

***Deepening our Understanding  
of Community Wellbeing:***  
An Analysis of Qualitative Responses in the  
2014 Capital Region Community Wellbeing Survey

Prepared for  
**The Victoria Foundation**

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## What is Wellbeing?

There are many definitions of wellbeing. For the purposes of this report, the Victoria Foundation has adopted the *Canadian Index of Wellbeing's* working definition:

*The presence of the highest possible quality of life in its full breadth of expression focused on but not necessarily exclusive to: good living standards, robust health, a sustainable environment, vital communities, an educated populace, balanced time use, high levels of democratic participation, and access to and participation in leisure and culture.*

## Introduction

In 2014, the Victoria Foundation, Capital Regional District and the Canadian Index of Wellbeing (CIW) piloted the Victoria Capital Region Community Wellbeing Survey. Based on the conceptual work of the CIW, the survey measures the subjective wellbeing of residents in eight quality of life domains: community vitality, democratic engagement, education, environment, healthy populations, leisure and culture, living standards and time use.

An invitation to participate in the survey was mailed to 15,841 randomly selected households, representing 10% of all households in the region and divided proportionally across all municipalities. One person in each household, aged 18 years or older, was invited to complete the questionnaire. A total of 2,239 people completed the survey for a response rate of 14.1%, creating a statistically accurate snapshot of wellbeing in Greater Victoria.

In the final section of the survey, participants were asked one open-ended question: “Do you have any other comments or suggestions to improve the wellbeing in your community?” This report presents the findings of a qualitative analysis of responses to that question. The assessment of the qualitative responses allows for a deeper consideration of the lived experiences of wellbeing across the Capital Region. Of the jurisdictions in Canada utilizing the CIW community survey, the Victoria Foundation is the first to use the analysis of qualitative survey data to enhance its understanding of local communities and their residents, and to generate ideas for improving community wellbeing.

## Survey Overview

The 2014 Capital Region Community Wellbeing Survey is comprised of 77 closed-ended questions (e.g. yes/no and Likert scale responses) and one open-ended question. The close-ended questions focus on:

- Community vitality (11 questions) that assesses the personal connectedness and safety of the respondent in their community
- Healthy populations (7 questions) that assesses overall health and access to health services
- Democratic engagement (3 questions) that assesses interest and participation in local politics;
- Environment (2 questions) that assesses attitudes regarding natural environment, traffic, recycling and energy conservation;
- Leisure and culture (8 questions) that assesses how often people participate in recreational and cultural activities, as well as the quality of experience of those activities;
- Education (3 questions) that assesses what kinds of learning opportunities respondents have participated in and availability of learning opportunities;
- Living standards (8 questions) that assesses quality of work life and work life balance;
- Time use (8 questions) that assesses caregiving and self-care;
- Overall health and wellbeing (3 questions) that assesses level of satisfaction of a range of items on the quality of their personal wellbeing and neighborhood life.

The analysis of the quantitative survey data is captured in two reports, *A Profile of the Wellbeing of Victoria Capital Region Residents* (Phillips, Hilbrecht & Smale, 2014) and *A Comparison of Capital Region Residents on Selected Aspects of Their Wellbeing* (Phillips, Hilbrecht & Smale, 2014).

Of note in the quantitative findings, over half of respondents rated cost of living as the most pressing issue facing Greater Victoria residents, followed by affordable housing (21.1%). Other response data revealed that only 12% of survey participants felt that a sense of community was one of the best things about living in Greater Victoria. Approximately 29% of respondents felt lonely, and 20% felt uncomfortable or out of place in their community.

## Thematic Analysis Approach

Of the 2239 completed surveys, 853 respondents answered the open-ended question, providing approximately 35,000 words. Of the 853 responses, 153 responses that stated “nothing to add,” “n/a” or “no” were removed from the data, leaving 700 responses for analysis.<sup>1</sup> The transcripts were then open coded for consistent patterns in responses.

Open coding is a method of qualitative data analysis where the analyst does not apply pre-determined categories or codes to the data (such as the nine domains of well-being that structured the survey). Instead, the analyst follows the narrative within the data.

