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# Analysis of Basic Needs Survey

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Thurston Regional  
Planning Council

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November 2013

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**THURSTON REGIONAL PLANNING COUNCIL (TRPC)** is a 22-member intergovernmental board made up of local governmental jurisdictions within Thurston County, plus the Confederated Tribes of the Chehalis Reservation and the Nisqually Indian Tribe. The Council was established in 1967 under RCW 36.70.060, which authorized creation of regional planning councils.

TRPC's mission is to **“Provide Visionary Leadership on Regional Plans, Policies, and Issues.”**

**To Support this Mission:**

- A. Support **regional transportation** planning consistent with state and federal funding requirements.
- B. Address **growth management, environmental quality, economic opportunity,** and other topics determined by the Council.
- C. **Assemble** and **analyze data** that support local and regional decision making
- D. Act as a **“convener”** and build regional **consensus** on issues through information and citizen involvement.
- E. Build **intergovernmental consensus** on regional plans, policies, and issues, and advocate local implementation.

This analysis was prepared as part of TRPC's 2013 work program.

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**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

TRPC thanks the Thurston County Food Bank, Family Support Center, and Community Action Council of Lewis, Mason & Thurston Counties, which distributed the survey to their clients.

## Project Overview & Status

As part of the Sustainable Thurston and Urban Corridor Communities projects, the Thurston Regional Planning Council (TRPC) conducted targeted outreach to populations that do not traditionally participate in planning projects. TRPC and its partners distributed a Basic Needs survey to more than 4,000 residents during the summer of 2013. This survey will help inform actions in both *Creating Places—Preserving Places: A Sustainable Development Plan for the Thurston Region* and a more detailed Urban Corridor strategy. Such actions will help the region achieve the priority goal of “Ensuring that residents have the resources to meet their daily needs,” and the following target: “By 2035, less than 10 percent of total households in Thurston County will be cost-burdened; less than 5 percent will be severely cost-burdened.” Cost-burdened households are those earning 80 percent or less of median income and spending more than 30 percent of it on housing. Severely cost-burdened households spend more than 50 percent of their income on housing.

## Survey Distribution & Response

Roughly 1,000 residents completed the 29-question survey fully or partially, for a response rate of about 25 percent. TRPC translated 100 copies of the survey to Spanish and distributed the document through several channels to ensure it reached low-income residents. The Housing Authority of Thurston County distributed

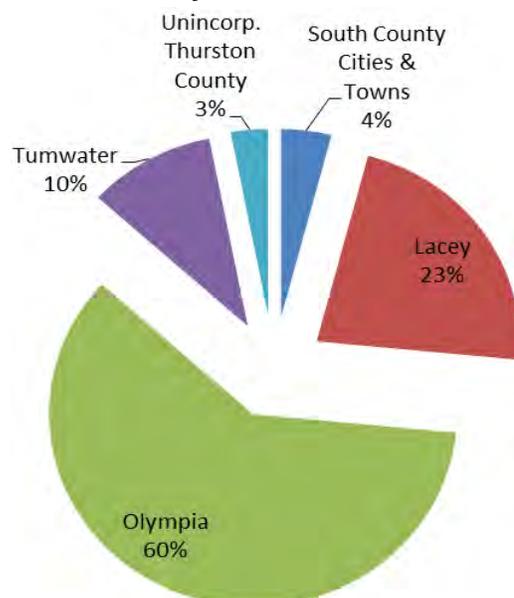
the survey to residents by mail and directly to apartment complexes. The Thurston County Food Bank, Family Support Center, and Community Action Council of Lewis, Mason & Thurston Counties also distributed the survey to clients. The following analysis shows that the survey reached its targeted population and provided valuable context about equity and affordability challenges.

## Survey Demographics

Questions 27-29 asked respondents for information about their age, gender and race. Questions 1, 25 and 26 asked respondents about their household’s location, size and annual income.

Sixty percent of respondents live in Olympia, 23 percent in Lacey and 10 percent in Tumwater. A combined 4 percent live in the South County communities of Bucoda, Tenino, Rainier and Yelm; 3 percent live in unincorporated Thurston County. The response pattern is generally consistent with the geographic distribution of people below the poverty line [See Figure Q1].

