

City of Priest River Planning & Zoning Department

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To: Priest River City Council
From: Jake Gabell, Planning and Zoning Administrator
Subject: Public Engagement Report
Date: April 20, 2026

Attachments

- Public Engagement Summary and Community Vision Report
-

Background

The City of Priest River has completed Phase 4 – Public Engagement for the Comprehensive Plan Update.

As outlined in the adopted Public Engagement Plan, this phase was intended to provide accessible opportunities for residents, stakeholders, and agencies to review the draft Comprehensive Plan and provide input prior to final revisions and adoption.

Public engagement activities were conducted from February through April 2026 and included a public survey, online comment portal, community workshops, stakeholder and agency outreach, and targeted engagement with seniors and students.

A summary of outreach efforts, participation levels, and key themes identified through public input is provided in the attached Public Engagement Summary and Community Vision Report. The attached report serves as the formal documentation of Phase 4 public engagement.

Staff Recommendation

Staff recommends that the City Council accept the Public Engagement Summary and Community Vision Report and direct staff to prepare revisions to the draft Comprehensive Plan based on the findings of the report.

Possible Council Action

I move to accept the Public Engagement Summary and Community Vision Report and direct staff to prepare revisions to the draft Comprehensive Plan and schedule the updated draft for a public hearing.

Phase 4 - Public Engagement Summary and Community Vision Report

Introduction and Purpose

Phase 4 of the Comprehensive Plan Update focused on engaging the Priest River community in reviewing and responding to the draft Comprehensive Plan. This phase builds on prior technical work and City Council review and is intended to validate community priorities, gather focused feedback, and inform final revisions prior to adoption.

Public engagement during this phase emphasized accessibility, transparency, and documentation. The intent was not to reopen foundational policy decisions, but to ensure the draft plan reflects community values, identifies areas of concern, and provides a clear public record demonstrating how input was considered.

This report documents the engagement methods used, participation levels, key themes identified, and how public input will inform revisions to the draft Comprehensive Plan.

Public Engagement Approach

Public engagement was conducted in accordance with the adopted Phase 4 Public Engagement Plan, which emphasized accessibility, transparency, and documentation. The City utilized a combination of digital tools, in-person events, and targeted outreach to ensure broad participation across different age groups and community segments.

The approach prioritized:

- Clear and accessible information
- Multiple opportunities for participation
- Documentation of input
- Representation across age groups and community segments

Engagement Activities and Timeline

The City conducted public engagement activities between February and April 2026 using a variety of outreach methods. The following timeline summarizes the key public engagement activities conducted during Phase 4 of the Comprehensive Plan update.

Date	Activity	Outcome
February 10	Initial outreach to local newspapers (Daily Bee, Miner, Beacon)	Media notified of upcoming comp plan update and engagement process
February 11	Daily Bee article published	Early public awareness of Comprehensive Plan update
February 12	Public Engagement Plan approved by City Council	Formal authorization to begin Phase 4 engagement

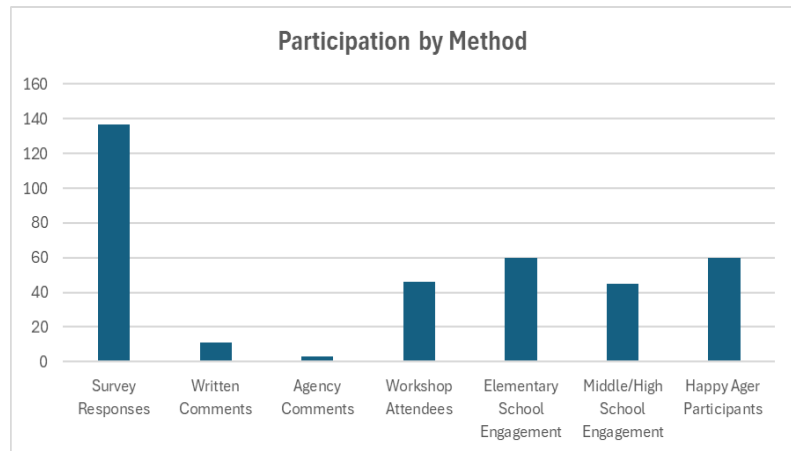
Date	Activity	Outcome
February 17	City Council finalized engagement plan and survey edits	Survey content refined prior to launch
February 19	Draft plan posted to website; banner and Facebook posts published	Public access to draft plan established
February 19	Public survey and online comment portal launched	Public engagement officially opened
February 19	Flyers mailed to 700+ residents (included with sewer mailer)	Broad direct outreach to city residents
February 19	Agency outreach emails sent requesting review and comment	Coordination with public agencies initiated
February 19	Follow-up media outreach to newspapers	Continued effort to generate media coverage
February 25	Newport Miner article published	Expanded regional awareness
March 3	Beacon article published	Additional public outreach through local media
March 4	Daily Bee article published	Reinforced awareness of engagement opportunities
March 5	Channel 6 News coverage	Television coverage increased visibility
March 5	Public Workshop #1	22 attendees, 2 children; 6 written comments and 5 surveys collected
March 18	Daily Bee follow-up article published	Reminder of upcoming engagement opportunities
March 19	Public Workshop #2	24 attendees, 1 child; 2 written comments and 5 surveys collected
April 6	Senior Center presentation (“Happy Agers”)	~25 participants; discussion and survey distribution
April 7	Elementary school presentation and drawing activity	~60 students; 59 drawings collected
April 8	High School and middle school classroom engagement	~45 students; direct discussion
April 13	Follow-up Senior Center presentation	~35 participants; 3 surveys collected
April 14	Public survey and comment portal closed	Total of 137 surveys and 11 comments received; 3 agency comments received

These efforts were consistent with the adopted plan and, in several cases, expanded beyond the originally anticipated scope.

Participation Summary

Public engagement resulted in strong participation across multiple formats.

- 137 survey responses
- 11 written comments
- ~46 workshop attendees
- ~60 elementary students engaged
- ~45 middle/high school students engaged
- ~60 senior participants
- 25 agencies notified, 3 agency responses received



Participation included a broad cross-section of the community, including youth, working-age residents, and seniors. Public engagement reached approximately 200+ individuals through in-person activities, supplementing digital participation through surveys and online comments.

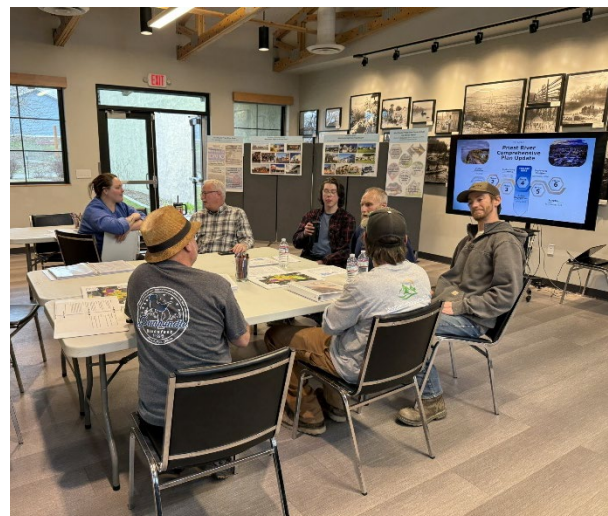
Engagement Activities

Community Workshops

Two public workshops were conducted in an open-house format on March 5, 2026, which had 22 attendees and March 19, 2026, which had 24 attendees. Workshops provided valuable input and allowed participants to engage directly in the planning process.