Two broad thematic areas emerged from the open coding of the data:

1. Barriers to wellbeing
2. How to create wellbeing

Following this initial coding, data was systematically re-coded for a second and third iteration to verify the consistency of the initial coding scheme. The following discussion summarizes these findings, explores an intersectional analysis across themes, and proposes areas for further study.

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<sup>1</sup> Any responses that stated “No thanks, my community is great!” or “I have nothing to add, the survey was very comprehensive” were retained for analysis.

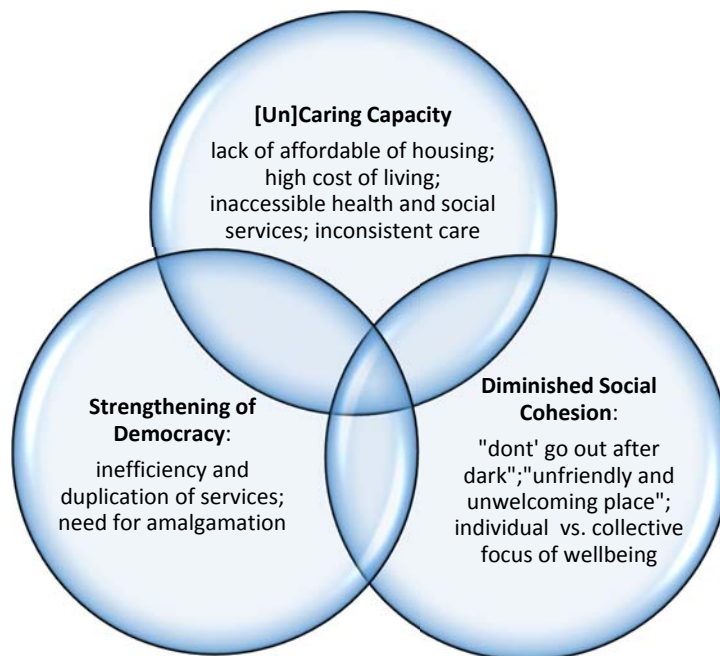
## Summary of Findings

### Barriers to Wellbeing

The barriers to wellbeing identified by the respondents encompassed three areas:

1. A lack of caring capacity within their community (e.g. high cost of living, lack of affordable housing, and inaccessible health and social services)
2. A need to strengthen democracy (e.g. amalgamation of municipal councils, inefficiency and duplication of services)
3. Diminished social cohesion (e.g. reported feelings of fearfulness, isolation, communities as unfriendly and unwelcoming places, and individual concerns rather than community wellbeing)

