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City of South Bend Resident Budget Feedback Report 2026

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Many thanks go out to South Bend residents for their feedback, members of the common council for their continued support since 2021, and the Office of Mayor for their guidance.

Special thanks to the 27 city staff members who volunteered their time to help table, code voicemail responses, and assist in design work this year.

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BUILD THE BUDGET



Letter from the Mayor



Dear Neighbor,

For the fifth year running, the City team continued our “Build the Budget” engagement program. This outreach and data collection season has become a recognizable staple in the late summer and early Fall. We're pleased to see residents participate year after year.

Just as before, the City Administration collected online survey responses, coded hundreds of 311 voicemails, and facilitated budget feedback and trivia sessions at festivals and events.

Yet again, our team saw engagement numbers soar. We saw over 2,200 resident engagements this season, beating last year by a healthy margin. This number is nearly double the first year we did this program in 2021.

This report will share the major takeaways on resident priorities and ideas. We were pleased to see that our proposed 2026 budget is aligned with this year's feedback.

James Mueller
Mayor, City of South Bend

Executive summary

Each year, the City of South Bend invests hundreds of millions of dollars into the services and infrastructure that shape daily life—from public safety and road repairs to vehicles and staff salaries. The budget isn't just numbers on a page—it's a blueprint for our city's future. It determines what gets built, what gets fixed, and how our neighborhoods thrive.

That's why it's critical for residents to be part of the conversation. Historically, public participation in the budget process has been low—not due to a lack of interest, but because traditional engagement methods often asked residents to come to us, rather than us meeting them where they are.

To change that, South Bend launched the “Build the Budget” initiative five years ago. This effort is designed to make the budget process more accessible and transparent, using creative outreach to invite residents into the fold.

Through online surveys, voicemail submissions, and in-person tabling at community events, we've opened new channels for feedback—and each year, more residents are stepping up to help shape the budget.

148

Online survey
responses

+

301

Budget feedback
voicemails

+

1,788

In-person envelope wall
participants

=

2,237

Resident feedback total

Executive summary

This year, 2,237 engagements were recorded, just over 2% of the City population. Across the 2,237 engagements, five themes surfaced over and over. These priorities were consistently mentioned by residents through all three forms of engagement.

Residents who participated in Build the Budget want:

1 **Housing accessibility, availability, and affordability**

Affordable and diverse housing options are essential for a growing and inclusive community. Residents are concerned about rising rents, housing shortages, and homelessness, as well as investment in luxury housing units over market rate units.

2 **Repairing and Resurfacing Roadways (and Alleys)**

Residents rely on safe, well-maintained roads for daily commutes, school transportation, and access to local businesses. While the city has invested heavily in roadways, your experience is your reality. Residents say they experience potholes and deteriorating pavement along their daily commutes regularly and feel some roadways keep falling behind.

3 **Create good jobs by attracting and retaining businesses and talent**

Residents want opportunities for meaningful employment and career growth and are concerned about their economic futures. Residents want to support local businesses and attracting new industries so the city can boost its tax base, reduce unemployment, and retain young professionals and families in an affordable city.

4 **Improve Neighborhood Infrastructure**

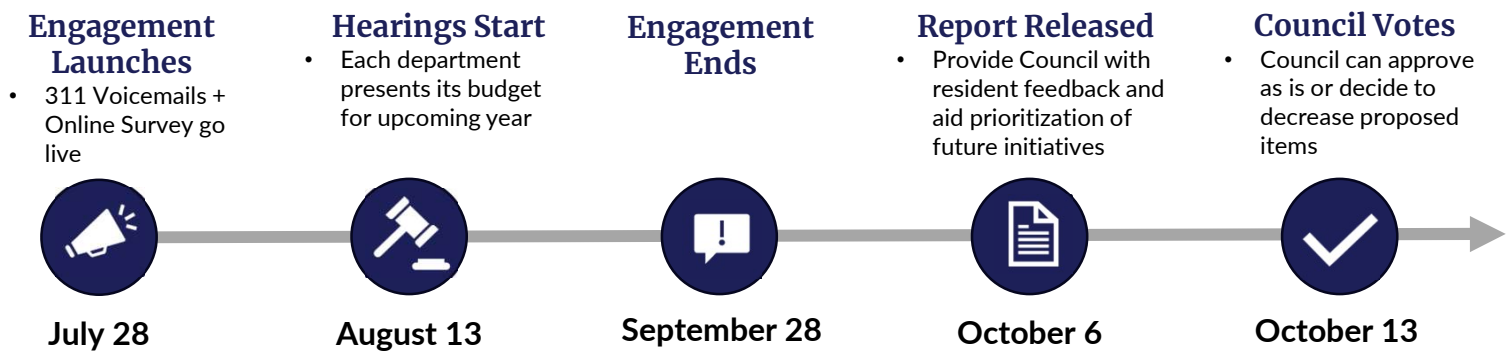
Well-lit streets, safe sidewalks, and traffic calming features contribute to walkability, reduce accidents, and promote public safety. Without ongoing investment, deteriorating infrastructure can lead to blight, which undermines community pride and poses a barrier to future growth and neighborhood stability.

Invest in climate action plan

5 **Residents have expressed interest in investing more in the city's climate action plan. Local investments in sustainability can directly improve air and water quality, reduce utility costs, and protect neighborhoods from extreme weather and flooding.**

Resident Engagement Timeline

Build the Budget engagement ran for nine weeks, from July 28– September 28. Check out the timeline below to see how Build the Budget was promoted to residents and what events we took the budget table to this year.



	Date	Event	Location	Visitors
★	July 29	Meet the Mayor	St. Adelbert's	31
★	August 1	First Friday	Downtown	86
★	August 5	National Night Out	South Bend Police Station	90
★	August 9	Art Beat	East Bank	140
★	September 5	September First Friday	Downtown	68
★	September 6	Fall Family Fun Fair	Rum Village Park	53
★	September 13	Linden Ave Farmers Market	MLK Jr. Dream Center	19
★	September 27-28	Fusion Fest	Howard Park	1209
★	July 28 - Sept 28	Utility Lobby	Colfax Office	111

How Residents Built the Budget

The three forms of engagement draws from different segments of the population and is presented differently to residents, which leads to top categories being slightly different across each platform.

The online survey and envelope walls present residents with a list of twenty strategic categories prepared by the Mayor's Office. This year's list is the same with apart from one reworded category¹ allowing us to compare responses from last year.