Workshops included:

- Informational displays and draft plan materials
- Interactive sticker boards
- Comment cards and surveys
- Direct interaction with staff



Senior Center Outreach

Presentations were conducted at the Senior Center (“Happy Agers”) on April 6 and April 13, 2026 with Mayor Jeff Connolly and Planning and Zoning Administrator Jake Gabell. A copy of the draft plan was left in the Senior Center along with flyers and printed copies of the survey. There were approximately 60 participants across two sessions. Several surveys were collected and an open discussion on growth, utilities, and community priorities occurred.

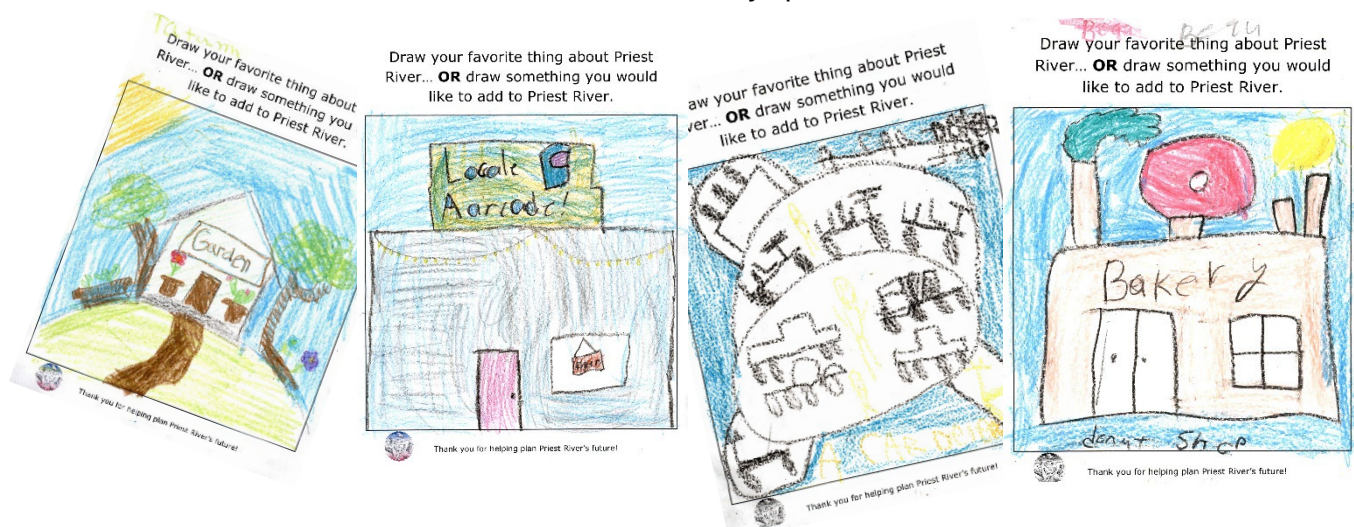


Youth Engagement

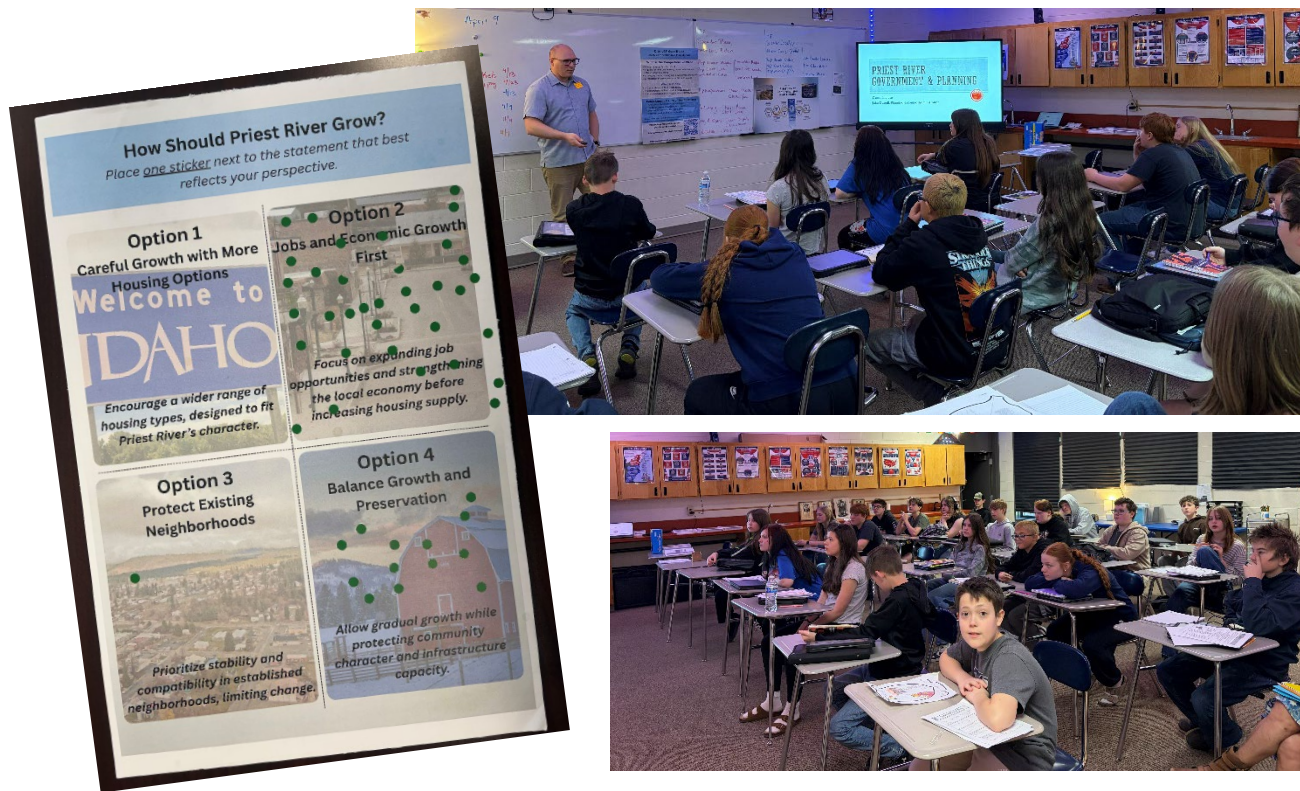
Youth engagement included classroom presentations and activities with approximately 100 students across elementary, middle, and high school levels.

Elementary students participated in a drawing activity focused on: Their favorite aspects of Priest River or ideas for the future

These drawings highlighted recurring themes such as additional entertainment activities, food establishments, recreation, and community spaces.



