

Virginia Highland Community Survey Results

By: Pamela Papner

We received 340 unique¹ responses to the VHCA survey. Thank you to everyone who took the time to respond! The complete results are published at www.vahi.org. Based on the response sample of 340 (out of 8,000 households in Va-Hi), the results reflect a confidence level of 95%, at $\pm 5.2\%$ confidence interval.

The survey results confirmed the VHCA Board is indeed focused on the issues perceived as most important by the majority of the community; however, I believe the results also indicate:

- We need to move faster/more aggressively to address out-of-scale residential infill that is not in keeping with the architectural character of our neighborhood.
- Most people recognize that maintaining the character of the neighborhood (which is what attracts people/enhances property values to begin with) is important, but many voiced a desire for guidelines that relate new construction to existing conditions without going “too far.” One example cited by a respondent in favor of historic zoning was, “so long as not overly restrictive... getting approval to change our front door is going too far.”
- We should create a VHCA Transportation and Traffic Committee, focused congestion, parking issues and pedestrian safety (The #1 concern of 12% of residents).

Results for Question 1:

What Is The Most Important Issue Facing the Va-Hi Community Today?:

86% of respondents answered this unaided (first) question, and the majority (61%) cited “irresponsible infill” (residential and/or commercial) as our #1 issue. Words varied, of course, but of that group:

54% focused on “residential infill – teardowns and out-of-scale replacement,” and another 9% cited “residential & commercial infill”. Representative verbatims include:

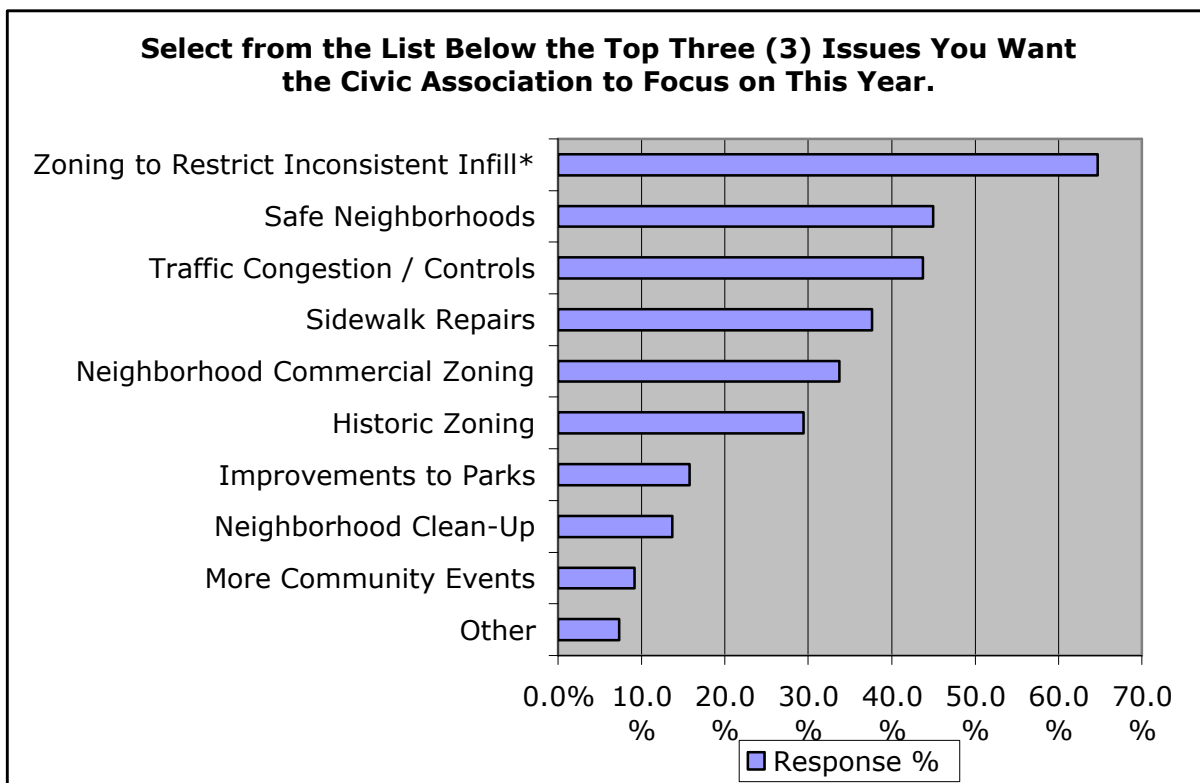
- The continued building of houses that don't fit the neighborhood. The tear down that is now a huge colonial-looking box two doors down from us makes me sick. When we renovated and expanded our house, we spent a fortune on architect fees to make sure we stayed consistent with the existing house and neighborhood.
- Development consisting of houses that appear to occupy an overly high percentage of lot area as well as tower over existing housing. Many are raised above the street to allow for street level garages and other design features that are more akin to suburban development rather than an appropriate response to the existing character in VH.
- Huge new houses on small lots are killing the character of our lovely neighborhood. I have no problem with larger houses or appropriate additions, just hate the (out of scale) mega houses.