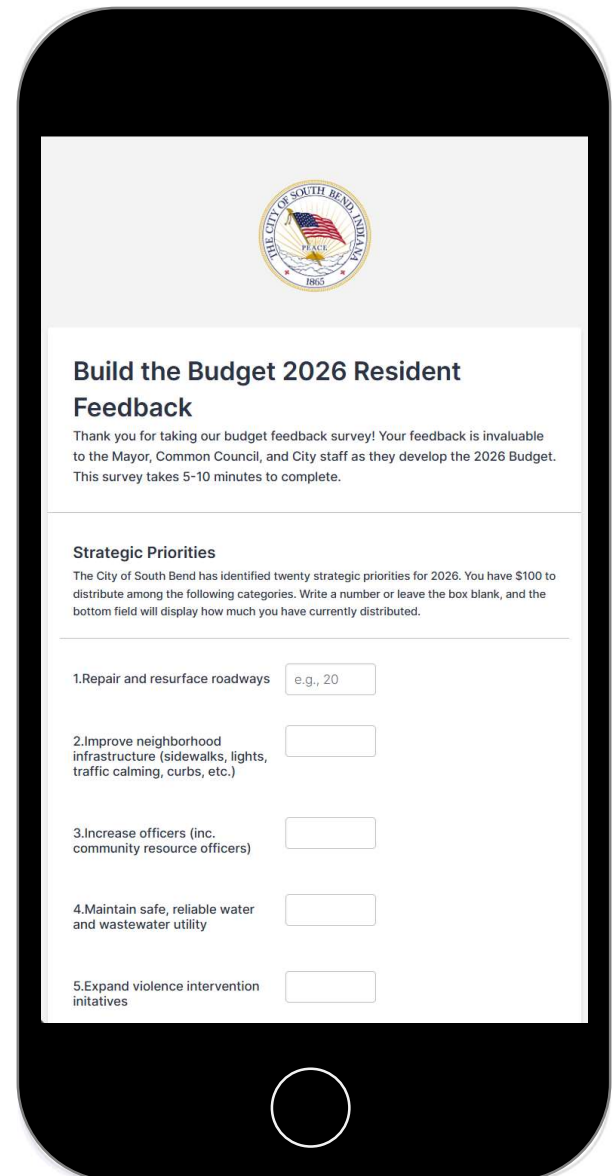
The Online Survey

The survey was available through a link posted to the City website, Facebook, Instagram, and through QR codes printed on promotional materials. **148 residents completed an online budget feedback survey**, more than last year, but lower than prior years.

Our goal was to offer an accessible feedback opportunity that is more comprehensive than the tabling envelope walls.

The goal of the survey was to assess residents' preferences when managing a limited amount of funds. Residents were asked to allocate a fictional \$100 across strategic categories. Residents were also presented with a list of four investment areas, asking which ones the City should increase, maintain, or reduce. Many residents also offered extensive and constructive feedback in the open-ended portion of the survey.

This mimics the difficulty of the City budget process: there are always tradeoffs and there is no such thing as infinite money to support everything residents want.





Build the Budget 2026 Resident Feedback

Thank you for taking our budget feedback survey! Your feedback is invaluable to the Mayor, Common Council, and City staff as they develop the 2026 Budget. This survey takes 5-10 minutes to complete.

Strategic Priorities

The City of South Bend has identified twenty strategic priorities for 2026. You have \$100 to distribute among the following categories. Write a number or leave the box blank, and the bottom field will display how much you have currently distributed.

1.Repair and resurface roadways	e.g., 20
2.Improve neighborhood infrastructure (sidewalks, lights, traffic calming, curbs, etc.)	
3.Increase officers (inc. community resource officers)	
4.Maintain safe, reliable water and wastewater utility	
5.Expand violence intervention initiatives	

311 Voicemails



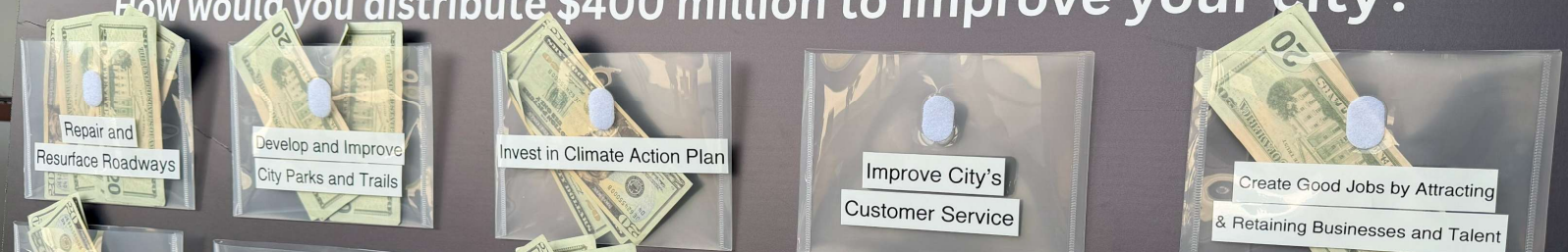
Residents were also invited to leave a voicemail through the 311 system to share their priorities for the 2026 City Budget. At the end of each call, liaisons asked if the resident would like to provide feedback. The City received **320 voicemails**, of which **301 contained relevant input**.

To efficiently process this open-ended feedback, an AI model was used to conduct an initial categorization of the voicemails by topic and priority area. City staff then reviewed each message to refine the coding and ensure accuracy. Because voicemail responses were often broad and nuanced, many included suggestions outside of the strategic categories, as well as location-specific investment ideas.

On average, each voicemail referenced 1.6 distinct topics, indicating that nearly half of respondents emphasized a single issue they felt strongly about.

Envelope Walls

Each year, the City of South Bend passes a new **\$400+ million budget**.
How would you distribute \$400 million to improve your city?



To mirror the information collection of the online survey, the City created two interactive envelope walls to display at public events.

Like the survey, participating residents each received \$100 in fake bills to allocate across strategic spending categories in the 2026 annual budget.

Over August and September, the envelope walls went to **8 public events** and a **fixed location at the 311 Colfax Utility Office**.

\$178,820 in fake money was allocated by roughly **1,788 residents** who participated in the envelope wall activity, a 35% increase from last budget year. The increase can be attributed to the Fusion Fest table placement at a high traffic area in addition to volunteer enthusiasm.

Sample Trivia Question: How many total vehicles does the City own? Over or under 1,000?