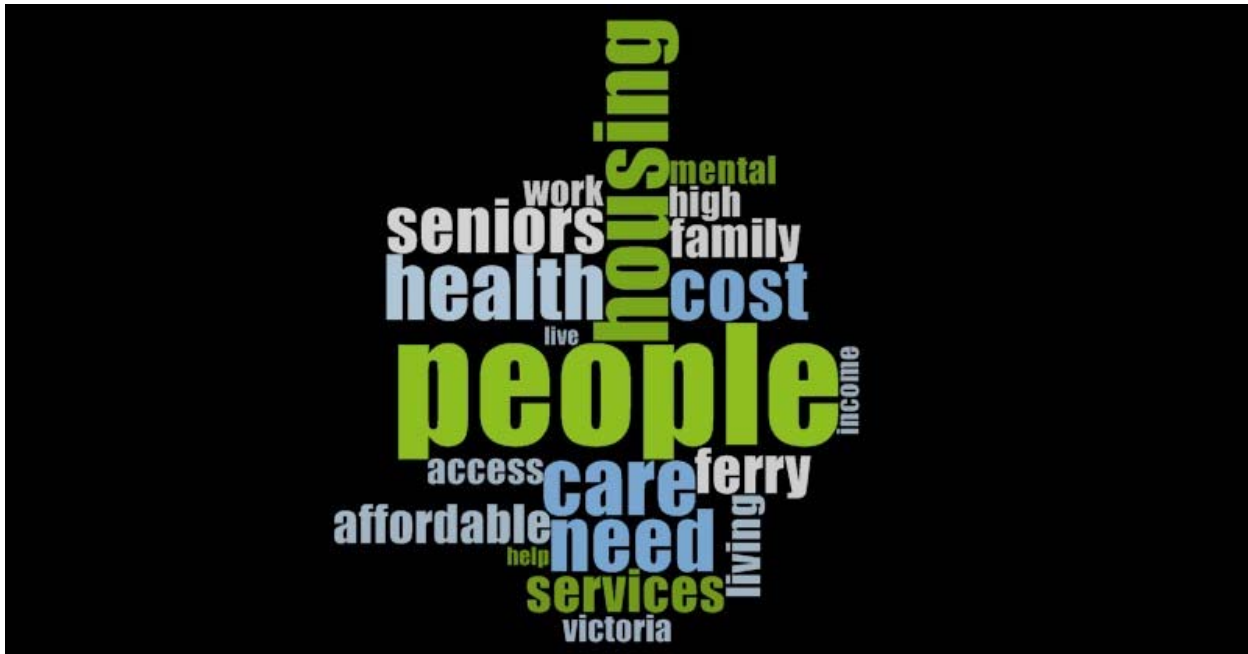
**Diagram 1: Barriers to Wellbeing**



## [Un]caring Capacity

Caring capacity is a population health concept used to assess the capacity of a community to meet the needs of its residents, such as through affordable housing and accessible services. As shown in diagram 2, the most frequent words or phrases used by the respondents to the qualitative survey question were about the cost of living, lack of affordable housing and inaccessible services, particularly in the health care sector (213 of total responses, or 30%).

Diagram 2: [Un]caring Capacity



- “I love my community and the quality of life. The cost of living here is our greatest struggle.”
- “Our community offers a lot of choices. Our barrier is our jobs. Demands are high and stressful which consumes our energy.”
- “Being able to have things like gym memberships or other services like that more affordable. Based on general rent costs, and wages made people really don't have much spending money-if any, without being in debt. ... I also don't go out too much due to not having enough money. I would like to be able to utilize what is around me, but find it hard to do so based on all these things. I don't imagine this survey will fix those things.”

- “With the money I get per month you tell me how I can feel like part of the community or feel good about myself or have a family. My health is not the greatest but there are things I can do, but it is hard to wake up and go to work when you feel worthless. Mental health help is out of the question because I cannot afford \$60 a visit. It is too bad this will accomplish nothing that truly matters to the people that these improvements would benefit.”

The affordability of ferry service from the Gulf Islands to Vancouver Island was seen as important to wellbeing of the island communities (33 of 213 responses). For example:

- “Ferry fares have reached the point where I cannot afford to leave the island as much as I would like visit children, grandchildren, and for recreational purposes. My children cannot afford the ferry to come over to see me.”
- “Increasing ferry fares are having an extremely negative effect on our communities (Southern Gulf Islands) and on my family's ability to access the services we need. As well, the cost of ferry travel has had a very negative impact on our personal financial situation. My husband has to travel to Vancouver weekly to care for his brother who has disabilities. As well, we both need to travel to access medical specialists ... The residents of the islands are feeling helpless and hopeless about this issue.”

Access to health care services accounted for 63 of 213 responses. Again, affordability of ferry services was linked to diminished community wellbeing in terms of access to health care services, as well as the downgrading of health care services on the Gulf Islands.

- “Residential care for seniors is inadequate: too few beds, hard to access in a timely manner, not close enough to family for their continued support, many current facilities are tired and worn. So wellbeing in my community would see more residential care beds for seniors, available in a timely manner, without the hassles currently encountered, and be modern, pleasant facilities.”
- “I see a few priorities the lack of mental health services in the CRD cause undue hardship on families frequently to the point of breakdown. The lack of increased programs and services for families living with dementia. We as a neighborhood provide support to one family where a spouse has early dementia and the other spouse must still work, organize the household and look after the not yet totally independent children.”
- “Island Health has not been helpful in establishing clinics for people over 50; in fact Island Health was instrumental in closing such a clinic that was working extremely well. Previously I saw the same GP; now a different GP each time and the last person seem to have the competence of someone with dementia!!”