### Q1: Where do you live?

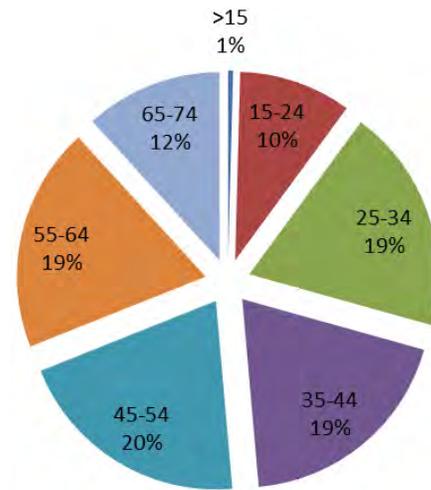


About 44 percent of respondents live alone. Nineteen percent live in a two-person household, and 13 percent live in a three-person household; 24 percent live in a household with four or more people [Note: Surveys marked “no response” are imputed and values are rounded]. Women constitute about 65 percent of those who filled out surveys. The age distribution of respondents was dispersed fairly evenly [See Figure Q28].

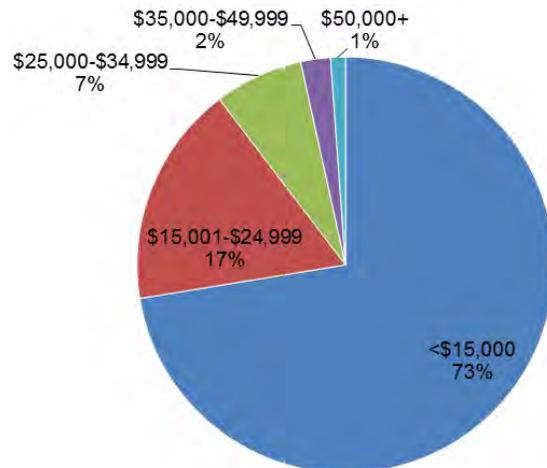
About 73 percent of respondents have an annual household income of less than \$15,000, before taxes, and just 1 percent of respondents have an annual household income of greater than \$50,000 [See Figure Q26]. The data confirm that TRPC and its partners were successful in reaching mostly low-income residents who are most likely to face difficulty meeting basic needs. For the sake of comparison, Thurston County’s median household income was \$63,100 during the 2007-2011 period, according to U.S. Census Bureau data. Six percent of county households had an annual income of less than \$15,000, and 61 percent had an annual income of greater than \$50,000.

The majority of the respondents — about 76 percent — are Caucasian/White [See Figure Q29]. Minority residents responded to the survey in similar proportions. The group of survey respondents is slightly less diverse than the overall Thurston Region [See TRPC’s *Fair Housing Equity Assessment*<sup>i</sup> for a more detailed analysis of correlations between household income, opportunity access, and race and ethnicity].

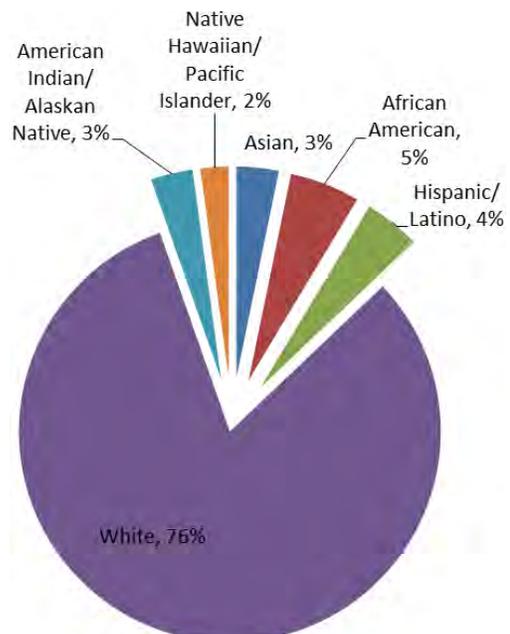
**Q28: What is your age?**



**Q26: What is your household income?**



**Q29: What is your race/ethnicity?**



Questions 2 and 3 asked respondents about their ability to make ends meet. When asked whether their household has enough money to meet basic needs, roughly a quarter of respondents marked “never” and half marked “sometimes.” Seventeen percent marked “often,” and just 10 percent marked “always.” Respondents most often cited making rent/mortgage, paying for utilities, and having access to affordable health care as their top concerns [See Figure Q3]. Question 24 provides additional context about these concerns [See page 7].

