

# A survey of Westerly, RI businesses

## October 2019



Collaborative business survey was conducted by the Westerly Economic Development Commission and the Ocean Community Chamber of Commerce (Summer 2019)



### Survey Background

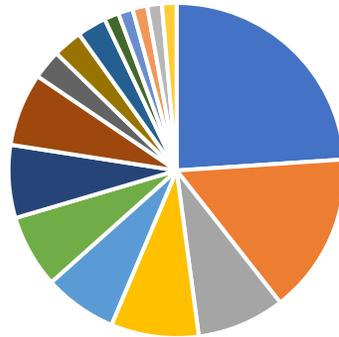
- Population source was 1,507 Taxed Businesses on record in Westerly as of January 1, 2019
- Survey cards were mailed mid-August to the address on file
- Initial response was 41 as of September 1<sup>st</sup>
- Additional outreach initiated via town business association groups and door-to-door solicitation
- Final survey closed October 1<sup>st</sup> with 71 responses

**Response rate of 5% from 71 Westerly businesses**

# Diverse mix of survey respondents by types of businesses and geographic spread



Responses by Industry



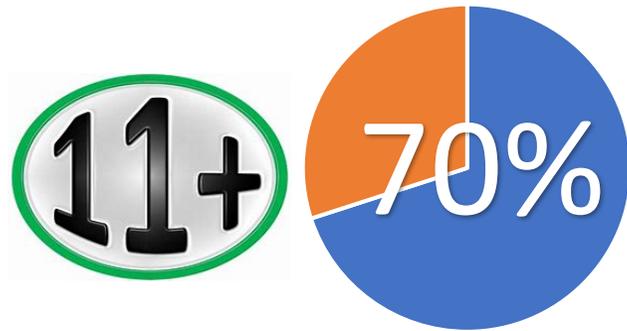
- Retail 17
- Manufacturing 6
- Healthcare 5
- Salon/Beauty 2
- Consumer goods producer 1
- Transportation 1
- Professional Services 11
- Construction 5
- Restaurant 5
- Tourism 2
- Entertainment/Recreation 1
- Financial/Insurance 6
- Fitness 5
- Automotive 2
- Communications 1
- Real Estate 1

Respondents cover a broad spectrum of 16 industries with the majority being Retail (24%), Professional Services (15%), and Manufacturing (8%)

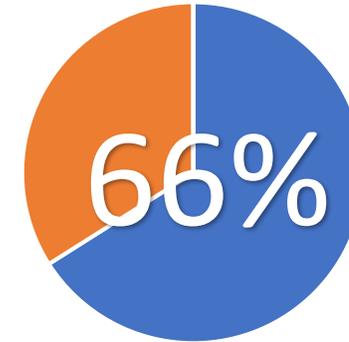


Respondents fairly proportional with business distribution with clusters from Dunns Corner (14%), Downtown (11%), Route 1 Corridor (11%), Main Street (11%), and Medical Area (10%)

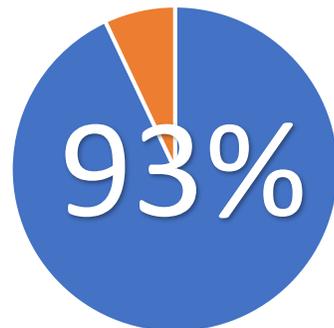
Survey respondents were mostly long – term, year – round, small scale business operators committed to Westerly



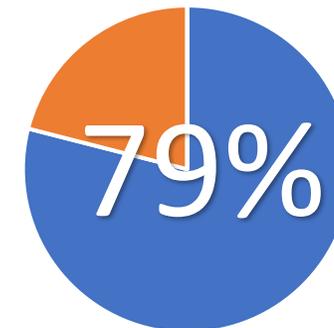
**70% have been operating their business for over 11 years**



