, said local schools are unfairly maligned, and the survey shows a need for a public relations campaign to improve their image. Industry recruiters and real estate agents often pass over Athens because of the schools' poor reputation, Sniff said Monday at a meeting with planners and county commissioners.

"Perhaps we could have a 'Take your Realtor to school day,' " county planning commission Chairman Scott Weinberg quipped.

At least three-quarters of Athenians think crime, schools and jobs are extremely important issues. Half or less view taxes, transportation, zoning or historic preservation as extremely important.

There was strong support for more parental involvement in education, more job training and business

recruitment by the county government, better regional cooperation and a commuter rail line between Athens and Atlanta. Support for mixed-use developments, relaxing laws limiting the number of unrelated people who can live together, stricter limits on the size and design of houses, converting houses into apartments and offering government and business services in Spanish was lower.

When asked about downtown, most people said they want more parking, aesthetic improvements and fewer bars.

On growth, slightly more than half of the respondents said the amount of growth is just right. They vastly preferred environmentally friendly medical and technical businesses to traditional industries and large retail stores.

The survey revealed some deep splits along racial, age, education and income lines. Those with four-year college degrees were far more likely to view Athens as a great place to live than those with high school or post-graduate educations. Black and Hispanic residents were far more likely than whites to hold negative opinions about the local economy, view public schools in a positive light, say the community doesn't do enough to alleviate poverty or homelessness, think housing is unaffordable and criticize police for slow response times and lack of professionalism.

The report was based on responses from the 347 surveys that were returned out of 2,000 mailed to random households in Clarke County earlier this year. The results were adjusted to reflect demographics like race and gender.

Hundreds of other residents also filled out the survey online, or mailed it in after seeing it in the newspaper or a child brought it home from school, but those results were less scientific and not included in the official report.

Published in the Athens Banner-Herald on 061307

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