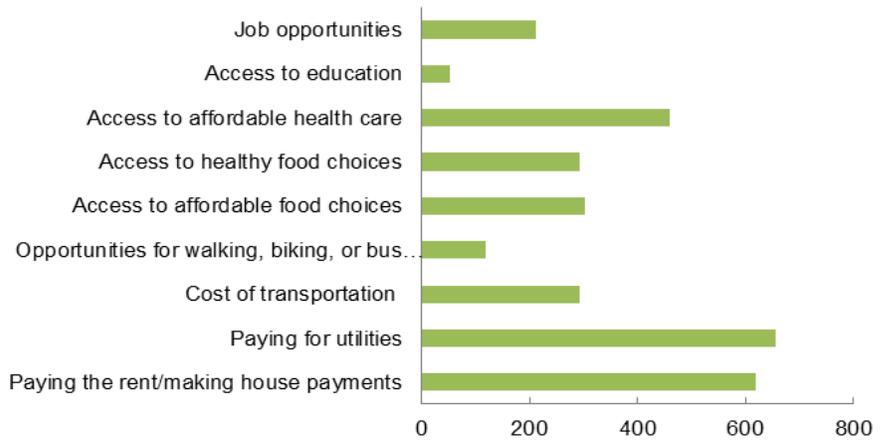
## Housing & Transportation

Questions 4-16 of the survey explored housing and transportation challenges.

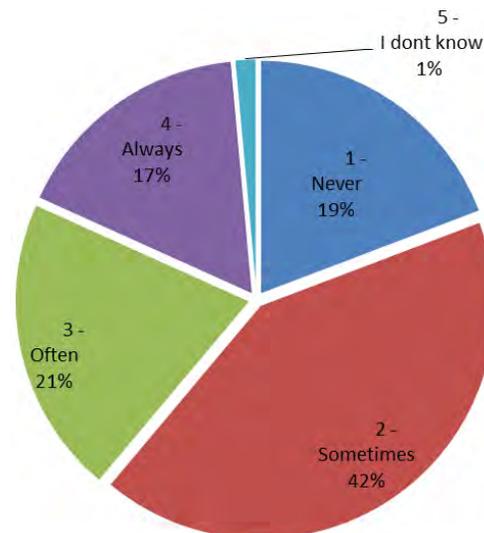
Asked whether they had trouble paying for housing or transportation during the past year, 19 percent of respondents marked “never,” and a similar number marked “always.” A combined 63 percent marked either “sometimes” or “often” [See Figure Q8].

Employment status appears to be a major factor in the respondents’ ability to meet basic needs. Forty-three percent of respondents are unemployed. Another 7 percent are students and 27 percent are retired — groups that are most likely to live on a fixed income. Less than a quarter of the respondents either work from or outside of the home [See Figure Q11].

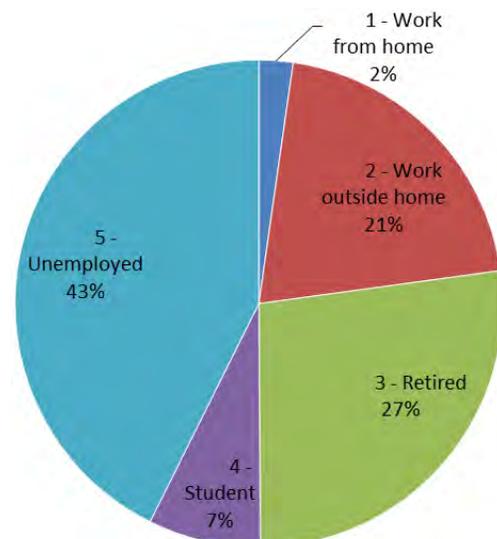
### Q3: What are your top three concerns in meeting basic needs?