**66% operate one location only in Westerly**

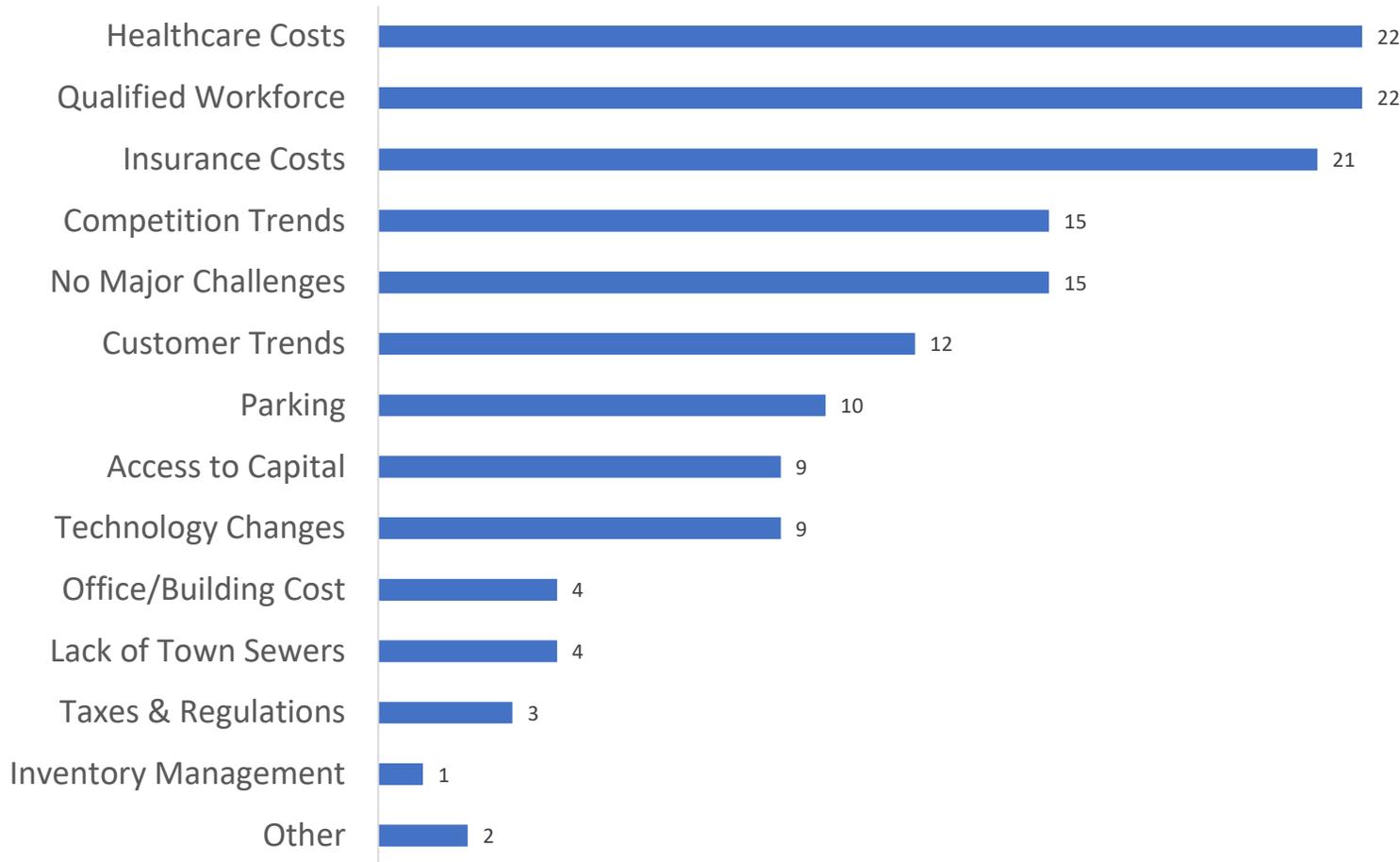


**93% operate a year – round business**



**79% have fewer than five employees**

Some respondents are very positive claiming their business faces no major challenge (21%), while others do have challenges, some of which are consistent