High School and Middle school students participated in an hour-long lecture by the Planning and Zoning Administrator and were given an opportunity to participate in the public survey and sticker boards. Their input was included in the visual preference analysis below.



Digital Engagement

The City launched a public survey and online comment portal on February 19, 2026, which remained open through April 14, 2026.

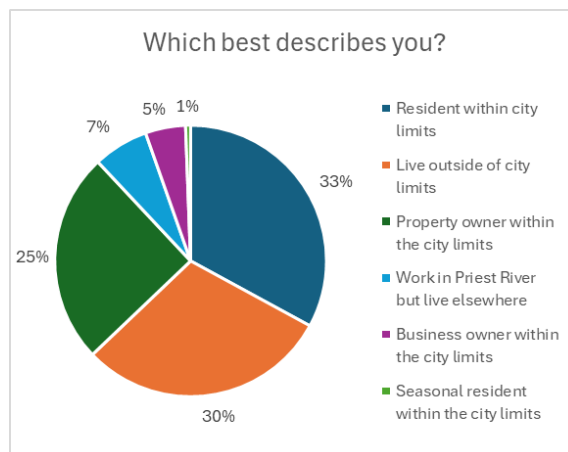
Survey and comment tools were promoted through:

- City website
- Social media
- Local media coverage
- Direct mail

Survey Results

Survey Respondent Demographics

Survey respondents represent a broad cross-section of the Priest River community, including residents, property owners, workers, and business owners. The largest group of respondents identified as residents within city limits (33%), followed closely by individuals



living outside city limits (30%). A substantial portion of respondents also identified as property owners within the city (25%), indicating strong participation from individuals with a direct stake in land use and development decisions.

The survey captured a mix of long-term residents and newer community members. The largest share of respondents (34%) have lived in Priest River for more than 20 years, reflecting strong participation from individuals with deep community ties and historical knowledge. At the same time, residents with less than 10 years in the community accounted for nearly 40% of responses, indicating meaningful input from newer residents. Additionally, 13% of respondents identified as non-residents, demonstrating engagement from individuals connected to the community through work or property ownership.

Age distribution trends show that participation was strongest among middle-

aged and older residents, with respondents aged 35 to 64 representing approximately half of all responses, and those aged 65 and over accounting for an additional 24%. Younger age groups were also represented, including respondents under 18 and those aged 18 to 24. This reflects targeted outreach efforts during the public engagement process, including classroom presentations and youth engagement activities.

Overall, the demographic distribution indicates that the survey reached a diverse and representative group of participants. The combination of long-term residents, newer community members, and individuals with varying connections to Priest River provides a well-rounded foundation for understanding community priorities and informing policy decisions within the Comprehensive Plan.

Visual Preferences

The survey and workshop activities included a series of visual preference questions designed to better understand how community members would like Priest River to look and feel over the next 20 years. These questions were presented both in the public survey and through interactive sticker boards at community workshops and school outreach events.

Which best describes you? Select all that apply.	Responses	Percent
Resident within city limits	55	33%
Live outside of city limits	50	30%
Property owner within the city limits	42	25%
Work in Priest River but live elsewhere	11	7%
Business owner within the city limits	8	5%
Seasonal resident within the city limits	1	1%
How long have you lived in Priest River?		
Less than 2 year	9	7%
2 to 5 years	26	19%
6 to 10 years	16	12%
11 to 20 years	19	14%
More than 20 years	46	34%
Not a resident	18	13%
What is your age range?		
Under 18	8	6%
18 to 24	10	7%
25 to 34	16	12%
35 to 49	32	24%
50 to 64	35	26%
65 and over	32	24%
Prefer not to say	1	1%

Participants were asked to select images that best reflect their preferences for residential areas, downtown and commercial areas, and recreational spaces. This approach provided a more intuitive and accessible way to gather input on development patterns and community character.

Residential Preferences

	Survey	Workshop	Youth	Total
Single family homes on smaller sized lots	42	6	3	51
Multi family homes on smaller sized lots	14	3	0	17
Manufactured homes	19	3	3	25
Single family homes on medium sized lots	87	20	8	115
Accessory dwelling units (ADUs)	28	14	0	42
Duplexes	37	18	1	56
Multi family homes on medium sized lots	24	1	5	30
Tiny homes	25	3	0	28
RV dwellings	8	1	0	9
Single family homes on larger lots	68	24	31	123

Survey and workshop responses indicate a strong preference for traditional single-family housing, particularly on medium and larger sized lots.

- Single family homes on medium sized lots (115 survey responses) and larger lots (123 survey responses) were the most preferred options overall.
- Moderate support was also expressed for:
 - Duplexes
 - Accessory dwelling units (ADUs)
 - Smaller lot single-family homes

Higher-density housing types, including multi-family housing and RV dwellings, received comparatively lower levels of support. Residents generally support a range of housing types, but clearly favor lower-density, single-family development patterns, particularly those consistent with existing neighborhood character.



Downtown and Commercial Preferences

	Survey	Workshop	Youth	Total
Large Shopping Plaza	11	0	1	12
Medium Shopping Plaza	4	0	2	6
Neighborhood-Scale Office	17	3	3	23
Modern Store Front	7	0	1	8
Traditional Downtown Storefront	84	24	4	112
Urban Mixed-Use Corridors	10	2	7	19
Historic Brick Row	86	28	18	132
Flex-Office / Office-Warehouse	2	0	1	3
New Urbanist Village Center	70	20	6	96
High Street Commercial / Local Mixed-Use	70	20	8	98

Responses related to downtown and commercial areas show a clear preference for traditional, small-scale, and locally oriented development patterns.

- The most preferred options included:
 - Historic brick row (132 responses)
 - Traditional downtown storefront (112 responses)
 - High street commercial / local mixed-use (98 responses)
 - New urbanist village center (96 responses)
- Large and medium-sized shopping plazas received very limited support, indicating a lack of preference for larger-scale, auto-oriented commercial development.



There is strong community support for maintaining and enhancing a traditional downtown character, with an emphasis on walkability, local businesses, and human-scale development.



Recreation Preferences

	Survey
Walking Trails	115
Tennis and Pickleball Courts	33
Splash Pad	43
Greenways	100
Basketball	54
Playgrounds	75



Recreation-related responses demonstrate strong support for outdoor and community-oriented amenities.

- The most preferred options included:
 - Walking trails (115 responses)
 - Greenways (100 responses)
 - Playgrounds (75 responses)



Residents place a high value on accessible outdoor recreation, particularly trails and connected open space systems, along with family-oriented recreational amenities.



Housing Availability and Preferences

Survey responses related to housing provide a consistent and data-supported picture of community concerns, priorities, and expectations for future development. Responses across multiple questions indicate that housing is a central issue for Priest River, closely tied to broader concerns about growth, infrastructure, and community character.