11% of that group cited “inappropriately scaled commercial development” (often specifying the Mix) as the #1 issue, and another 16% cited the need to “protect the character of our neighborhood” and/or “preserve our historic architecture” as the #1 concern. 10% cited the need for “balanced zoning and managed growth/ planning. Representative verbatims include:

- Proliferation of developers' ungoverned destruction of the character, nature and beauty of the neighborhood.
- Threat of changing character of the neighborhood. I'm more worried about architectural style than size and setbacks.
- The neighborhood commercial areas staying quaint and not turning into what they are doing at Emory Village.

A significant number of residents (12%) cited crime prevention/safety/sidewalks as our top priority, while another 12% cited traffic congestion/speeding/parking as tops. Following these concerns were schools (4%), taxes (2%) and miscellaneous (9%).

Results for Question 2:



* Survey option read: "Zoning to Restrict Inconsistent Residential/Commercial Infill."

Results of Scaled Questions Regarding Zoning (Questions 3 through 7):

A resounding 87% of respondents believe it is Very Important/Important to obtain Neighborhood Commercial zoning. On the topic of residential infill, 76% of respondents believe it is Very Important/Important that the City adopt zoning options to address this, and 63% believe Historic District zoning is very important/important.

	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important	No Opinion	Total Respondents	Skipped Question	
How Important is Focus on Obtaining Neighborhood Commercial Zoning?	66% (224)	21% (70)	7% (22)	6% (19)	0% (2)	337	3
How Important is Focus on City Zoning Code Rewrite to Prevent Inconsistent Residential Infill?	61% (207)	15% (50)	11% (36)	12% (39)	1% (4)	336	4
How Important is it to Tighten "FAR" (Floor Area Ratio) Definition in Zoning Rewrite?	41% (136)	15% (51)	17% (56)	20% (66)	7% (23)	332	8
How Important is it to Pursue "Overlay Control" Zoning?	51% (169)	20% (66)	12% (40)	15% (50)	2% (8)	333	7
How Important is it to Obtain Historic Zoning?	38% (127)	25% (85)	16% (54)	20% (66)	1% (2)	334	6

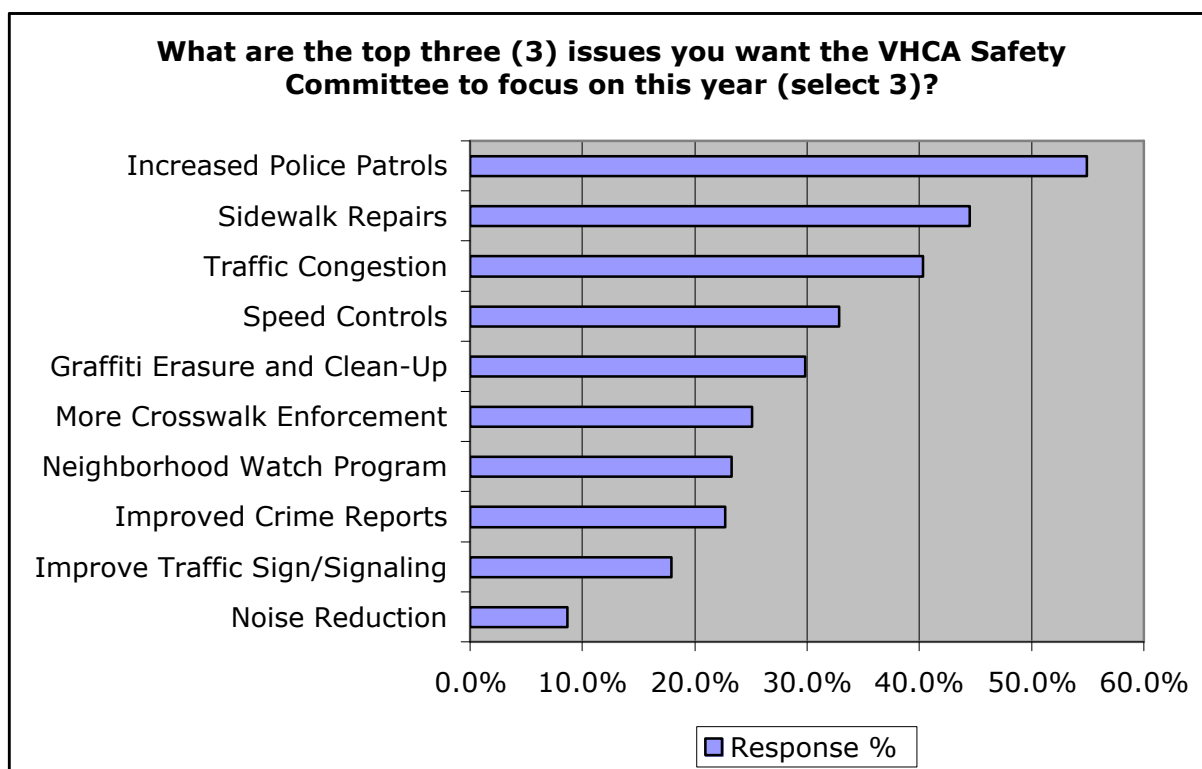
These results suggest three things:

- We need to understand the status of the City's zoning rewrite and its response to the Infill Panel's recommendations made over a year ago.

- ❑ If the City is not likely to implement desired infill zoning regulations (via zoning code rewrite) within the near future, then Historic Zoning should be pursued. While this process is lengthy, it may be our only option.
- ❑ We must focus on developing quantifiable metrics such as lot size, maximum height, setback, floor height above grade, etc. and guidelines that relate new construction to existing conditions/architecture without going “too far” (without being overly restrictive).

Results for Question 8, Parking Meters: Many respondents (43% Strongly Agreed; 19% Somewhat Agreed) favored removal of parking meters within our business district; however, this response was predicated on the assumption that a 2-hour maximum parking limit would be enforced. I have since spoken with the Traffic/Parking Chair in Ansley, who advised their 2-hour chalk enforcement for commercial parking simply does not work – it is too labor intensive. Kim Nickels also polled business owners through the VHBA, and their concern was that without outside enforcement, shop employees would fill the available spots early and remain all day. The Board has instead asked Council Member Anne Fauver to pursue lower rates (\$.50 to \$1.00 per hour, not the \$2.00/hour that exists today), which both residents and merchants appear to favor.

Results for Question 9:



Results for Questions 10 through 16:

Open-Ended Questions: We received some excellent ideas and feedback, and all responses are posted online at www.vahi.org. General results/representative verbatims are:

- Website:** People are generally satisfied with the vahi.org site. Ideas for improvement included:
- ❑ More info/links for contacting city departments, resources for home maintenance and repair.
 - ❑ More consistent updates – post VHCA Voice and meeting minutes.

Parks: Comments evidenced general satisfaction with our two parks and desire that we continue the work being done to keep them clean and well maintained. Many voiced a desire to restore/improve Orme Park. Ideas for improvement included:

- More lighting.
- Graffiti clean up and playground repair.
- Monitor homeless more closely.

Other Events: Many people said Home Tour and Summerfest “are enough!” Many also suggested additional events such as:

- More movie showings or music events in John Howell Park.
- 4th of July picnic, fall festival in park, organized Halloween event, with parade.
- More neighborhood-only or block-based events; more events for children/teens.

Home Tour Improvements: Most voiced strong satisfaction with the Home Tour, as it exists today. Many enjoy the food tastings. Suggestions for improvement included:

- Consider another time of year.
- Consider adding gardens, holiday decorations.
- Lower ticket prices.
- Consider walking tour or use shuttles to reduce parking problems.

Summerfest Improvements: Like Home Tour, most people love Summerfest. Suggestions for improvement included:

- Alleviate congestion by spreading out the booths (mentioned by many).
- Offer better-quality/healthy food options.
- Find ways to promote local Va-Hi businesses.
- Off-site parking with shuttles.

Communications: Overall, we seem to be doing well on this front!

Other Issues to Address Not Mentioned: Many people repeated the importance of staying focused on issues already mentioned, particularly zoning issues, safety, traffic and sidewalks. Some unique concerns were mentioned, but none repeated to any significant degree. Unique concerns included:

- Too many signs making the neighborhood look “junky” in spots.
- Taxes are skyrocketing making it difficult for residents with fixed incomes.
- Keep an eye on evolving school districting to be sure we keep Morningside.
- Dilapidated homes that are “eye sores”
- Noise ordinance enforcement.
- Homeless shelter and nuisance crimes committed by homeless.

¹ To protect the integrity of the survey, we checked for duplicate originating IP addresses for all online responses and invalidated 197 responses (all but one) made by a bellsouth.net customer, who attempted to skew results. This person(s) disabled the capture of cookies on his browser and repeatedly answered only the scaled questions that would impact zoning results. Each answer submitted (approx. every 30 seconds) was identical. This occurred on Jan. 9, 11, 13, and 18.