**Consistent operating challenges:**

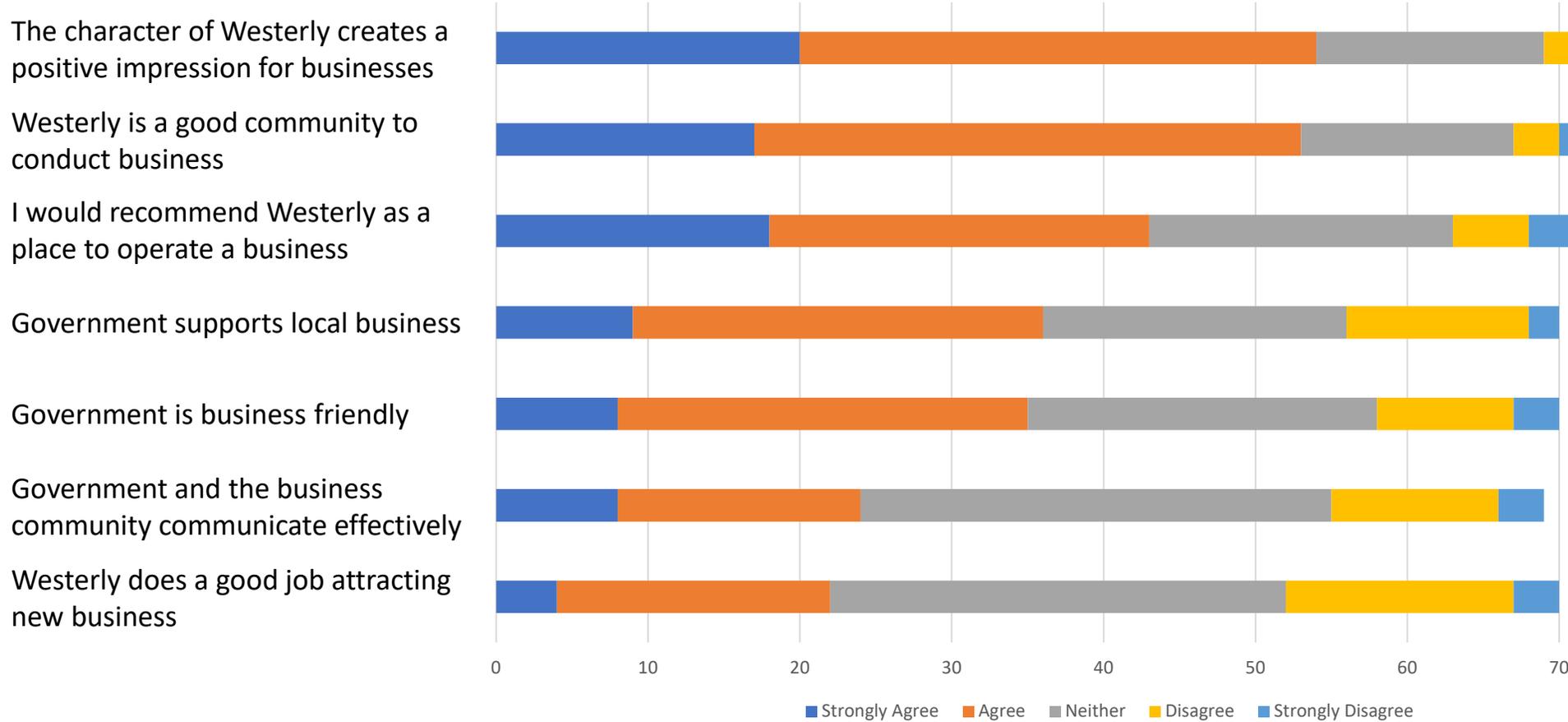
- Healthcare Costs (31%)
- Insurance Cost (30%)
- Competition (21%)
- Customer Trends (17%)

**Consistent local challenges:**

- Finding Qualified Workers (31%)
- Parking (14%)