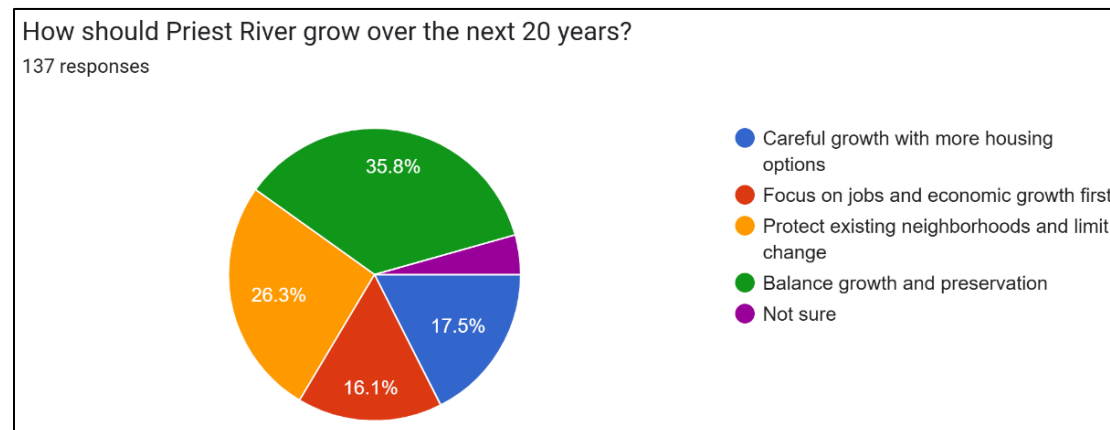
Housing as a Community Priority

Housing affordability is clearly identified as a major concern among respondents. When asked to identify top priorities for the next 20 years, 48% of respondents selected affordable housing options, while 53% identified infrastructure and utilities and 62% identified maintaining small-town character.

These results show that housing is not viewed in isolation. Instead, respondents are connecting housing needs with the capacity of infrastructure systems and the importance of preserving the existing character of Priest River.

Key takeaways from this question include:

- Housing affordability is a top-tier community priority
- Infrastructure capacity is closely linked to housing concerns
- Maintaining small-town character remains the most important overall priority



Perceptions of Growth and Development

Responses related to recent growth reflect a balanced but cautious perspective. A majority of respondents (55%) described recent growth as a mix of positive and negative, while 21% viewed growth as mostly positive and 12% viewed it as mostly negative. This suggests that residents recognize both benefits and challenges associated with recent development.

When asked how growth should be managed moving forward:

- 36% preferred balancing growth and preservation
- 26% preferred protecting existing neighborhoods and limiting change
- 18% supported careful growth with more housing options
- 16% prioritized jobs and economic development first

These responses indicate that residents are not opposed to growth but prefer a measured and balanced approach that protects existing neighborhoods while accommodating future development.

Housing Availability and Affordability

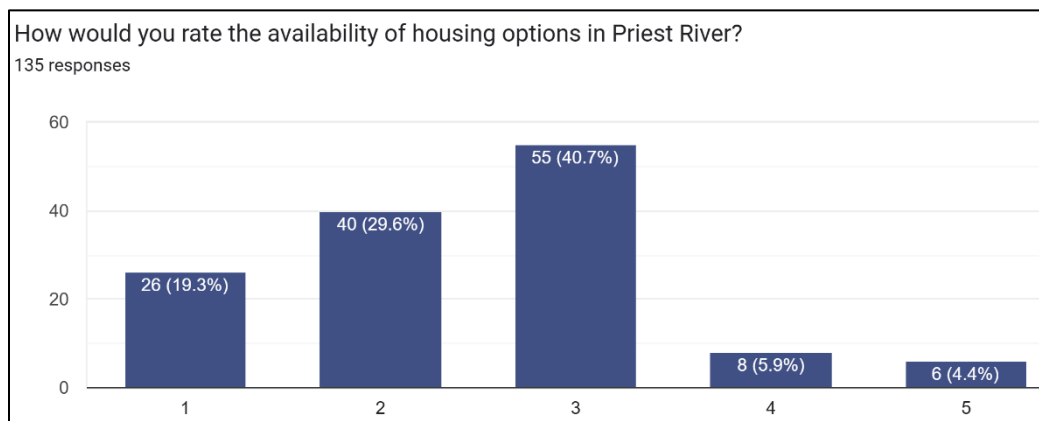
Survey responses indicate clear concern regarding both the availability and affordability of housing in Priest River.

Nearly half of respondents (49%) rated the availability of housing options as poor, while an additional 41% rated it as average. Only 10% rated availability as good, suggesting that most respondents perceive the housing supply as limited or constrained.

Affordability concerns are even more pronounced. A combined 64% of respondents disagreed that housing is affordable for people across a range of incomes, while only 8% agreed and 28% remained neutral.

These results indicate that:

- Housing affordability is a significant and widely recognized issue
- Limited availability is contributing to affordability concerns
- Housing challenges are likely influencing broader perceptions of growth



Preferred Housing Types

Survey responses indicate that residents support a range of housing types, but with a strong preference for lower-density options.

A majority of respondents (69%) selected single-family homes as the housing type they would most like to see more of. Moderate support was expressed for several other housing types, including duplexes, townhomes, small apartment buildings, and mixed-use housing, generally in the low-to-mid 20 percent range.

Lower levels of support were observed for accessory dwelling units (15%) and cottage or clustered housing (12%).

Overall, these responses suggest:

- A strong preference for traditional single-family housing
- Moderate openness to incremental increases in housing diversity
- Limited support for more compact or alternative housing types

Housing Policy Preferences

Responses to policy-related questions provide additional insight into how residents view potential housing strategies.

Support for expanding housing types is present but not overwhelming. A plurality of respondents (41%) agreed that encouraging a wider range of housing types helps meet community needs, while 35% were neutral and 24% disagreed. This indicates cautious support for diversification.

Similarly, 42% of respondents supported focusing new housing on infill and redevelopment, while 47% were neutral, suggesting that many residents do not have strong preferences regarding where growth should occur, or may not fully understand the implications.

In contrast, there is strong consensus on the importance of neighborhood character. A combined 67% of respondents agreed that maintaining neighborhood character should guide new housing development, with only 5% expressing disagreement.

This represents one of the clearest findings in the survey and suggests that compatibility and design will be critical considerations for future housing policy.

Residential Development Patterns (Visual Preference)

Visual preference results reinforce the survey findings. Participants overwhelmingly favored single-family homes on medium and larger lots, which received the highest levels of support across survey, workshop, and youth engagement activities. Moderate support was shown for duplexes and accessory dwelling units, while higher-density housing types, such as multi-family developments and tiny homes, received lower levels of support.

These results confirm a consistent preference for:

- Lower-density residential development
- Housing types that reflect existing neighborhood patterns
- Incremental, rather than large-scale, changes to development

Alignment with Workshop and Youth Input

Sticker board results generally reinforce the survey findings, while also highlighting some important nuances.

Workshop participants most frequently selected balancing growth and preservation (19 responses) as the preferred approach to future development, followed by equal support for both economic growth and protecting existing neighborhoods (10 responses each). In contrast, fewer participants prioritized housing-first growth approaches.