### Q8: Have you had trouble paying for housing or transportation during the past year?



### Q11: What is your employment status?

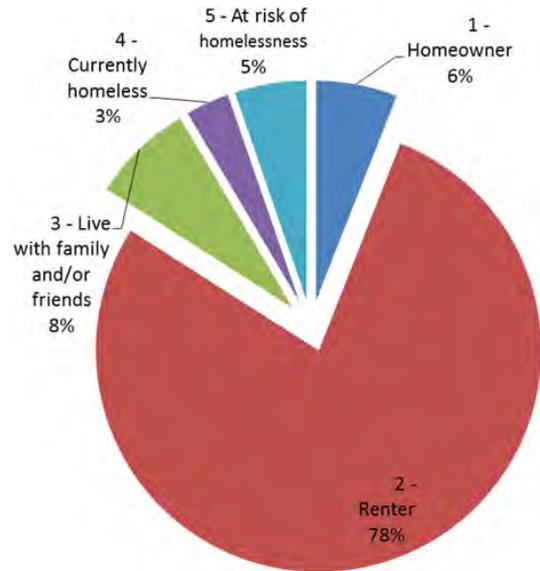


The *Regional Housing Plan* notes that 38 percent of the region’s households earn a moderate income (less than 80 percent of the county median); 21 percent earn a low income (less than 50 percent of the median). Of these low- and moderate-income households, 64 percent are cost-burdened (spend more than 30 percent of their income on housing).<sup>ii</sup> A third are severely cost-burdened (spend more than half their income on housing); these households are at a high risk of becoming homeless. Thurston County’s FY2008-2012 *Consolidated Plan* found an “affordability mismatch” between housing supply and demand — especially for residents at the lowest end of the income scale.<sup>iii</sup> The Basic Needs survey bears this out.

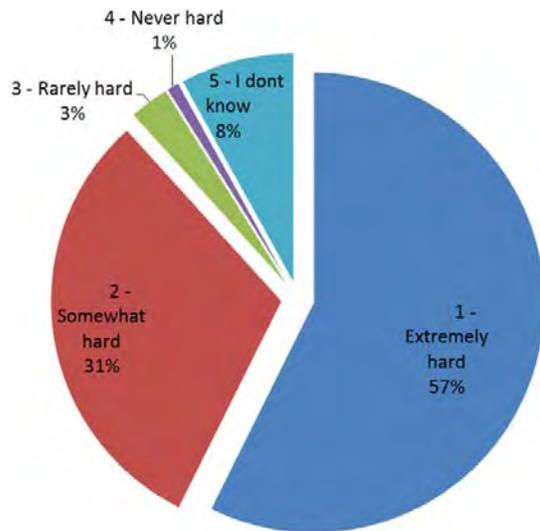
Three-quarters of respondents are renters [See Figure Q4] and more than a third do not find their housing “affordable,” a term they self-defined. Further, 57 percent of respondents find it “extremely hard” to find affordable housing; 31 percent find it “somewhat hard” [See Figure Q7].

When deciding where to live, respondents ranked the cost of rent/ mortgage and utilities as the top factors. When considering the broader neighborhood, respondents ranked safety and bus access as the top factors. Indeed, just 42 percent of respondents own a car. Another 39 percent do not own a car nor have access to one. Seventeen percent of respondents ride the bus “always” and similar amount ride it “often” [See Figure Q16].