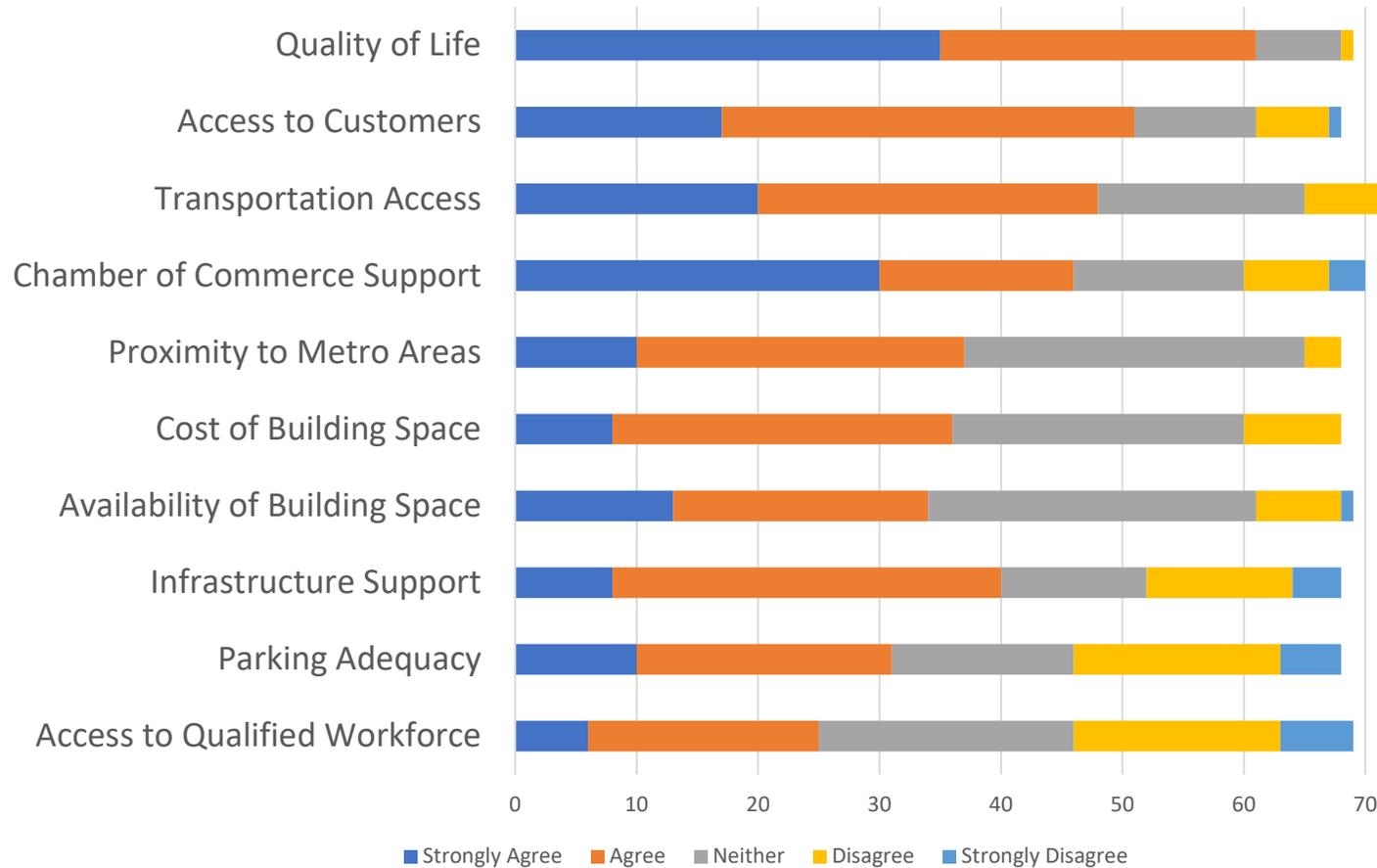
*70 respondents able to select multiple challenges  
(2.2 average number of selections)*

# Overall respondents have a more positive view of Westerly as a good place for business



Respondents are most impressed with Westerly’s Character (76% vs. 3%) and Community (75% vs. 6%)  
 Westerly Government is viewed as Business Friendly (50% vs. 17%) and Supportive (51% vs. 20%)  
 Less effective is Attracting New Businesses (31% vs. 26%) and Government/Business Communication (35% vs. 20%)

# Respondents were more satisfied than not with Westerly as a business location, but certain aspects were stronger than others