Youth responses differed more significantly, with a strong preference for jobs and economic growth first (35 responses) and less emphasis on housing availability. This suggests that younger participants may be more focused on long-term economic opportunity than immediate housing concerns.

Taken together, these results reinforce the broader survey finding that while housing is a recognized need, it is not viewed as the sole driver of growth. Instead, housing must be considered alongside economic development, infrastructure, and community character.

Balancing Housing Needs and Community Preferences

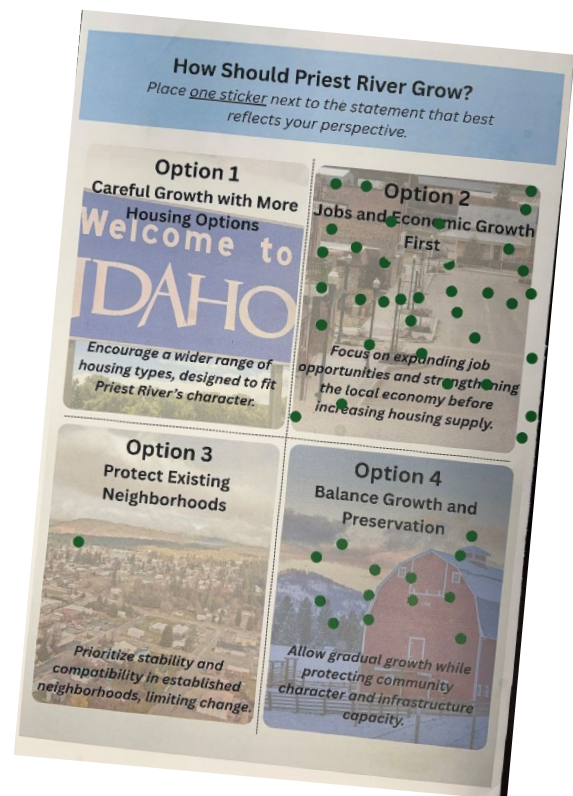
Survey responses reveal an important and consistent tension between the desire for increased housing availability and the preference for maintaining existing development patterns.

On one hand, respondents clearly identified housing as a priority:

- 48% identified affordable housing as a top priority
- 64% indicated that housing is not affordable
- Nearly half rated housing availability as poor

At the same time, preferences for future development strongly favor:

- Single-family homes (69%)
- Larger lot development patterns



- Limited support for higher-density housing types

Additionally, while there is moderate support for expanding housing options, there is strong agreement that “neighborhood character” should be preserved (67% agreement). These responses indicate that residents are seeking solutions to housing challenges but are also cautious about the types of development that may be required to address those challenges. This tension is not unique to Priest River and reflects a broader planning challenge faced by many communities. Expanding housing availability and improving affordability often requires changes in development patterns, including increased density or diversification of housing types.

For Priest River, this suggests that future housing strategies will need to carefully balance:

- The need for additional housing supply
- The desire to maintain small-town character
- Compatibility with existing neighborhoods

Addressing this balance will be a key consideration in refining housing policies within the Comprehensive Plan.

Economic Development, Jobs, and Commercial Areas

Survey responses related to economic development, jobs, and commercial areas provide a clear picture of community priorities and perceptions of the local economy. Similar to housing, responses reflect a desire to support economic activity while maintaining the character and scale of Priest River.

Economic Development as a Community Priority

Economic development is identified as an important component of Priest River’s future, though it is not the highest-ranking priority.

When asked to identify top priorities for the next 20 years, 48% of respondents selected job growth and economic development, while 32% selected downtown vitality and reinvestment. These priorities fall below maintaining small-town character (62%) and parks and recreation (55%) but are consistent with other infrastructure-related concerns.

These results indicate that residents support economic development but expect it to occur in a way that is consistent with community identity and overall quality of life.

Perceptions of Growth and Economic Direction

Survey responses indicate that economic development is not viewed as the sole driver of growth, but rather as one component of a broader, balanced approach.

When asked how Priest River should grow, responses reflect a clear preference for balance, while also highlighting a strong interest in economic opportunity:

- 48% supported prioritizing jobs and economic growth first

- 34% supported balancing growth and preservation
- 12% supported protecting existing neighborhoods
- Only 5% supported a housing-first growth approach

These results show that while economic development is important, it is not universally viewed as the only priority. A substantial portion of respondents continue to favor a balanced approach that integrates growth with preservation of community character.

At the same time, the relatively low level of support for housing-first growth reinforces earlier findings from the survey. While housing availability is recognized as a concern, it is not viewed as the primary lens through which growth should be managed.

Differences between workshop and youth responses provide additional context. Workshop participants were more evenly distributed across the response options, with the largest share favoring balance. In contrast, youth responses were heavily concentrated in support of economic growth, indicating a stronger emphasis on future job opportunities among younger participants.

Taken together, these results suggest that growth in Priest River is expected to:

- Support economic opportunity and job creation
- Occur in a measured and balanced manner
- Maintain compatibility with existing neighborhoods and community character

Downtown and Community Character

Survey responses demonstrate strong support for maintaining a vibrant, walkable, and locally oriented downtown.

Residents consistently identified downtown as a central part of Priest River's identity and economic function. A majority of respondents (57%) agreed that downtown should remain the focal point for business and community activity, with relatively little opposition.

At the same time, respondents placed high importance on the physical characteristics that contribute to a successful downtown environment. This includes walkability, landscaping, and overall design quality.

- 74% rated walkable streets and sidewalks as important (4–5)
- 68% rated street trees and landscaping as important (4–5)
- 58% rated a strong and vibrant downtown as important (4–5)

These responses indicate that residents do not just value downtown as a location for economic activity, but as a place defined by its design, accessibility, and character.

Business Environment and Job Opportunities

Responses related to the business environment are generally moderate, while perceptions of job opportunities are significantly more negative.

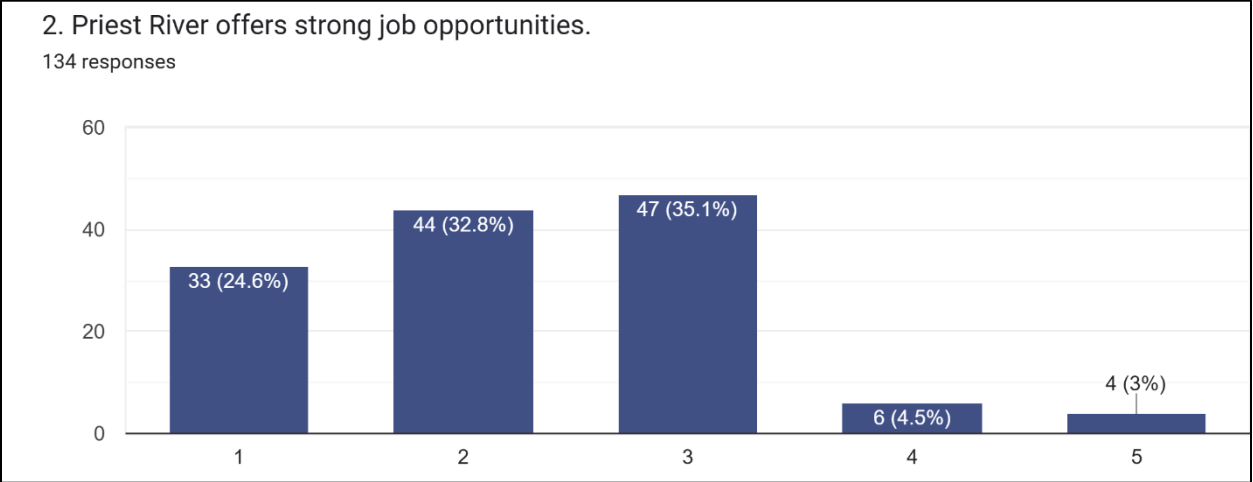
A plurality of respondents view Priest River as a somewhat supportive environment for small business, but there is a large share of neutral responses, indicating uncertainty or mixed experiences. Positive responses (44%) outweigh negative responses (19%), but not overwhelmingly.