Answer: Over! The city had 1,053 vehicles in 2023

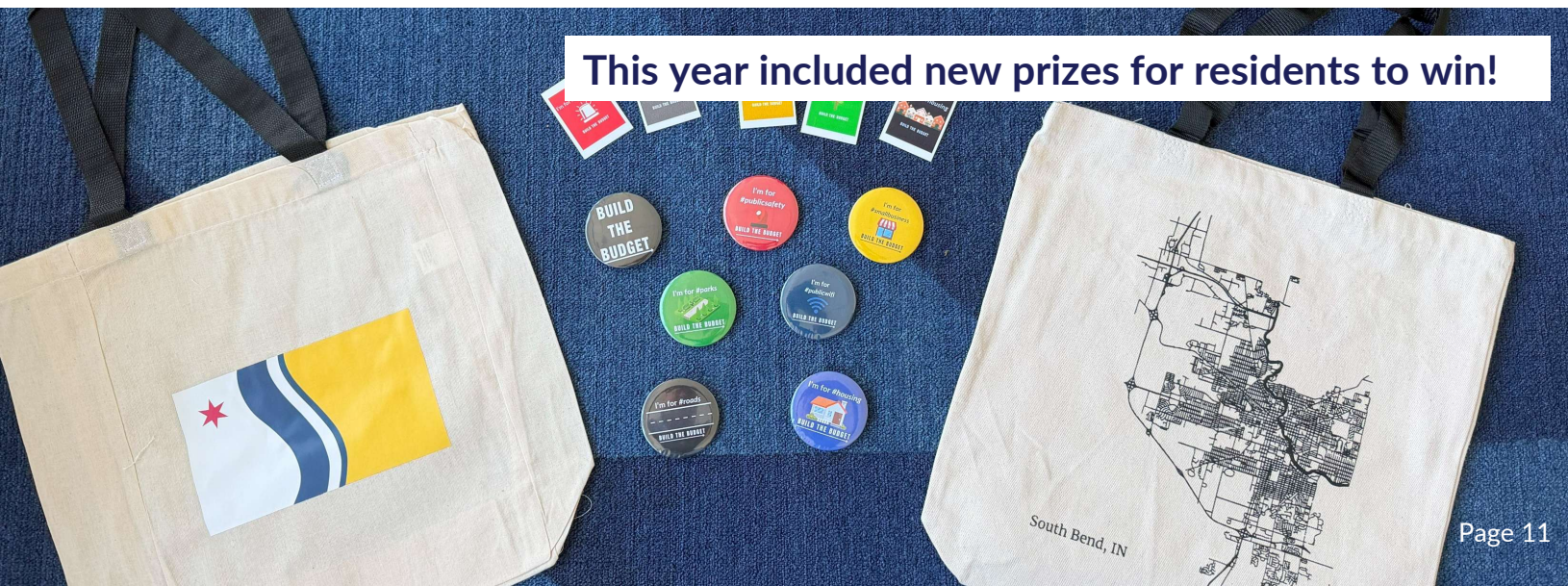


Budget Trivia Game

The budget trivia game is an eye-catching, fun way for residents to learn about the city budget. Residents spin the budget trivia wheel, land on a category, and get an opportunity to answer a question and win a prize, ranging from tote bags, pens and pens. Residents who answered a trivia question incorrectly were still always offered a sticker or candy for kids.

This game didn't help us learn about resident priorities, but it was an effective way to draw people into a conversation about the city budget and various city operations. After playing, residents were asked to participate in the envelope wall activity.

This year included new prizes for residents to win!



“I feel like there'd be there should be more streetlights up, so it's not so dark when people are out driving, and there's people out...”

- Voice Message 3

“Partnering with schools for literacy, health, and opportunity initiatives for youth, as well as supporting young families.”

- Survey 5

“More efficient and consistent solid waste collection, and improved code enforcement reaction time and being more proactive and less reactive.”

- Survey 53

“Multimodal transportation, such as more and safer cycling and pedestrian infrastructure, particularly on Indiana 23.”