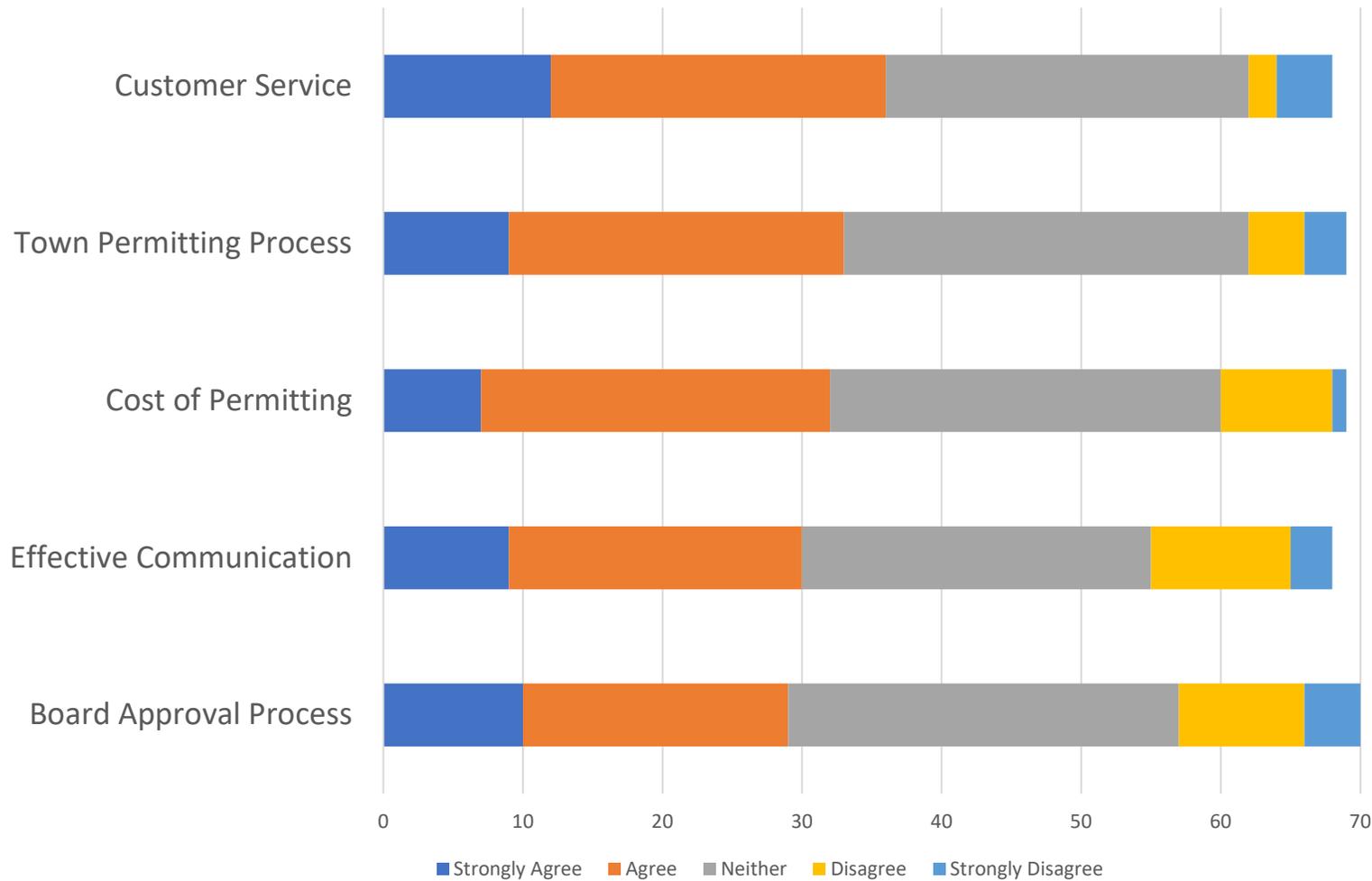
Respondents satisfaction levels were strongest with Westerly's:

- Quality of Life (88%)
- Access to Customers (75%)
- Transportation Access (68%)
- Chamber of Commerce Support (66%)

Respondents dissatisfaction levels were strongest with Westerly's:

- Access to a Qualified Workforce (33%)
- Access to Parking (32%)