A substantial amount of concern was raised by respondents over the cost of housing in the region. Development of condominiums at the expense of affordable or subsidized housing was noted, as well as the lack of incentives or programs for home ownership.

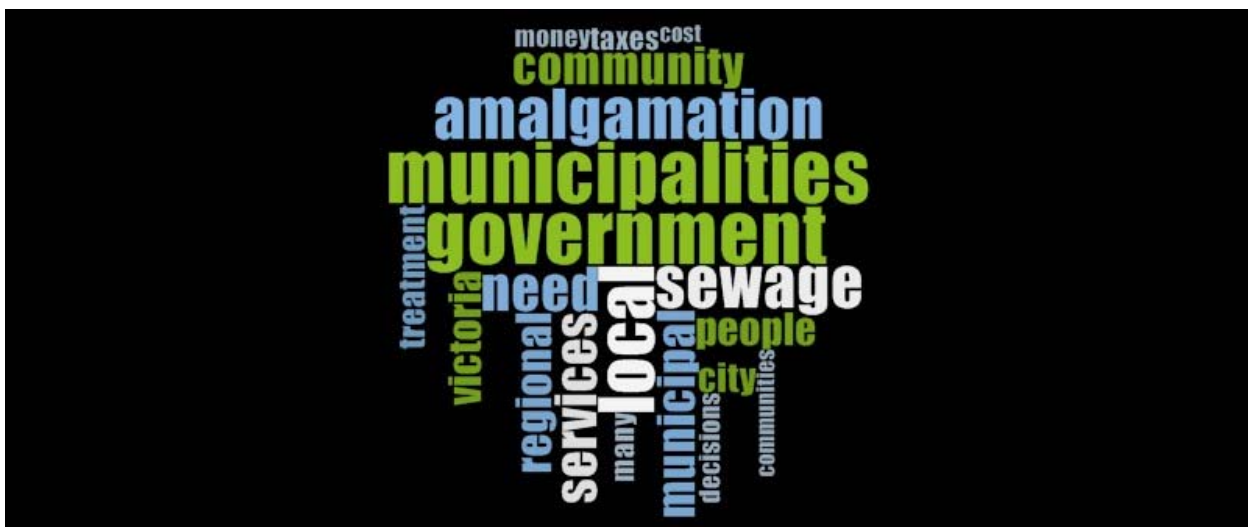
- “I see the negative effects of poverty on my community. The gap between the rich and the rest is widening dramatically. More social housing integrated into neighbourhoods would make neighbourhoods more diverse and assist poorer families to enjoy what my family has.”
- “Affordable CLEAN housing desperately needed. There are educated employed adults living in their cars because of the cost of rent. People without children and no disabilities cannot access subsidized/affordable housing.”
- “Make renting a home more affordable. Also offer "rent to own home ownership" opportunities to help people struggling get a step into a home. I can't make enough to pay our rent, let alone save for a down-payment. I feel very unhappy knowing that I may ever be able to own a home in this wonderful community.”



## Strengthening Democracy

As noted in *A Profile of the Wellbeing of Victoria Capital Region Residents*, 44% of the respondents were somewhat engaged in civic matters, and 26% were highly engaged. Qualitative responses regarding community wellbeing suggested a particular concern about the Capital Regional District's unelected status, and the need for an amalgamated governance structure to reduce inefficiency and duplication of services (117 of total responses, or 17%). As diagram 3 indicates, there is concern over the loss of local control over issues of governance and the need for greater accountability of the CRD for costs of services.

**Diagram 3: Strengthening Democracy**



Some examples of the survey responses highlight the frustration with the CRD, the need for amalgamation and better planning.

- “Something major has to change on this island. CRD and Islands Trust are not working hand in hand. It is a disaster. Not a good or happy place to live.”
- “I would prefer a more rational, inclusive and communicative/consultative system for deciding major projects affecting the region and its residents: e.g.: The sewage system, refuse disposal systems, the replacement of the Blue Bridge, the reinstatement of the E&NR local railway, oil tanker transit through neighbouring waters, municipal amalgamation, fishery protection, habitat protection, agricultural land protection, etc. etc. (and not necessarily in that order!)”