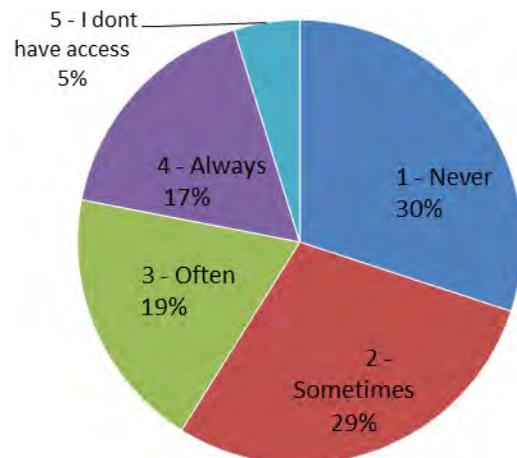
**Q4: What are your living arrangements?**



**Q7: How hard is it to find affordable housing?**



**Q16: How often do you ride the bus?**



Question 15 — which asked about travel to jobs, shops and services — added useful context to the responses above. About 32 percent drive a car; 24 percent ride a bus; 19 percent walk; and, 6 percent ride a bike. The rest of the respondents either carpool or use another mode of travel.

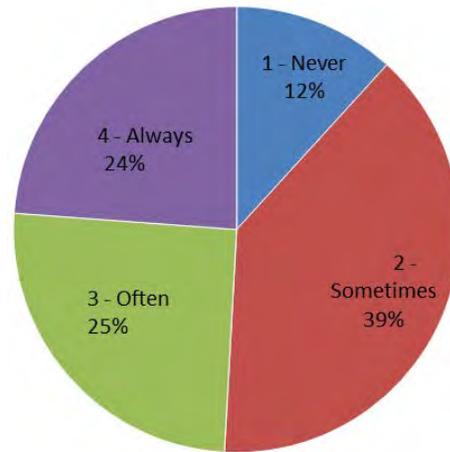
## Food

Questions 17-20 explored challenges respondents face affording and accessing food, including organic or local produce and meat. A quarter of respondents marked that they “always” have trouble having enough money to buy food. Just as remarkable, 39 percent marked that they have sufficient money for food only “sometimes” [See Figure Q17].

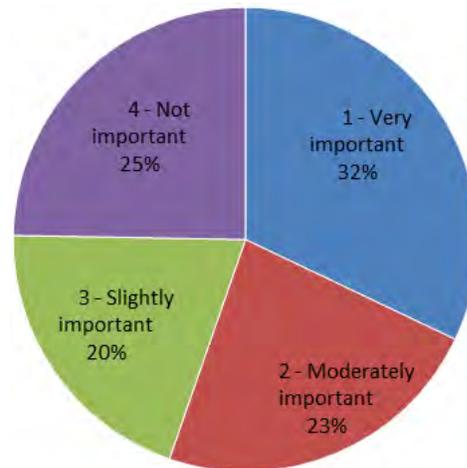
Access to healthy food is an equally big challenge for respondents. Even so, data suggest that most respondents care more about affording and accessing *any* food than affording and accessing organic or local food, specifically. Such food often costs a premium, which may make it less important to low-income households [See Figure Q19]. Responses to Question 20 support this theory.

Just 6 percent of survey respondents are “always” willing to pay more for organic food, and a similarly small number (8 percent) are willing to pay more for such food “often.” In contrast, 34 percent are “never” willing to pay a premium for organic or locally grown food; 52 percent are “sometimes” willing to pay a premium for such food [See Figure Q20].

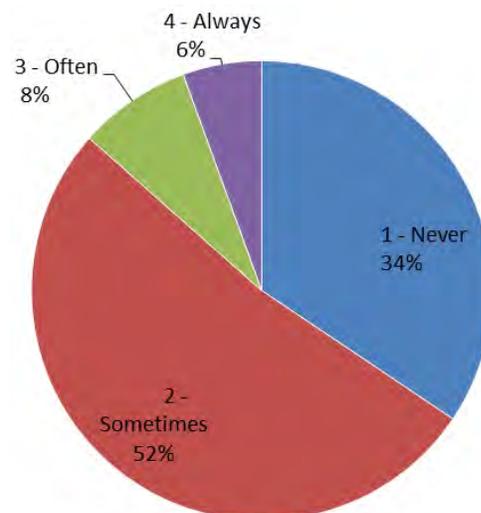
**Q17: Do you have enough money to buy food?**