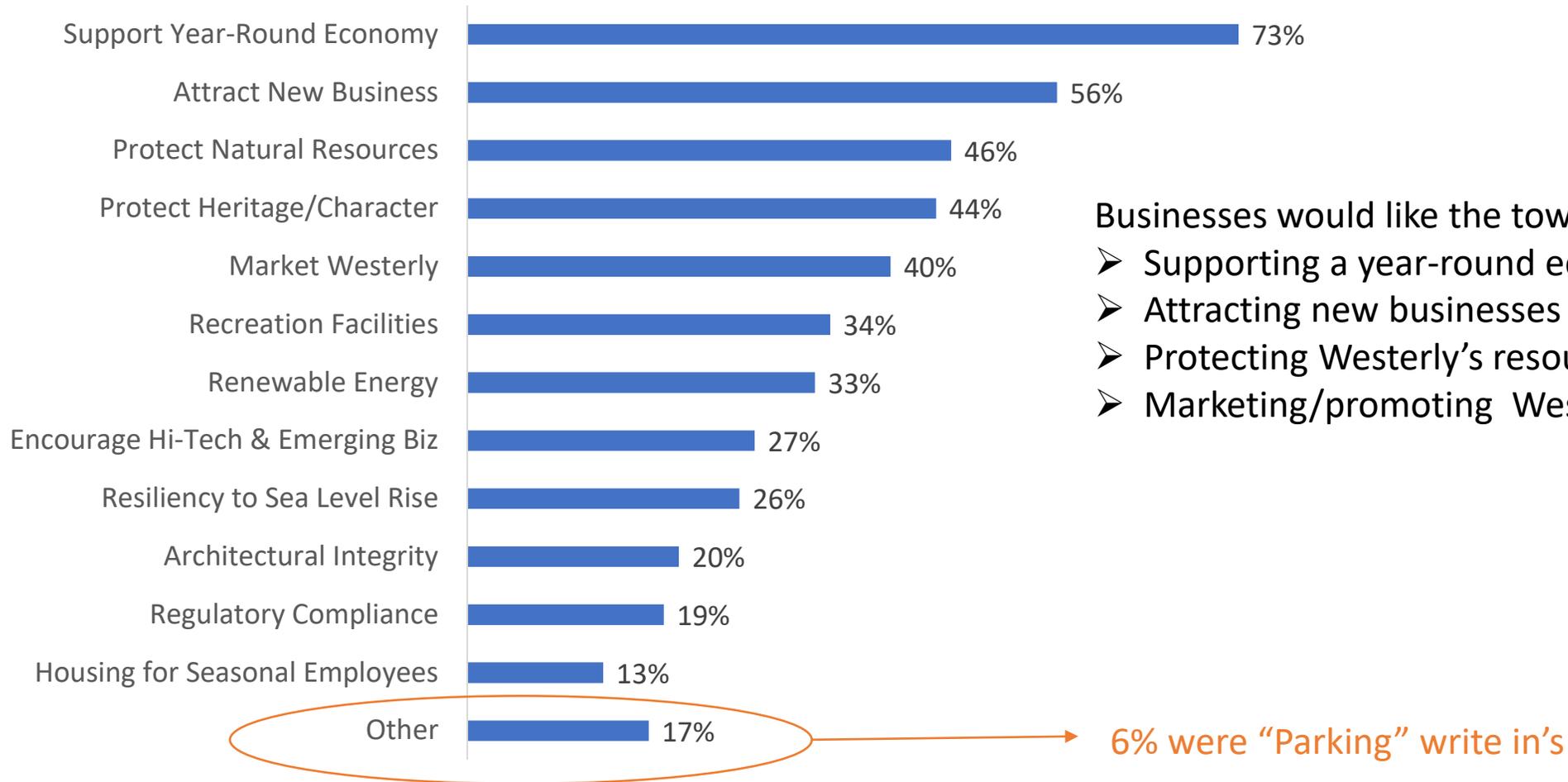
# When assessing satisfaction with town services, respondents were most satisfied with the town's Customer Service (53% vs. 9%)



While overall positive responses for the town services surveyed, dissatisfaction levels were strongest with:

- Board Approval Process (19%)
- Effective Communication of Policy and Implementation (19%)

To help support businesses, respondents were given an array of alternatives to recommend prioritizing