- “Amalgamate the municipalities that presently comprise the Capital Region. At present Greater Victoria cannot compete nationally, or have the infrastructure support that other smaller cities enjoy because we are too busy competing among ourselves. It is an absurdity that a city-region of 350,000 is divided into 13 municipalities.”
- “It is ridiculous to me that we have 13 municipalities. They should be amalgamated. If it is done properly, then perhaps there would be more money to help those who are homeless or without enough to feed and clothe themselves.”
- “Growth needs to be managed with more consideration to supporting services referred to in the survey i.e. schools, parks, transportation, health services etc. or soon the communities will deteriorate, as has happened in many other cities. I see too much evidence of short term development for profit overriding long term planning.”
- “The governance of our local municipalities are becoming more status quo, more power is given to CRD representatives who then hand decisions down to subordinates. In camera meetings are becoming the norm and it is very difficult to get complete, current accounts of debts and payments being made. All transactions made by public employees should be available for the taxpayer to follow and scrutinize expenditures. Expenses must be current and posted on-line.”

## Diminished Social Cohesion

The final barrier to community wellbeing was categorized as diminished social cohesion, comprised of fearfulness, unfriendly communities and unmet individual needs. As seen in diagram 4, respondents identified their lack of connection to other people, either as a result of fearfulness or isolation. Also in this diagram, respondents seem to need help to care for themselves and their family members.

**Diagram 4: Diminished Social Cohesion**



Respondents remarked on fearfulness of being out at night alone because of perceived crime problems (16 of total responses, or 2%):

- "You cannot be outside after dark. Everything that is not secure is taken; cars are broken into. Do not live on the ground floor of any apartment building. Bars and secure locks on all bottom floor windows and doors. Do not go downtown on a Friday. Avoid all homeless, they swear at you and harass you for money. Be aware which route and what streets you take. Avoid July 1 celebrations downtown and all festivals--too much liquor. Be careful on Sunday's downtown. Be out of all parks by 4:30 p.m."
- "Policing is suffering from cutbacks so safety in town questionable now. "
- "Nighttime crime: a lot of vehicle break in's - petty theft. I don't go out after dark."

Other respondents spoke of discrimination and isolation due to poverty and racism (7 responses, or 1%), and feelings of Victoria as a difficult place to make friends (10 responses, or just over 1%). Some examples of responses include:

- “You didn't ask whether someone felt they were discriminated against because of poverty or less money. I don't go out to most events, concerts, movies, theatre, restaurants or pubs because I cannot afford it, and many people think I'm not being part of the community because I don't do that.”
- “I'm a very social person who likes to try new things but this city is different from other Canadian cities in that it is very difficult to make new meaningful friendships. I am not the only person who feels this way. My company has hired dozens of people from out of province and they have struggled to make new meaningful friendships. I have seen a lot of turnover in within my Supervisor group because when you combine this with the ratio of low wages to higher cost of living then it's hard to keep people here. The nice weather and ocean simply aren't enough.”

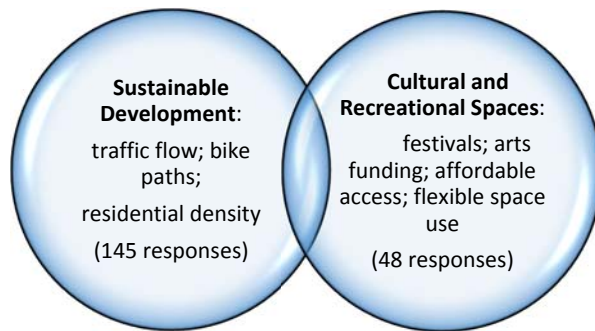
Personal wellbeing was the focus of 61 responses (9%) rather than community or neighbourhood wellbeing. These responses referred to service complaints or personal health problems. The tone of these responses was distinctly, "I need this, or I have experienced that." This trend in the data could be understood in terms of the survey design as respondents were asked detailed questions about their personal circumstances, activity levels and community involvement. Given only one question on the survey inquired about community well-being, it makes sense that respondents would continue to identify with their personal wellbeing in the context of community wellbeing.