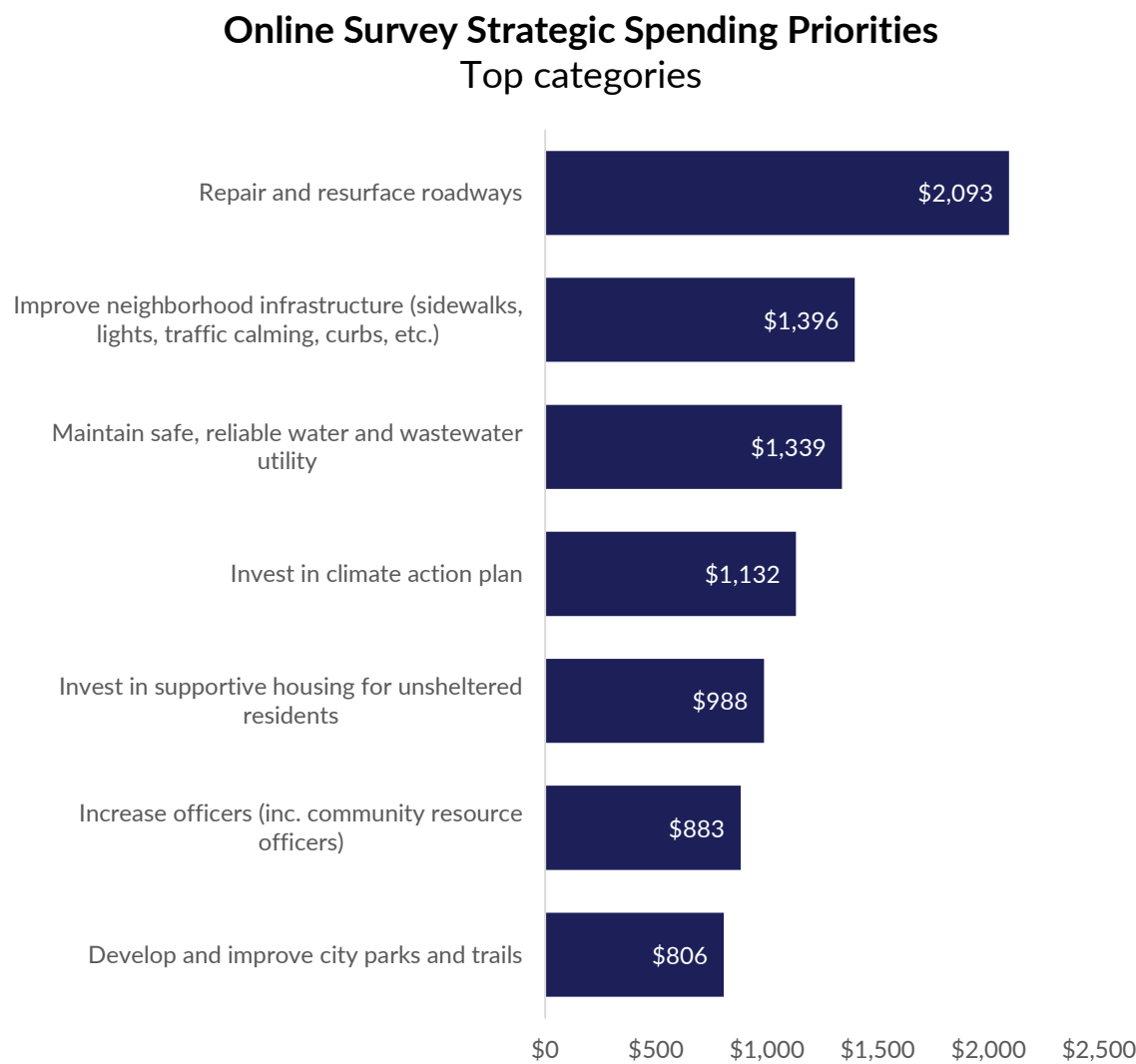
- Survey 69

Resident Feedback: Online Survey

Strategic Spending Priorities

South Bend residents' top priorities in next year's budget are continuing to repair roadways and improve neighborhood infrastructure. Compared to last year's survey, there is little change in proportion for each category other than *Invest in climate action plan* which grew moderately and *Invest in more housing of all types* falling slightly.

See the top seven categories below.



More details about the online survey responses can be found in Appendix A.

Resident Feedback: Online Survey

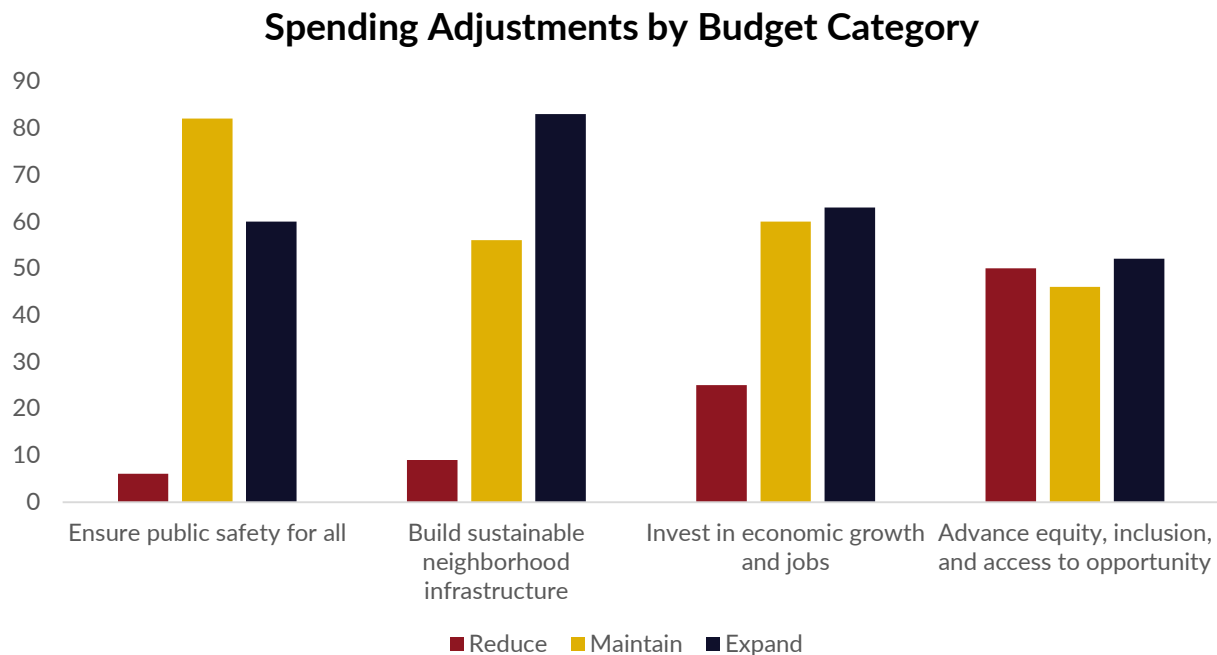
Spending Adjustments

Survey respondents were also asked how they would adjust spending across four broad civic priorities based on their current perceptions of City operations. Those categories were:

1. Ensure public safety for all
2. Build sustainable neighborhood infrastructure
3. Invest in economic growth and jobs
4. Advance, equity, inclusion and access to opportunity

For each civic priority, respondents could select to Reduce, Maintain, or Expand spending.

The chart below provides details on the spending adjustments indicated by respondents.



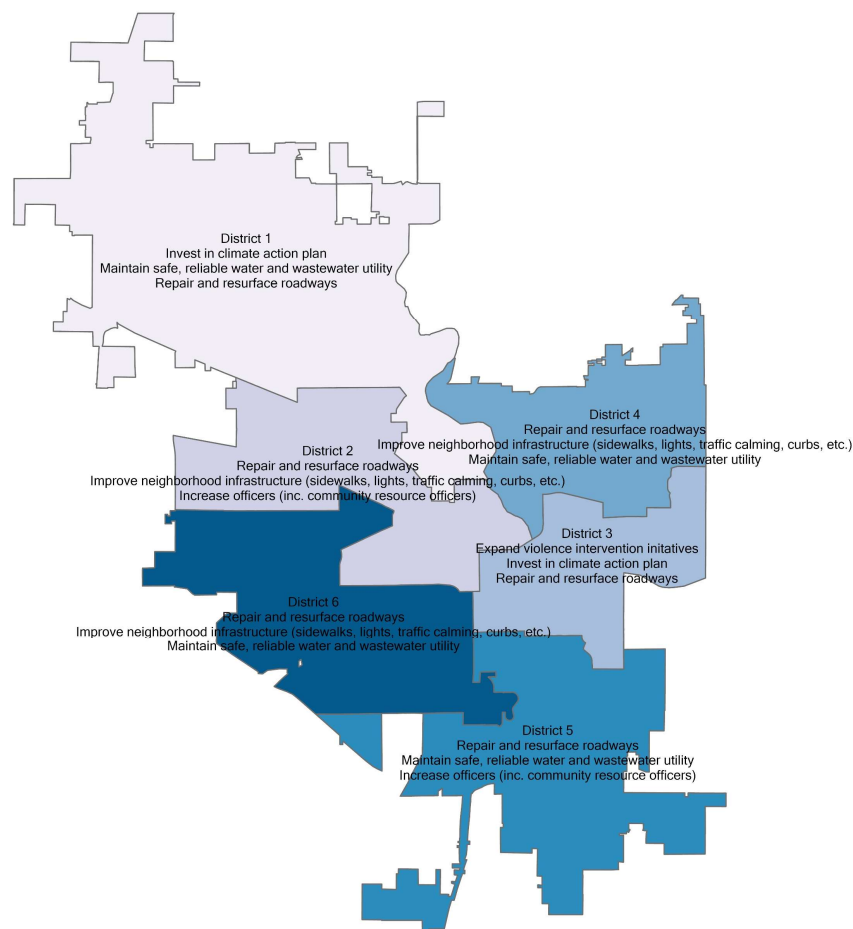
Takeaways

- Build sustainable neighborhood infrastructure for all had the most Expand responses. District 1 and 4 are most in favor of expanding.
- Ensure public safety for all has more Maintain responses and less Expand responses compared to last year.
- Advance equity, inclusion, and access to opportunity has the most Reduce responses, a growing share from last year. District 5 is the most in favor of reducing. District 1 is the most in favor of expanding.