There was no clear preference from respondents on which land use to support given four alternatives



**GIVEN ALTERNATIVES**

- ✓ Build on existing character of neighborhoods and commercial developments
- ✓ More opportunities for small scale professional offices and businesses
- ✓ Diverse commercial or industrial uses
- ✓ More housing opportunities within walking distance to downtown
- Other (please specify)

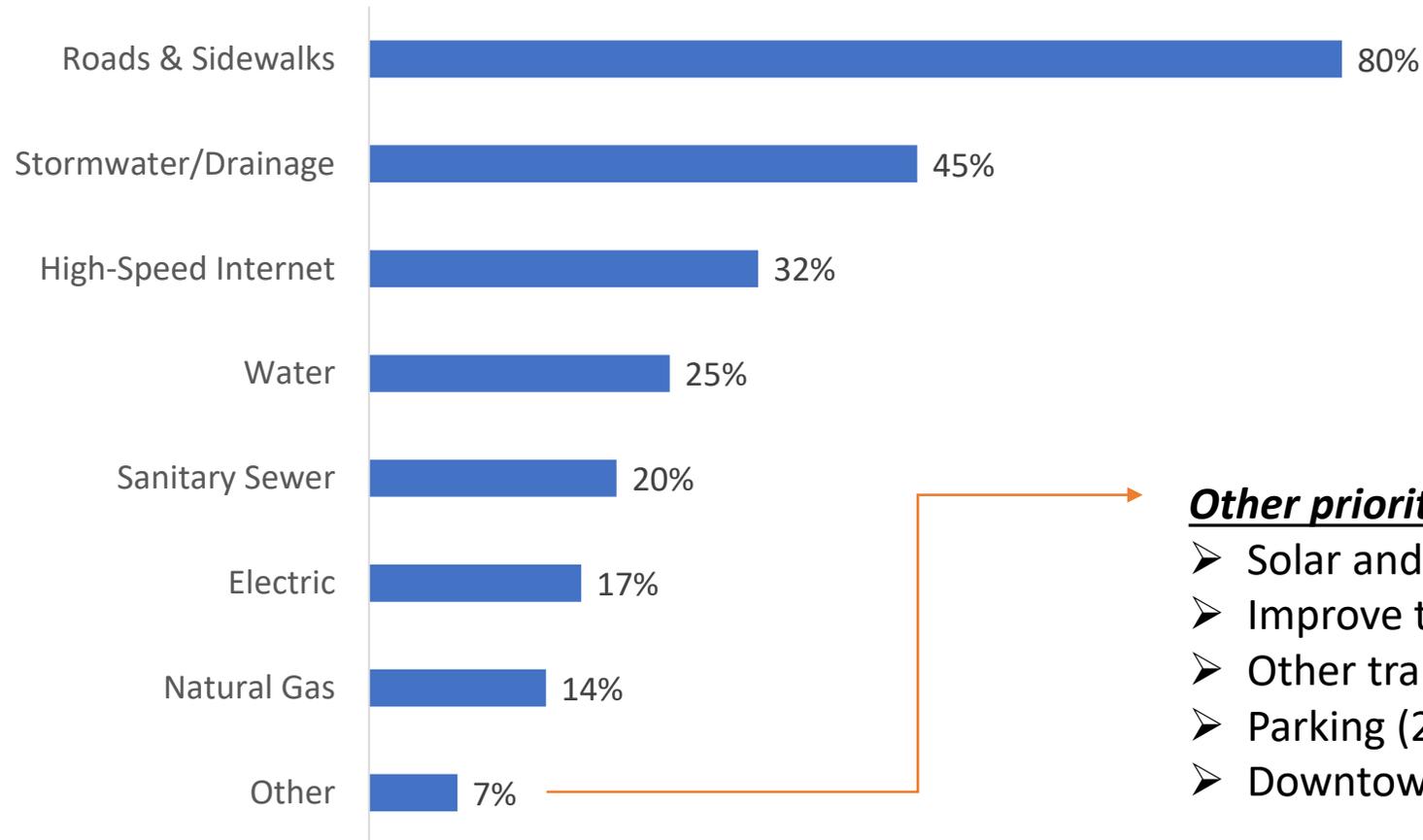
**Interesting array of “other” recommendations**