**Q19: How important is buying organic or locally grown food?**



**Q20: Are you willing to pay more for organic or locally grown food?**



## Energy

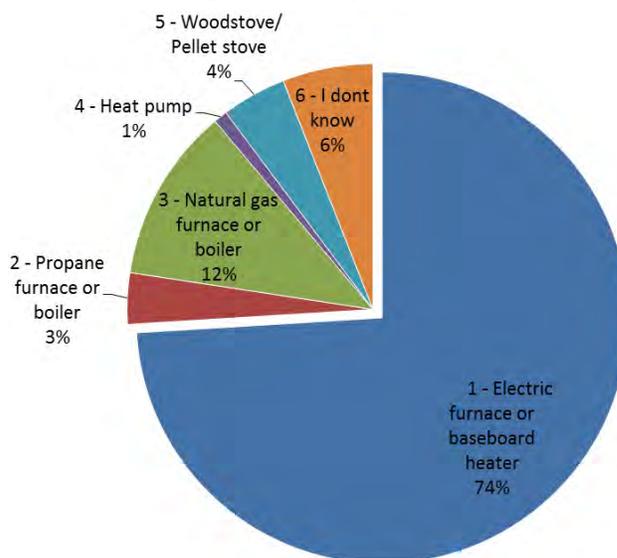
Questions 21-24 of the survey explored affordability challenges respondents face heating their homes and conserving energy.

Almost three-quarters of respondents heat their home with an electric furnace or baseboard heater. Just 12 percent heat their home with a natural gas furnace or boiler [See Figure Q21]. Such figures correspond with the comparatively high percentages of respondents who live in multifamily housing units [See Figure Q5].

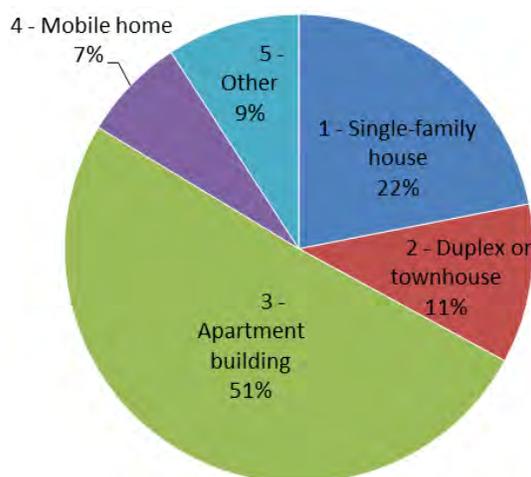
One of the most interesting groups of responses was to survey Question 22: “Has your home had energy efficiency upgrades (such as better building insulation, double-pane windows, compact florescent lighting, Energy Star appliances)? A quarter of respondents don’t know — perhaps indicative of the large number of renters among those who filled out the survey. Forty percent marked “no,” and 35 percent marked “yes.”

Responses to Question 3 showed that paying for utilities is a major challenge, and responses to Question 23 reinforce this finding. More than half of the respondents (53 percent) cannot afford to heat their home sufficiently during the winter; 36 percent can, and 11 percent do not know.

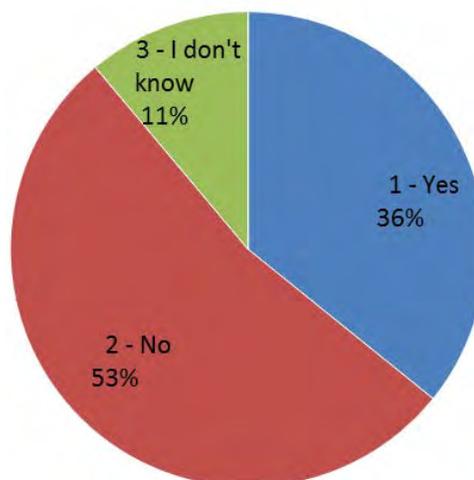
**Q21: How do you heat your home?**



**Q5: What type of housing do you live in?**



**Q23: Can you afford to heat your home sufficiently in the winter?**



Question 24 — which was open-ended — asked what are the top factors that affect whether a respondent can meet his or her household’s needs. Several themes emerged from the responses:

- Making ends meet is difficult for respondents who receive what they contend is decreasing or inadequate public assistance.
- Increasing rent costs is a burden that forces some households to choose between paying for shelter and other basic needs.
- Paying for electricity is a common source of stress — especially during the winter months. Some respondents wrote that their home is energy-inefficient and costs too much to heat.
- Paying for health care is also a common source of stress. Some respondents reported chronic health problems that make it difficult to earn a living wage. Others explained that they, or people in their care, have a disability.
- Rising gas prices make it difficult to get to or find work and take away from other needs. Some respondents wrote that they have limited access to personal transportation or that buses are too infrequent or hard to get to.
- Obtaining organic or specialized food (e.g., gluten-free) often costs a premium, forcing some low-income households to eat less-healthy options.
- Affording childcare is a major barrier for low-income households.

## Survey Summary & Actions

The survey results underscore that many of the region’s low-income residents face challenges finding and keeping affordable housing. The majority these residents do not own an automobile or have limited access to one. Many of these residents ride the bus to get to jobs, grocery stores, medical offices and other places, so finding housing near public transit is a top priority.

To address these transportation and housing issues, *Creating Places—Preserving Spaces* recommends draft actions to increase the stock of housing amid the region’s urban centers and along the transit corridors that connect them. Such actions include: pursuing grants and loans for mixed-income or subsidized housing; encouraging efficient use of land and building form that encourages walking; and, incentivizing developers to set aside units for low- and moderate-income buyers and renters [See *Community and Opportunities & Choices* chapters of *Creating Places—Preserving Spaces*, as well as the companion *Regional Housing Plan*]. Additional actions aimed at helping people access and remain in affordable housing include: providing funding for shared-equity policies; encouraging bulk purchase of delinquent mortgages to prevent foreclosures; fostering housing ownership reengagement centers; and, encouraging rapid build-up of equity through financial innovations so homeowners are less likely to default when market conditions are unfavorable.

Affording healthy food and utilities are other major challenges for low-income households, the survey results show. Actions in *Creating Places—Preserving Spaces* to address food accessibility and affordability challenges include: implementing a mobile food-delivery system; identifying opportunities to buy fresh food at rural commercial hubs; identifying locations for community gardens; and, encouraging businesses to donate food [See *Opportunities & Choices chapter*]. To address energy cost challenges, the Plan recommends: prioritizing weatherization funds for preserving affordable housing; supporting and expanding funding and incentive programs that encourage building owners and occupants to choose resource-efficient appliances; engaging landlords and property managers in energy efficiency efforts; and, working collaboratively to adopt uniform energy-efficiency building standards.

As the survey results indicate, an important part of meeting daily basic needs is having sufficient income. *Creating Places—Preserving Spaces* recommends actions to create economic clusters and train and hire local workers to fill them. Such actions include: supporting business incubation and research; supporting New Market Skill Center programs for technology, innovation and manufacturing; promoting vocational education; and, identifying and promoting internship and apprenticeship programs [See *Economy chapter*].

Additional chapters conclude with discrete goals and actions related to the environment, infrastructure, community, investment, and leadership and participation. To read the full list of Sustainable Thurston priority goals, targets and first action steps, visit [www.sustainablethurston.org](http://www.sustainablethurston.org).

## References

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- <sup>i</sup> Thurston Regional Planning Council. Fair Housing Equity Assessment. August 2013. [http://www.trpc.org/regionalplanning/sustainability/Documents/fair\\_housing\\_equity\\_assessment.pdf](http://www.trpc.org/regionalplanning/sustainability/Documents/fair_housing_equity_assessment.pdf)
- <sup>ii</sup> Thurston Regional Planning Council. Regional Housing Plan. August 2013. [http://www.trpc.org/regionalplanning/sustainability/Documents/draft\\_regional\\_housing\\_plan.pdf](http://www.trpc.org/regionalplanning/sustainability/Documents/draft_regional_housing_plan.pdf)
- <sup>iii</sup> Thurston County HOME Consortium. FY2008-2012 Consolidated Plan: Expanding Opportunities for Affordable Housing. July 2008. <http://www.co.thurston.wa.us/health/sscp/pdf/financial-consolidated-plan-2008-2012.pdf>