Resident Feedback: Online Survey

Survey Responses by Council District

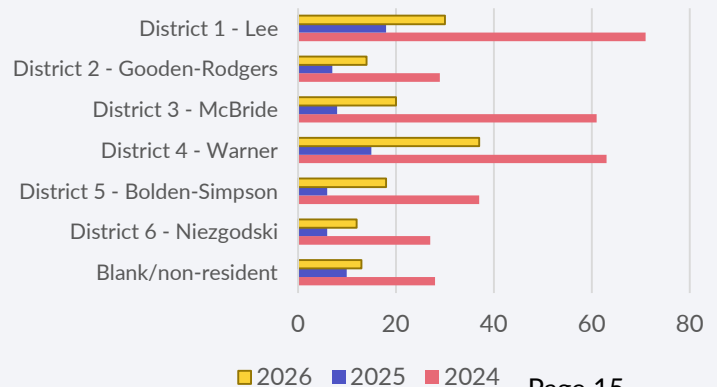
The map below includes **the top three strategic priorities** from the online survey. Darker hue represents larger response rate.



Notable takeaways:

- **Repair and resurface roadways** was a top category for every district.
- **Neighborhood Infrastructure**, **Water/Wastewater Utility**, and **Invest in Climate Action Plan** were also top categories for most districts.
- District 1 and 3 responses allocate more towards **Invest in Climate Action Plan**.
- The online survey responses favor categories that have *traditionally* been a part of the City budget: public works and public safety.
- District 1 and 4 continue to provide high response rates, and while growing, Districts 2 and 6 saw relatively low response rates.

Online Survey Responses by Council District Past three years

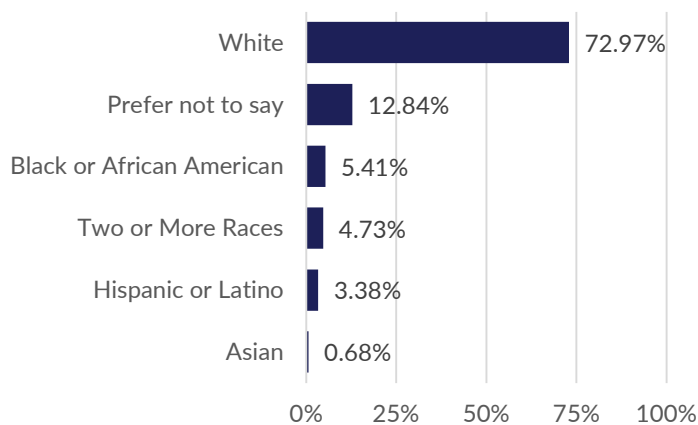


Resident Feedback: Online Survey

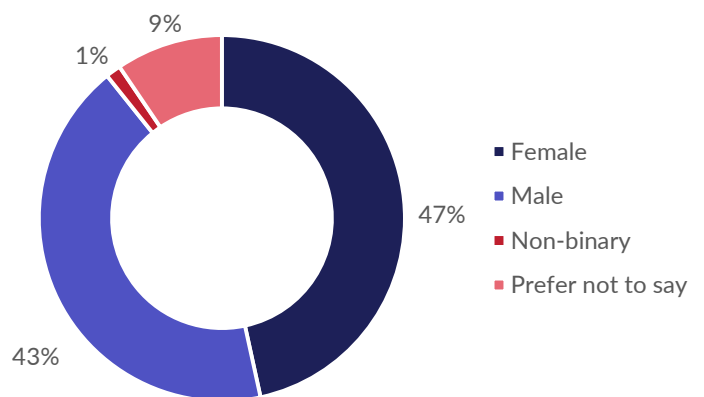
Survey Demographics

The survey asks residents for demographic information to better understand how well survey respondents represent our community. White residents are overrepresented (72% in survey compared to 50%), while Black residents (5% to 26%) and Hispanic residents (3% to 16%) are underrepresented in the survey².

Race and Ethnicity of Survey Respondents



Gender of Survey Respondents



2: [US Census South Bend Profile](#)



"We need better streets and repair, not just patching, repaving."

- Voicemail 9

"I wouldn't mind seeing improvements to our existing bike paths... It's not so much as adding new trails as it is upkeeping the existing trails that we have."

- Voice Message 17

"I would like to see more construction and repavement of the roads throughout the City of South Bend. More affordable housing for lower incomes, and housing for those that are homeless and sleeping on the streets."

- Voicemail 18

"We really need more trees planted along our street to help with shade and just make the neighborhood look nicer."