- “Trial form-based design”
- “Enough restaurants & gyms...Need more PARKING...”
- “Maximize waterfront”
- “Fill existing buildings before creating more” (2 similar)
- “Bike paths”
- “Accommodate small businesses, trades, work from home”
- “Sober house to help the opioid epidemic”
- “Denser commercial use of airport area for development”
- “Stop turning commercial property into residential”



✓ Responses ranged from 33% to 46%

# Regarding Infrastructure Improvements, respondents clearly wanted Westerly to prioritize Roads & Sidewalks



**Other priorities included:**

- Solar and wind energy
- Improve traffic patterns
- Other transportation means
- Parking (2 comments)
- Downtown waterfront

# What tools, resources, or action could Westerly government provide in order to assist you in achieving your business objectives?



Provide support for small businesses to get started and grow

Help promote year round businesses

**General branding of Westerly outside our immediate area**

**Stream-line permitting and records access - leverage technology**

Improve tax abatement regulations

Have a resource office

Schools could do more business with local establishments

**Local government to focus on maintaining infrastructure**

Access to seasonal employees and help with their housing costs.

**Qualified workforce**

Timely permit acceptance and guidance; more realistic business taxes

# What impediments, if any, are there to doing business in Westerly?



**PARKING!**  
(five individual comments)

**Escalating business and housing costs**

Planning & Zoning is well done but takes too long

Improve the quality of our roads

Lack of rules & regulations information for business owners

**Seasonal community – fewer year round residents**

Traffic/roadwork: management, planning, communication

Government slow and old school

Lack of drainage in Misquamicut – disgruntled guests

Simplify and explain regulation for signage, new business & growth

Access to public transportation

# What is the one thing Westerly government could do better to attract and retain companies to Westerly



Make the permitting process simpler and shorter

Promote the value of a coastal region; great recruitment incentive

Positive communication and offering helpful resources for start ups

**Revitalize the riverfront and better cater to tourism**

Approve new businesses quickly and no dragging feet!

Tax incentives

Streamline permit process when various departments are involved

Fair licensing and permitting

Invest in the workforce

No more retail sprawl!  
Losing our character w/  
big box & run down strips

**Maintain/improve infrastructure**

**Incentives for developers to create affordable and seasonal housing**

Improve parking; people avoid downtown & north end due to parking

# If you could share one thought with Westerly government, what would that be?



Communicate and support your local year round small businesses

RI is our worst location; overbearing regulation stifles and kills business

Signage ordinance needs to be enforced so there is equity

**Implement Form Based Design on a small scale trial; revisit zoning**

Stop spending and fix what we have

From the outside, things seem divided and messy

Attract more businesses that pay enough to own a home in Westerly

Be consistent, be fair, and enforce your ordinances

**Put in place a tax abatement program that is useable**

Enforce sign regulations many apparent violations are not acted upon

Not much innovation here, but the lack of it is New England wide

**Continue with these surveys for feedback and follow up**

No more retail sprawl! Granite/Franklin/Main looks worn down

Treat business as partners; if they succeed the town succeeds

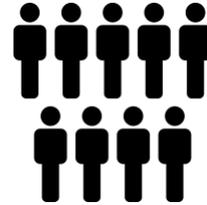
# Survey results provide insights into potential areas of focus



Build a year-round economy



Attract and develop a skilled work force



Promote Westerly and proactively attract new business



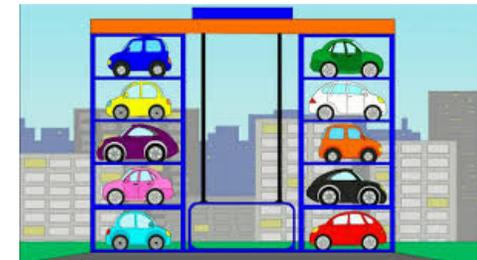
Protect the Westerly "charm"



Maintain and improve roads & sidewalks



Expand downtown parking



Manage stormwater and drainage problem



Simplify business entry to Westerly



Improve communication with the business community