In contrast, perceptions of job opportunities are much more critical. A majority of respondents (58%) rated job opportunities negatively, and this concern is even more pronounced when respondents consider opportunities within their own profession, where 71% expressed negative views.

This suggests a disconnect between:

- Priest River as a place that may support small business activity
- Priest River as a place that provides sufficient employment opportunities

This gap is one of the clearest findings in the survey and represents a key issue for long-term economic planning.



Public Spaces and Commercial Areas

Survey responses also highlight the importance of public spaces such as parks, plazas, and walkable shopping streets as part of the local economy and overall community experience.

While public spaces are clearly valued, perceptions of their current quality are mixed. A combined 45% of respondents rated public spaces negatively, while only 25% rated them positively, and 30% remained neutral.

Sticker board results generally reinforce the survey findings, while also indicating a stronger emphasis on economic development when responses are considered in aggregate. Workshop participants most frequently identified maintaining small-town character as a top priority, followed by strong support for job growth, infrastructure, and recreation. Youth responses again emphasized environmental protection and economic opportunity.

These results suggest that downtown, parks, and public spaces are not only amenities, but are also closely tied to how residents experience economic activity and community life.

Parks, Recreation & Public Spaces

Survey responses related to parks, recreation, and public spaces highlight both the value residents place on these amenities and the opportunity for continued investment and improvement. Across multiple questions, respondents consistently emphasized the importance of accessible outdoor spaces, trails, and community-oriented recreation.

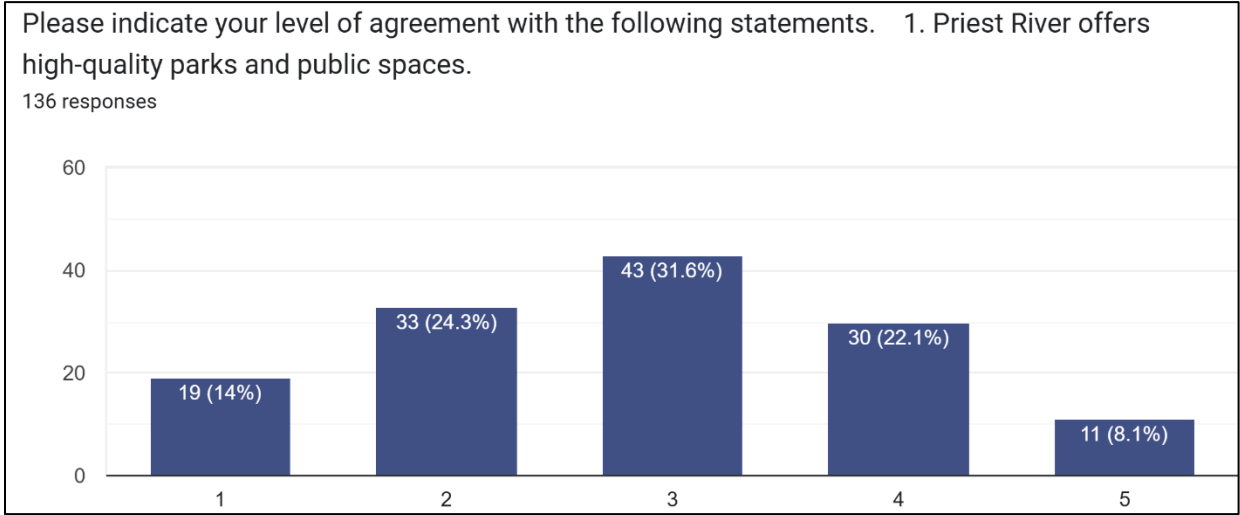
Community survey results further support this focus, with 55% of respondents identifying parks, trails, and recreational spaces as a top priority, placing it among the highest-ranked community needs.

Perceptions of Existing Parks and Public Spaces

Responses indicate that perceptions of existing parks and public spaces are mixed. When asked whether Priest River offers high-quality parks and public spaces:

- 38% of respondents rated them negatively (1–2)
- 32% rated them neutral (3)
- 30% rated them positively (4–5)

This distribution suggests that while some residents are satisfied with existing amenities, a significant portion of the community sees room for improvement. The relatively high neutral response also indicates that many residents may not strongly engage with or regularly use existing facilities.



Priority for Expansion and Investment

Despite mixed perceptions of current conditions, there is strong support for expanding recreational opportunities.

When asked whether expanding parks, trails, and river access should be a priority:

- 64% of respondents agreed (4–5)
- Only 13% disagreed (1–2)
- 24% were neutral

This represents one of the clearest areas of consensus in the survey and indicates broad support for continued investment in recreation infrastructure.

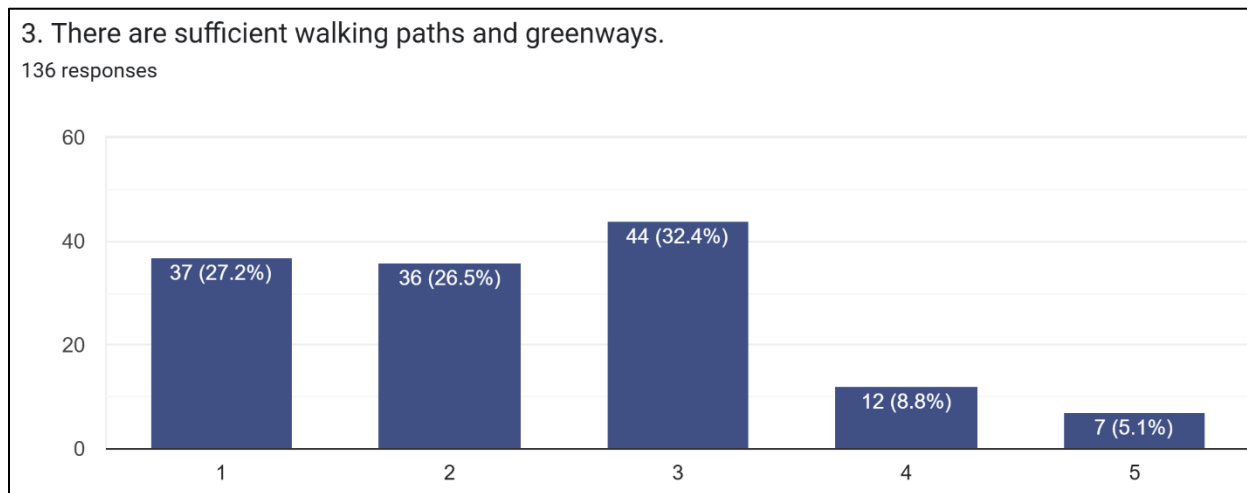
Trails, Walkability, and Connectivity

Responses related to trails and greenways highlight a specific gap in the current system.