- Voicemail 6

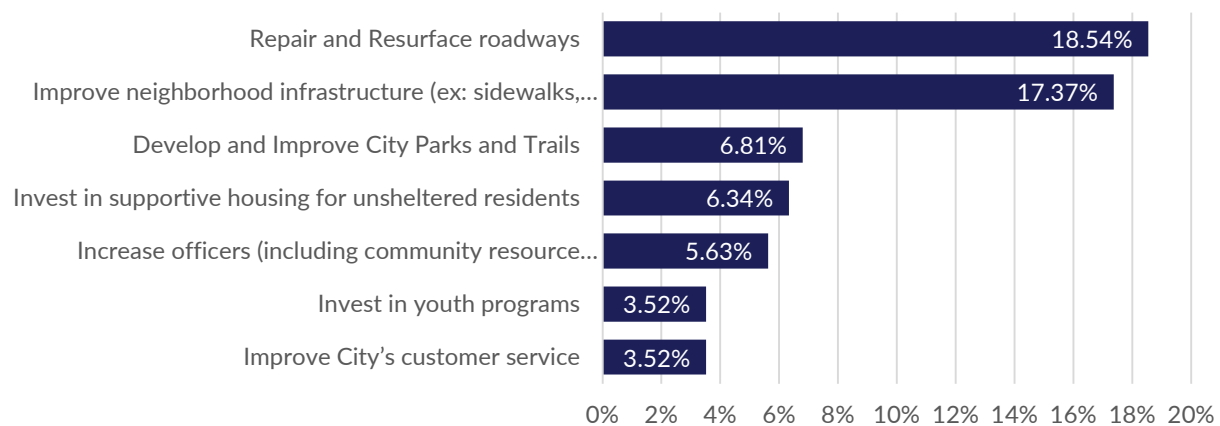
Resident Feedback: 311 Voicemails

311 Voicemail Overview

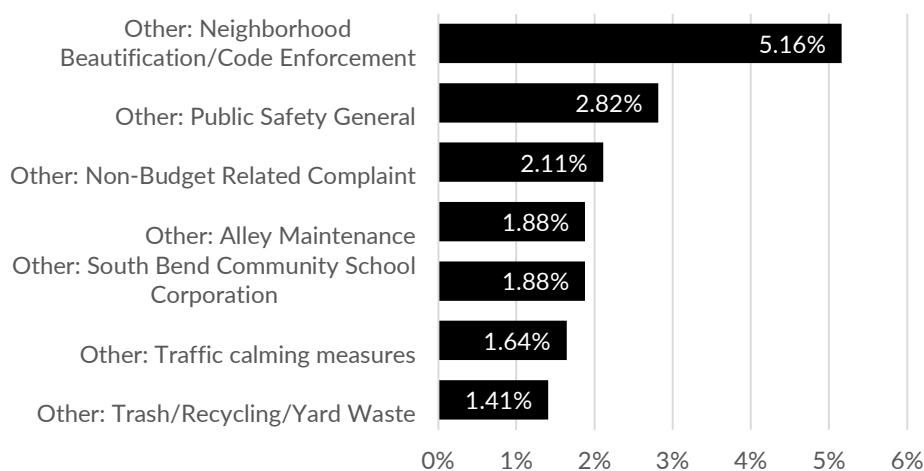
Across the 301 voicemails, there were 321 strategic category mentions and 105 mentions of other resident priorities that were not encapsulated by the existing categories presented in the online survey/envelope wall.

18.5% and 17% of voicemail messages mentioned **repairing roadways** and improving **neighborhood infrastructure**, respectively. There was a minority of voicemails that were critical of the City's traffic calming measures.

311 Voicemail Strategic Spending Priorities Most mentioned categories



Most mentioned other topics



More details about the 311 voicemail responses can be found in Appendix B.

Resident Feedback: 311 Voicemails

Other Topics

In addition to the City's established strategic priorities, residents voiced several recurring concerns that merit attention. These include:

1 Beautification and Code Enforcement

A significant number of residents expressed frustration with the perceived lack of enforcement around property maintenance. Specifically, they want the City to take a more proactive stance in issuing citations for properties that violate local codes including overgrown lawns, structural disrepair, or litter and debris. This concern reflects a broader desire for neighborhood beautification.

2 General Public Safety

While many residents support increasing the number of community resource officers, some raised safety concerns that extend beyond policing. These include issues such as traffic safety, lighting in public areas, and emergency response times. The feedback suggests a need for a more holistic approach to public safety.

3 Quality of Local Public Education

Although public education is not directly managed by the City administration, several residents voiced concerns about the quality and performance of local schools. These concerns ranged from academic outcomes to school facilities and extracurricular opportunities. While the City may not have direct control, this feedback highlights an opportunity for stronger collaboration with school district leadership and advocacy for educational improvements.



Resident Feedback: 311 Voicemails

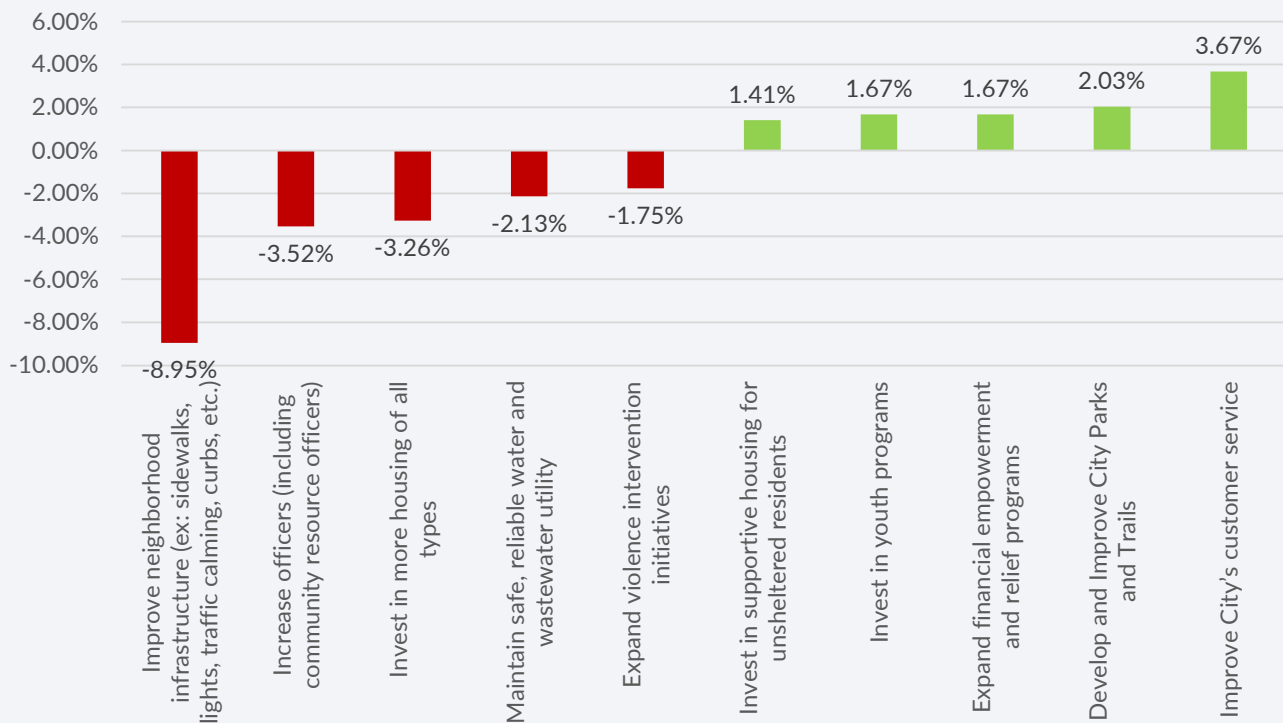
Changes in Resident Sentiment from Last Year

Voicemail responses has shown the greatest change in category mentions compared to the other engagement types.

Improve Neighborhood Infrastructure increased more in mentions compared to last year, but its share of the total fell the most of any category. This is followed by a modest proportional increase for **Increase Officers** and **Investing in Housing**.