- “I think that the blue box pickup should not be allowed to start before 8:00 am in the morning. They come by my house every other Friday at 7:30 am which is very noisy.”
- “The municipality is negligent with the "Green Areas" they set up...the home owner has to then mow and weed this area in front of their property....My sense of wellbeing is assaulted every morning by the SAANICH PLANNING Dept. lack of good planning...why put in a GREEN SPACE and then NOT LOOK AFTER IT!!!”
- “I would like to see a different fee structure at rec center for people like me who are only interested in swimming and are in and out of the pool in less than 1 hour, however currently I have to pay as much as someone who uses the facility all day long.”
- “I am looking for free one on one counselling to help me with issues that come up and affect my depression. I do try hard to get out to the gym or pool now I have a pass or walk with friends. My girlfriend brings me bags of food from time to time which helps a lot.”
- “It would be wonderful if the neighbours across the street would end their partying at 10 p.m. instead of 2 or 3 a.m. and if the owner of the property lived in Victoria and could get the situation under control.”

## How to Create Wellbeing

Creating wellbeing was envisioned primarily through sustainable development, specifically transportation system improvements, housing development and protection of green spaces. By far, the most commonly reported improvements needed to achieve community wellbeing were changes to the built environment to address traffic flow and access to alternative transportation.

**Diagram 5: How to Create Wellbeing**



As evident in diagram 6 below, reducing traffic congestion, better public transit, biking and walking options are most important. Of note, in the overall survey, there were only two questions on attitudes towards the environment (e.g. natural habitat, traffic, recycling and energy conservation), however, this issue resulted in the largest number of qualitative responses (193 of total responses, or 28%).

**Diagram 6: Sustainability for Community Wellbeing**



Access to better ferry services was mentioned again, as in earlier sections of this report, especially with regards to LRT planning to link western communities to ferry services. Other responses focused on the aging infrastructure overwhelmed by new residential developments (condominiums), and the need for better public transit planning especially for shift workers.

- “We need much more frequent and extensive bus service. It would take me more than an hour to get to work by bus and to return home by bus. Therefore, I have to drive to and from work.”
- “Improvement to transit is a big issue. Now I can get around by car, and even though that is not environmentally desirable, at least I am not isolated. I am concerned about a time when I can no longer do this.”
- “I would like to see wider sidewalks that would encourage people to use them for daily outings and exercise. I would also like to see an effort to address traffic problems throughout the CRD, in particular the congestion where McKenzie Avenue intersects with Highway #1. This is RIDICULOUS how this is not being dealt with, and a source of endless frustration with all who use this road system.”
- “Make Bicycling safer. Make more parks and parklets. Make downtown safer. Better bus connections (avoid having them all downtown). More bus service. Better lighting at bus stops.”
- “Improved cycling facilities, including physically separated bike lanes, signal crossing, water, washrooms and bike air pumps.”
- “The CRD should consider restructuring the use of some major parks to be more inclusive and active. Improve access to parks for pedestrians and cyclists in partnership with MOT and municipal governments. For example an over pass across Hwy 17 to Elk/Beaver Lake Park. A bike or pedestrian path on the east side of the park connecting Beaver Lake main entrance to the boathouse and Hamsterly Beach would improve safety and access without need for a car.”
- “Developers are encouraged & enabled by local government, but there is never any resolution to how to move all the people that are moving to the western communities. Nobody anywhere addresses the issue. It shows a complete lack of respect for the people who have lived here for many years. Lots of talk about light rail & transit, but the cars are here & we need to do something to move them or stop building. You just can't keep building if you have no infrastructure. How long have you sat in traffic trying to get through the McKenzie intersection or trying to go up island on a Friday afternoon. The traffic problem has a huge negative impact on the quality of life in the Western communities.”

Culture and recreation as aspects of community wellbeing are also included in the theme of sustainability. While these aspects of community life are recognized as important to sustainability, they are less frequently mentioned than matters of infrastructure and traffic.

**Diagram 7: Cultural and Recreational Resources for Community Wellbeing**



Affordability and accessibility are overarching themes throughout the data, linking all aspects of community life and wellbeing. With regards to how to create wellbeing through cultural and recreational opportunities, most respondents identified the need for more affordable access, while some respondents suggested improvements to performance venues with more innovative design.