When asked whether there are sufficient walking paths and greenways:

- 54% of respondents rated this negatively (1–2)
- 32% rated it neutral (3)
- Only 14% rated it positively (4–5)

These results indicate that while residents value walkability and connectivity, existing infrastructure may not fully meet community needs. This aligns with earlier findings emphasizing the importance of walkable streets and sidewalks in both residential and downtown areas.



Alignment with Community Priorities

Survey and sticker board responses further reinforce the importance of parks and recreation within the broader community vision. When asked to identify top priorities for the next 20 years, 55% of respondents selected parks, trails, and recreation, placing it among the highest-ranked priorities.

Sticker board responses support this finding and provide additional context. Workshop participants frequently identified parks and recreation as a focus area, while also connecting these amenities to broader themes such as community character, infrastructure, and quality of life. Youth responses similarly emphasized environmental protection and outdoor spaces, indicating strong interest in maintaining access to natural features and open space.

These responses demonstrate that parks and recreation are not viewed as standalone amenities, but as an integral part of what makes Priest River a desirable place to live.

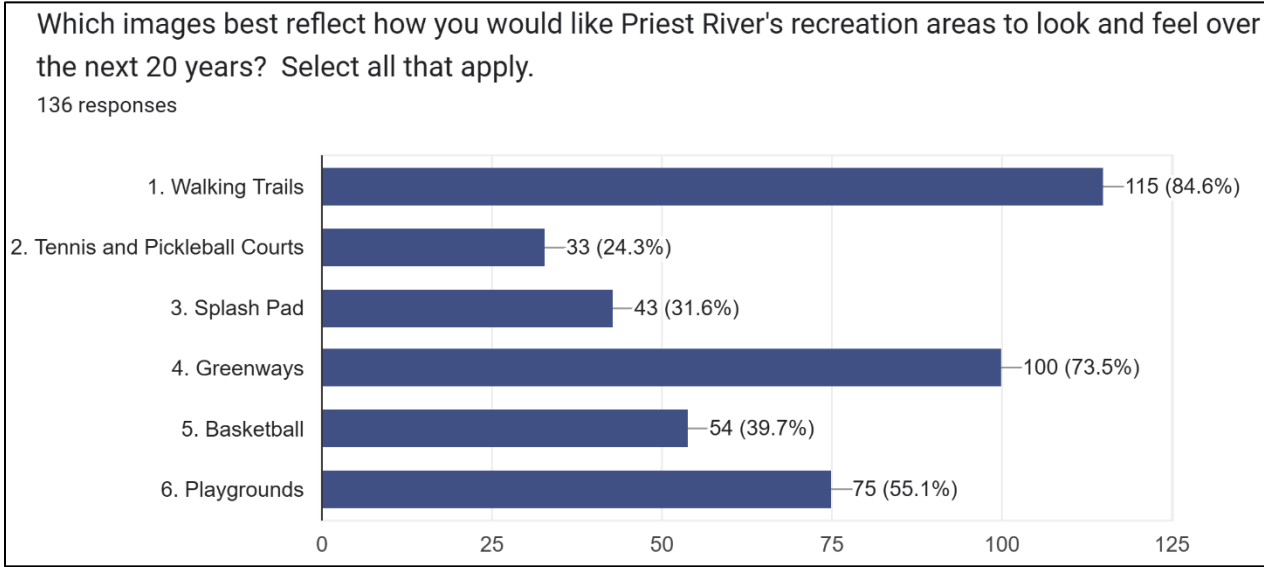
Role of Parks and Public Spaces in Community Character

Parks, trails, and public spaces play a central role in shaping the identity and experience of Priest River. Survey responses show that residents place a high value on walkability, access to nature, and the overall quality of public spaces.

At the same time, responses indicate that existing facilities may not fully meet community expectations. While some respondents expressed satisfaction, a significant portion identified gaps in trail connectivity, greenways, and the overall quality of public spaces. This suggests that future investments should focus not only on expanding recreational opportunities, but also on improving the functionality and accessibility of existing amenities.

The strong support for trails, greenways, and river access highlights the importance of:

- Connecting neighborhoods to parks and downtown
- Enhancing access to the river and natural areas
- Strengthening the relationship between recreation and overall community character



Community Identity – Word Cloud

Survey participants were asked: “In one word, what do you love most about Priest River?”



These responses demonstrate a clear and consistent community identity centered on small-town character, strong social connections, and access to natural surroundings.

The consistency of responses indicates a high level of alignment regarding community values and provides a strong basis for policy direction.

What Residents Value Most About Living in Priest River

When asked to describe what they value most about living in Priest River, responses were remarkably consistent. The most common theme by far was the small-town feel, often described in terms like “quiet,” “slow pace,” and “not too crowded.” Residents clearly value a lifestyle that feels manageable, familiar, and grounded.

Closely tied to this is a strong sense of community and connection. Many responses emphasized knowing neighbors, supporting one another, and maintaining a close-knit, family-oriented environment. Words like “friendly,” “caring,” and “supportive” came up repeatedly, pointing to a community where relationships matter.

Another major theme is the area's natural surroundings and access to the outdoors. Residents highlighted the river, mountains, forests, and proximity to places like Priest Lake, along with opportunities for recreation such as hunting, fishing, and walking. For many, the physical setting is just as important as the social one.

There is also a clear appreciation for safety, peace, and quality of life. Terms like "safe," "quiet," and "peaceful" were frequently mentioned, especially in the context of raising families. Several responses emphasized the ability to balance privacy with community involvement.

Finally, many residents expressed a deep connection to place and identity. References to family history, growing up in Priest River, and preserving its character reflect a strong desire to maintain what makes the community unique. This aligns closely with broader survey results highlighting the importance of maintaining small-town character.

Overall, the responses point to a community that values simplicity, connection, and its natural environment. These themes reinforce the importance of protecting Priest River's character while planning for the future.

Desired Changes and Improvements for Priest River's Future

When asked what single change or improvement they would most like to see, responses covered a wide range of needs, but several clear priorities emerged.

The most prominent theme was infrastructure, particularly concerns around water, sewer, and roads. Many residents pointed to aging or insufficient systems, with specific mentions of water pressure, fire flow reliability, and sewer capacity. There is a strong sentiment that

basic infrastructure must be addressed before additional growth occurs.