On the other hand, City Customer Service increased considerably, followed by City Parks & Trails. This could potentially be attributed to less than satisfactory experiences with these categories and a desire for improvement.

Largest Voicemail Category Shifts (2025-26)



Since the response rate varies year over year, the chart above compares the change in proportion for each category e.g. last year Neighborhood Infrastructure was mentioned 25%—this year it is 32% hence a 7.3% increase.

Resident Feedback: Envelope Wall

Envelope Wall Overview

The Envelope Wall engagement was by far the most popular this year with **1,788 residents participating**. Two-thirds of participants were from Fusion Fest alone. Anecdotally, many of our participants came from young families and residents who enjoy attending VPA and DTSB programming. Even though residents were limited to five categories (each resident was given five fake \$20 bills), the parity of dollars distributed was high relative to other activities i.e. low variance among categories.

Envelope Wall themes this year include more investment for the **housing and maintenance categories: Investing in more housing of all types and improving roadway and neighborhood infrastructure**. Hearing from residents, many were concerned about housing affordability and general concern about the maintenance of existing infrastructure over new investment.

Subcategory and Other topics

Investing in the Climate Action Plan saw a considerable increase this year along with focus on other personal and financial welfare categories such as supporting small businesses, attracting and retaining good jobs and businesses, and violence intervention.

Other topics residents suggested were childcare, more equitable community investment, and SBARC specific resources.

Envelope Wall Strategic Spending Priorities Top categories



More details about the envelope wall responses can be found in Appendix A.

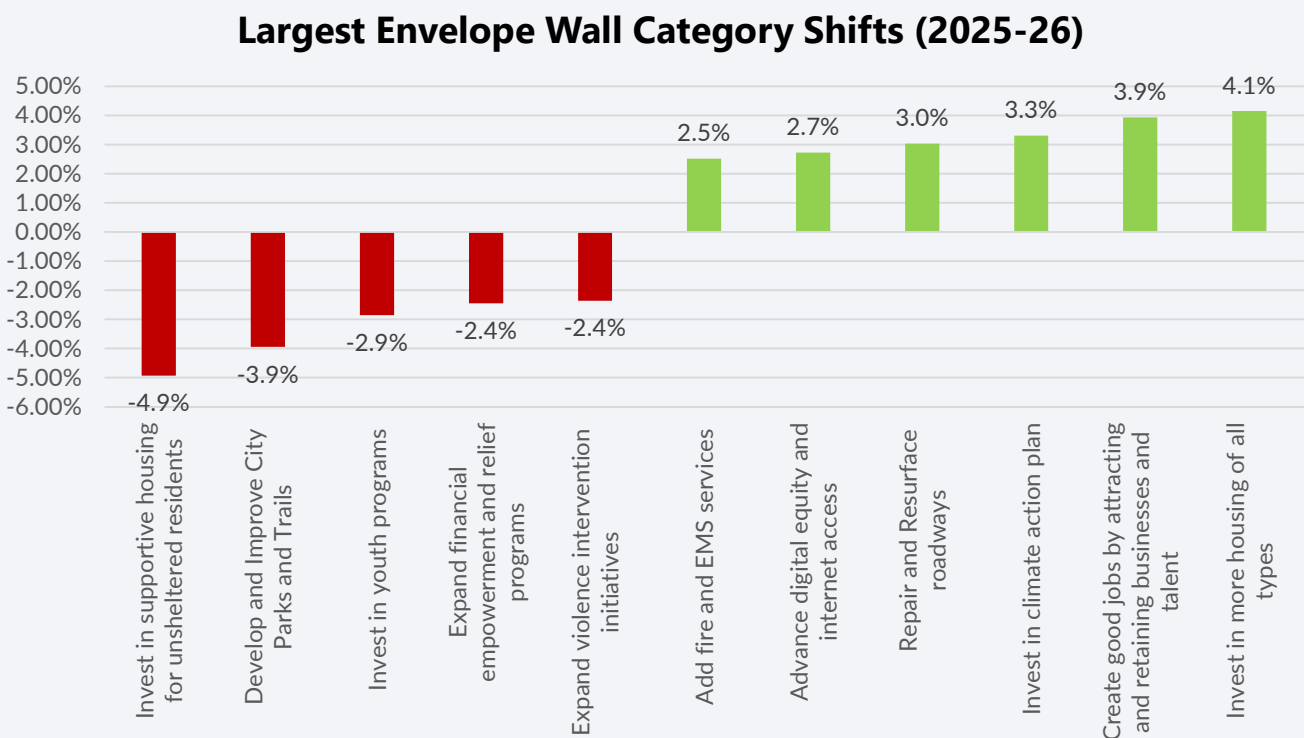
Resident Feedback: Envelope Wall

Changes in Resident Sentiment from Last Year

Residents largely invested the same proportion of dollars in the list of strategic categories. Top increases include **Investing in housing** and **Creating good jobs and attracting businesses**.

Investing in supportive housing, Developing city parks and trails, and investing in youth programs fell as a share of the total.

Often highly chosen categories focusing on local issues like supportive housing and violence intervention programs fell likely as a result of a larger spike of interest in economic categories in a time of relative uncertainty. Of the 5 largest percentage point decreases, 2 of these categories remain in the top 10 category priorities, where 4 were in the top 10 last year.



Since the response rate varies year over year, the chart above compares the change in proportion for each category e.g. last year Invest in more Housing received 6.6% of all dollars allocated—this year it is 10.7% hence a 4.1% increase.

Conclusion

Comparing responses across the three platforms, the report's conclusion reaffirms resident sentiments over the last few years: Support for Roadways remains steady, while investment in housing and economic opportunity has risen.

- 1. Housing accessibility, availability, and affordability**
- 2. Repairing and Resurfacing Roadways (and Alleys)**
- 3. Create jobs by attracting and retaining businesses and talent**
- 4. Improve Neighborhood Infrastructure**
- 5. Invest in climate action plan**

Looking forward to Build the Budget 2027, some recommendations include updating categories to better reflect resident sentiment e.g., code enforcement, SBARC, and public transit. Providing clarifying information to residents at events for some categories: Climate Action details, health equity program proposal could be useful. To improve online survey uptake, it would be best to partner with Common Council on distributing the survey and encourage residents to take the survey each year if they filled out a survey in the past.

If you have ideas to improve budget engagement so we can continue to engage with more residents next budget season, please email sbit@southbendin.gov.

"I think the city should invest in South Bend Animal Resource Center. Add more kennel space, along with more staff."

- Survey 140

"Assistance for residence, including, but not limited to utility services food access, affordable, healthcare transportation, shelter for unhouse, income-based assistance housing."