- “We have no good-sized convention centre to attract, sizable conventions, because no municipality can afford to do it, we don't have a large enough arena to attract a professional team or professional concerts, or a decent concert hall, performance centre, to attract world class acts.”
- “Build an actual arts centre in the downtown core and stop funding the RTMS [Royal Theatre and MacPherson Playhouse]. Move the AGGV [Art Gallery of Greater Victoria] to the downtown core and establish a permanent Emily Carr exhibition. Take the VCM [Victoria Conservatory of Music] off life-support and establish a local branch of the Royal Conservatory of Music.”

- “Eliminate the exorbitant entry fee for the museum and Victoria art gallery. When the museum was free I used to drop in with my first daughter every time we were down town. My younger children almost never saw the inside because it's far too expensive.”
- “We need a performing arts centre taking advantage of our harbor side environment. We will have an iconic new (e.g. blue) bridge. Why not an iconic water side cultural centre?”

Recreational spaces and programs were identified by respondents as too expensive or difficult to access. Downtown Victoria was noted as lacking a swimming pool facility other than the Crystal Pool which needs to be replaced.

- “The goals of community recreation centres should be to help improve the overall health of the residents in the community. Providing only registered and additional fee paying programs is not the way to encourage people that cannot afford the private providers services in the first place to participate.”
- “Recreation centres have become more and more just competition to private health clubs rather than providing residents with low cost health programs like they should and used to be.”
- “More access to childcare at recreation centers for parents during non-conventional hours. Very hard to get out as a single parent for myself and with my child as I can only do things in the evenings. No programs for toddlers in the evening either. Can't take my toddler to music lessons if they are only at 3:00pm (or earlier) when I am still at work.”



## Looking Forward

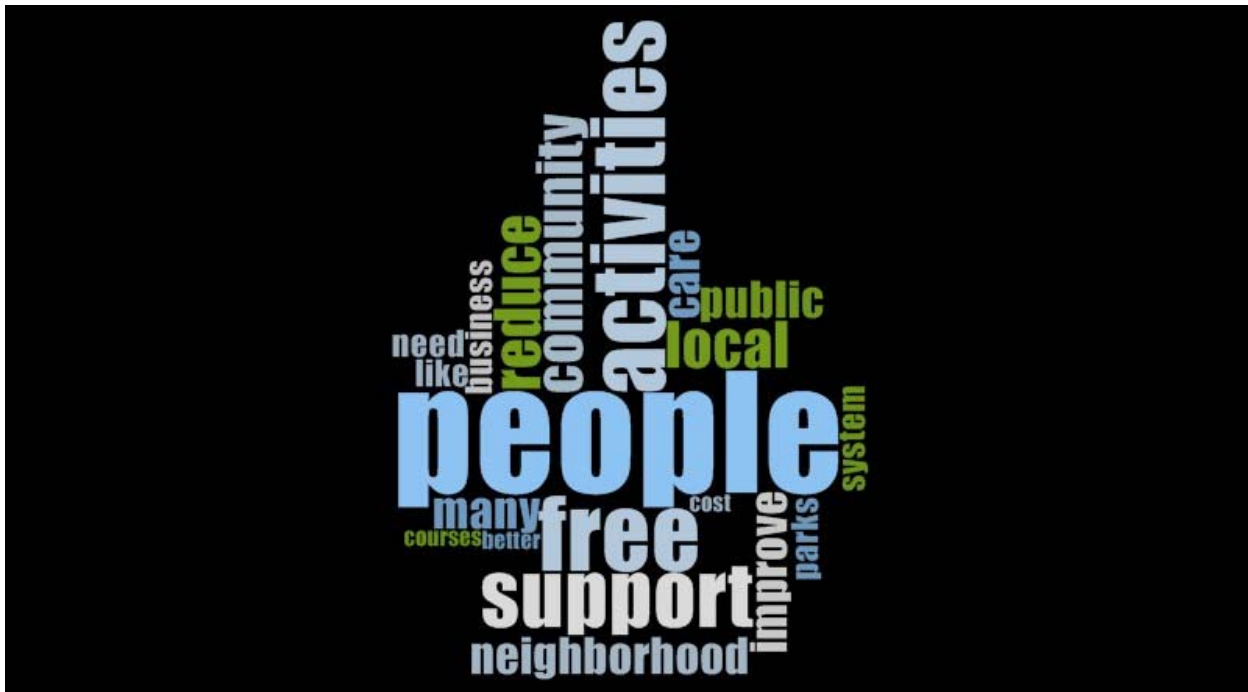
Overall, only 37 responses (5%) were coded for a high level of community wellbeing. As seen in diagram 8, these respondents expressed a high level of support and enjoyment of activities within their communities.