Closely tied to this is the need for affordable and attainable housing. Residents repeatedly expressed concern that rising housing costs are pushing out younger generations and working families. At the same time, many emphasized that new housing should be balanced with preserving the community's small-town character.

Another major theme is economic development and job opportunities. Responses highlighted a desire for more local jobs, support for small businesses, and a more active downtown. Several residents noted that Priest River is currently seen as a pass-through town and expressed

"The quiet town feel & knowing people you see."

"This is where I grew up, all of my family is close and nearby."

"I would like to see new housing built and sidewalks on existing streets"

"More opportunity for kids and families"

"I'd like to see more events that make use of downtown, music, and the rivers beauty"

interest in creating attractions and destinations that encourage people to stop, stay, and spend locally.

Residents also placed strong emphasis on parks, recreation, and walkability. Requests for walking paths, bike trails, river access, and community spaces were common. There is clear demand for both outdoor amenities and indoor recreational options, particularly for youth and families.

At the same time, many responses stressed the importance of maintaining Priest River's identity. Residents want to see growth managed carefully, with an emphasis on preserving rural character, small-town feel, and community values. Concerns about overdevelopment, loss of local control, and changes to zoning reflect a desire to shape growth intentionally rather than react to it.

Additional themes included improving schools, increasing community services, enhancing public safety, and creating more activities for youth. While these were mentioned less frequently, they reinforce the broader goal of improving quality of life for residents of all ages.

Overall, the responses reflect a community that is open to change, but only if it is thoughtful, balanced, and rooted in the qualities that make Priest River unique.

Additional Community Feedback and Perspectives

The final comments reinforce several key themes seen throughout the survey. Residents consistently emphasized the need to address infrastructure before further growth, particularly water, sewer, and roads.

Views on growth are mixed. Some support it for the economic benefits, while others are concerned about overdevelopment and losing local control. Overall, there is broad agreement that growth should be carefully managed and aligned with community values.

Maintaining small-town character and rural identity remains a top priority, along with protecting open space and avoiding a shift toward a resort-style community.

Residents also highlighted the need for downtown revitalization, safer pedestrian infrastructure, and improved walkability, especially near schools and neighborhoods.

Finally, there is a strong call for transparency and meaningful community involvement, with an expectation that public input will directly shape future decisions.

Overall, the message is clear: residents support progress, but want it done thoughtfully, with infrastructure, identity, and long-term sustainability in mind.

“Great work!! Thanks for thinking about Priest River's future”

“Thank you for the opportunity to provide input.”

Agency Input

Three agencies provided comments during the review period:

- Idaho Department of Fish and Game (no comments)
- Idaho Department of Lands (wildfire and vegetation management recommendations)
- Idaho Department of Water Resources (water rights and groundwater language recommendations)

Agency comments were technical in nature and focused on refining existing language rather than identifying conflicts.

Key Themes from Public Input

Public input during Phase 4 revealed a high level of consistency across survey responses, workshops, and open-ended comments. Several core themes emerged.

1. Infrastructure and Growth Capacity

Residents clearly emphasized that infrastructure, particularly water, sewer, and roads, must be addressed before accommodating additional growth. This aligns strongly with policies in Chapters 7 and 15, which prioritize development based on available infrastructure capacity.

2. Small-Town Character and Community Identity

Maintaining Priest River's small-town feel, rural character, and sense of community was the most consistent priority across all engagement efforts. This theme is directly supported by policies in Chapters 12 and 15, which emphasize compatibility, scale, and context-sensitive development.

3. Housing Affordability and Availability

Housing is widely recognized as a challenge, particularly for younger residents and working families. However, there is also clear preference for lower-density housing types. This reflects an inherent tension that is acknowledged in Chapter 11 and reinforced through land use and growth management policies.

4. Economic Development and Job Opportunities

Residents support economic development, particularly job creation and small business growth, but expect it to occur in a way that reinforces community character. This aligns with Chapter 4 policies focused on diversification, downtown reinvestment, and local-scale development.

5. Parks, Recreation, and Quality of Life

There is strong support for expanding parks, trails, and river access. These amenities are viewed as essential to both quality of life and community identity, consistent with Chapter 9 policies.

6. Walkability and Safety

Residents identified a need for improved sidewalks, pedestrian crossings, and connectivity, particularly near schools and downtown. This aligns with transportation policies in Chapter 8.

7. Desire for Balanced and Managed Growth

Across all responses, there is broad agreement that growth should be intentional, measured, and aligned with infrastructure and community values. This theme is reflected throughout the Comprehensive Plan framework.

Recommendations for Plan Revisions

Overall, the draft Comprehensive Plan is well aligned with public input. However, several targeted refinements are recommended to strengthen clarity and responsiveness to community priorities.

1. Strengthen Infrastructure-First Language

While existing policies address infrastructure capacity, consider reinforcing language in Chapters 7 and 15 to more explicitly state that development should not outpace available services. This reflects one of the strongest and most consistent public concerns.

2. Clarify Approach to Housing Diversity

Given the tension between affordability needs and preference for lower-density housing, Chapter 11 could benefit from clearer language emphasizing:

- Compatibility with existing neighborhoods
- Incremental or context-sensitive increases in housing types
- Design standards that maintain neighborhood character

3. Reinforce Small-Town Character Across Chapters

Although addressed in Chapter 12, consider integrating stronger references to small-town character in Chapters 4 (Economic Development) and 8 (Transportation) to ensure consistency across policy areas.

4. Expand Focus on Walkability and Connectivity

Strengthen policies in Chapter 8 to more clearly prioritize sidewalk expansion, safe crossings, and trail connectivity, particularly in residential areas and near schools.

5. Emphasize Downtown as a Community and Economic Hub

Chapter 4 policies are well aligned, but could be strengthened by more explicitly supporting:

- Year-round activity
- Small business retention
- Public space improvements and events

6. Highlight Recreation as Core Infrastructure

Given the level of public support, Chapter 9 could further emphasize trails, greenways, and river access as essential community infrastructure rather than optional amenities.

7. Maintain Flexibility While Improving Clarity

The plan appropriately emphasizes flexibility, but in some areas additional clarity on implementation thresholds (particularly infrastructure and development review) may improve predictability for both residents and applicants.

Conclusion

Phase 4 public engagement confirms that the draft Comprehensive Plan is largely aligned with community values and priorities. Residents demonstrated a clear and consistent vision for Priest River's future, one that reflects cautious support for growth, with a strong emphasis on managing it carefully and protecting the community's identity.

The strongest message throughout the process is not opposition to change, but a desire for balance. Residents want to see improvements in housing, economic opportunity, and amenities, while preserving the small-town character, natural environment, and sense of community that define Priest River.

The draft plan provides a solid policy framework to achieve this balance. With targeted refinements that strengthen infrastructure coordination, clarify housing strategies, and reinforce community character, the Comprehensive Plan is well positioned to guide Priest River's growth in a way that reflects both current needs and long-term community values.