- Survey 32

"Yes, I would like to see sidewalks. I know you have a curb sidewalk program, but there are some folks that just can't afford to pay their part."

- Voice Message 20

I noticed that...many of the houses in the neighborhood had lead pipes coming from the street access. I'm hoping that that can be resolved, and maybe some of that infrastructure could be updated..."

- Voice Message 39

Appendix A: Online Survey and Envelope Wall

Envelope Wall and Online Survey Detailed Response Totals

2026 Budget Categories	Envelope Dollars	% Share Envelope	Online Dollars	% Share Online
Invest in supportive housing for unsheltered residents	\$7,300	4.08%	\$988	6.68%
Develop and Improve City Parks and Trails	\$7,400	4.14%	\$806	5.44%
Invest in youth programs	\$8,880	4.97%	\$654	4.42%
Expand financial empowerment and relief programs (Utility Assistance Program, eviction defense)	\$1,660	0.93%	\$346	2.34%
Expand violence intervention initiatives	\$10,600	5.93%	\$507	3.43%
Support small businesses	\$11,780	6.59%	\$598	4.04%
Maintain safe, reliable water and wastewater utility	\$4,120	2.30%	\$1,339	9.05%
Increase officers (inc. community resource officers)	\$7,180	4.02%	\$883	5.96%
Fund workforce development and skills training	\$7,100	3.97%	\$534	3.60%
Promote diversity and inclusion in city contracts	\$5,000	2.80%	\$256	1.73%
Partner to promote health equity (reduce infant mortality disparities)	\$5,360	3.00%	\$448	3.03%
Improve neighborhood infrastructure (sidewalks, lights, traffic calming, curbs, etc.)	\$10,900	6.10%	\$1,396	9.43%
Support new residents and welcome immigrant communities	\$8,680	4.85%	\$331	2.24%
Improve city customer service	\$3,800	2.13%	\$324	2.19%
Add fire and EMS services	\$9,920	5.55%	\$626	4.23%
Advance digital equity and internet access (free public WiFi, Broadband infrastructure)	\$8,600	4.81%	\$349	2.36%
Repair and Resurface roadways	\$16,880	9.44%	\$2,093	14.14%
Invest in climate action plan	\$12,960	7.25%	\$1,132	7.65%
Create good jobs by attracting and retaining business and talent	\$11,420	6.39%	\$606	4.09%
Invest in more housing of all types	\$19,280	10.78%	\$588	3.97%
Total	\$178,820	100.00%	\$14,800	100.00%

Appendix A: Online Survey and Envelope Wall

Online Survey Spending Adjustments by Council District

	District 1 (Canneth Lee)	District 2 (Ophelia Gooden Rodgers)	District 3 (Sharon McBride)	District 4 (Troy Warner)	District 5 (Sherry Bolden-Simpson)	District 6 (Sheila Niezgodski)	Total
Advance equity, inclusion, and access to opportunity							
Expand	53.33%	35.71%	45.00%	18.92%	22.22%	33.33%	35.14%
Maintain	23.33%	21.43%	35.00%	43.24%	27.78%	25.00%	31.08%
Reduce	23.33%	42.86%	20.00%	37.84%	50.00%	41.67%	33.78%
Build sustainable neighborhood infrastructure							
Expand	53.33%	21.43%	65.00%	67.57%	44.44%	66.67%	56.08%
Maintain	43.33%	50.00%	30.00%	32.43%	44.44%	33.33%	37.84%
Reduce	3.33%	28.57%	5.00%	0.00%	11.11%	0.00%	6.08%
Ensure public safety for all							
Expand	46.67%	28.57%	40.00%	35.14%	55.56%	33.33%	40.54%
Maintain	50.00%	57.14%	50.00%	64.86%	44.44%	58.33%	55.41%
Reduce	3.33%	14.29%	10.00%	0.00%	0.00%	8.33%	4.05%
Invest in economic growth and jobs							
Expand	43.33%	28.57%	50.00%	54.05%	33.33%	25.00%	42.57%
Maintain	40.00%	28.57%	35.00%	37.84%	55.56%	50.00%	40.54%
Reduce	16.67%	42.86%	15.00%	8.11%	11.11%	25.00%	16.89%

Appendix B: 311 Voicemail

Budget Voicemail Detailed Response Total

Categories	Count	% of Total
Repair and Resurface roadways	79	18.5%
Improve neighborhood infrastructure (ex: sidewalks, lights, traffic calming, curbs, etc.)	74	17.4%
Develop and Improve City Parks and Trails	29	6.8%
Invest in supportive housing for unsheltered residents	27	6.3%
Increase officers (including community resource officers)	24	5.6%
Other: Neighborhood Beautification/Code Enforcement	22	5.16%
Expand financial empowerment and relief programs	15	3.5%
Improve City's customer service	15	3.5%
Invest in youth programs	15	3.5%
Invest in more housing of all types	12	2.8%
Other: Public Safety General	12	2.82%
Support small businesses	9	2.1%
Other: Non-Budget Related Complaint	9	2.11%
Other: South Bend Community School Corporation	8	1.88%
Other: Alley Maintenance	8	1.88%
Other: Traffic calming measures	7	1.64%
Maintain safe, reliable water and wastewater utility	6	1.4%
Other: Trash/Recycling/Yard Waste	6	1.41%
Invest in climate action plan	5	1.2%
Other: Resources for the homeless generally (transit passes, accessible shelter)	5	1.17%
Expand violence intervention initiatives	4	0.9%
Add fire and EMS services	3	0.7%
Create good jobs by attracting and retaining businesses and talent	3	0.7%
Other: SBARC	3	0.70%
Other: Increase Transparency	3	0.70%
Other: ReLeaf/Snow Plowing	3	0.70%
Other: Support Senior Citizens	3	0.70%
Other: St. Joe River Cleanup	3	0.70%
Other: Renter Assistance/Bill Assistance	2	0.47%
Other: More cameras	2	0.47%
Other: Downtown	2	0.47%
Other: Employee Salaries	2	0.47%
Promote diversity & inclusion in city contracts	1	0.2%
Other: More crossing guards	1	0.23%
Other: No one way streets	1	0.23%
Other: Equitable Community Investment	1	0.23%
Other: Decrease Officers	1	0.23%
Other: Public Transportation	1	0.23%
Partner to promote health equity(ex: reduce infant mortality disparities)	0	0.0%
Advance digital equity and internet access	0	0.0%
Fund workforce development and skills training	0	0.0%
Support new residents and welcome immigrant communities	0	0.0%
Total	426	100.0%

BUILD THE BUDGET