**Diagram 8: “What Our Community Does Well”**



- “I would like to applaud and thank the City of Esquimalt for the excellent recreation facilities it had provided. I use the pool and rec centre on a regular basis; the programs are good and affordable. Thank you to the Mayor and all her staff who put so much work into the Rec Centre. I also appreciate the fact that the City of Esquimalt is currently holding open houses and asking for input. Thank you. “
- “We love our neighborhood and are so grateful to be living close to Bamfield Park - it has been a real life-saver for us! Gorge Swimfest, corn roast - the Vic West community association is fantastic!”
- “This is the best place to live.”
- “We could not have picked a better place to live in Victoria.”
- “Community is quite good, probably as good as it gets.”

Diagram 9: “What Might Work ...”



Some respondents provided creative and innovative ideas for bolstering community wellbeing, including ideas aimed at sustainability (e.g. car share programs) and affordable recreational activities (e.g. exercise parks). The suggestions of “what might work” appear to define community wellbeing in terms of active lifestyles and bringing people together to share sustainable resources, such as community gardens, yet are unrelated to the specific needs identified in the areas of affordable housing and the burdens of high costs of living.

- “In my fantasy neighborhood there would be a small common building on an empty lot that served a very intimate area (perhaps 16 square blocks) with car/heavy equipment sharing, an allotment garden, perhaps a free library a cooking area, playground. I lived on a gulf island for many years and miss those non-commercial group gatherings. This is the “It takes a Village” concept. I think the benefits would be extraordinary!”
- “Less development non-sustainable development; discouragement of continued population growth; viable public transit; change car culture so cyclists are safe; much more support for locally-grown food; restore train travel up & down the island; stop dumping human waste in Salish Sea; make the Official Plan real; more food grown on public land; the green world everywhere we look; support including funding for neighborhood-generated projects; emphasis on sustainability at every level of human activity in the CRD.”

- “Victoria CRD is very well positioned to become a world leader in transitioning to a new economy, i.e., not based on fossil fuels. Let us consciously grasp this opportunity and run with it.”

Some respondents did provide innovative ideas to address joblessness and social isolation such as:

- “I believe the educated young people of this city need FREE, accessible supports for micro-business (right down to the individual freelancer/contract worker) and opportunities to experiment with/learn new technology. This includes communal working space (e.g.: desk with wifi and/or workshop space not leased by any single business but which can be accessed by members), legal/financial support, public access to commercial-grade hardware and software that individuals might not be able to personally afford, and more.”
- “Please bring back bookmobiles.”

## Future Qualitative Research & Analysis

As stated at the outset of this report, the quantitative survey results indicate general wellbeing among the Capital Region’s residents. However, there are some worrying trends with regards to cost of living, housing affordability and social isolation that are borne out in the qualitative data.

Despite this, the issues of traffic and transportation infrastructure generated the largest number of qualitative responses, suggesting that these issues are the greater impediment to community wellbeing in the region. However, these findings may be attributed to survey design limitations (e.g. only one opportunity for an open-ended response) and to response bias on the part of the survey participants (e.g. who does and does not respond to open-ended survey questions).

The qualitative responses analyzed in this report suggest a connection between cost of living and social isolation. Further, the lack of affordable housing and high cost of living appear to be widespread concerns that resonate across all socio-economic groups and age groups.

Future research could involve analyzing the demographic characteristics of survey participants who reported high levels of social isolation and precarious housing, as well as conducting focus groups on affordability and access to opportunity with a sample of low income and middle income earners in the Capital Region.