



KENT COUNTY 2050

HEADWATER

A Strategic Framework for the Future of Kent County



RECAP

What is Strategic Foresight?

Phase 1: Sensing

What's happening in Kent County?



Conducted a two-part Delphi Survey to identify a range of expert opinions and form consensus on the factors impacting Kent County (*276 participants*)



Identified 28 STEEP/R trends—covering society, technology, economics, environment, and politics/regulatory

Increasing Population

Increasingly Older Population

Growing Diversity

Improving Poverty & Income Inequality

Rising Educational Attainment & Requirements

Increasing Immigrant Role

Growing Gap: Youth vs. Adult Mental Health & Care Access

Increasing Grid Capacity & Demand

Rising Broadband & Connectivity

Growing Automation & AI Applications

Growing EV Infrastructure & Use

Increasing Pressure to Address Housing

Growing Climate & Weather Impacts

Growing Demand for Alternative Transit

Increasing Pressure to Increase Water Sustainability

Rising Child Care Concerns

Increasing Industry Re-/On-Shoring

Growing Employment

Shifting Top Industries

Growing Per Capita Income

Falling Behind on Talent

Increasing Circular Economy

Decreasing Property Tax Burden

Rising Minimum Wage

Increasing Union Power & Assertiveness

Decreasing Republican Dominance in Gubernatorial Elections

Increasing Public Support for Sustainability Policies

Growing Inclusive Civic Engagement

Phase 1: Sensing

What's happening in Kent County?



Held 3 Big Sort sessions where community leaders evaluated trends that will impact Kent County's future (*110 participants*)



Developed a list of Top Trends based on the Big Sort results

FQ*	Trend	Variability in Readiness Ranking**																							
26	16. Rising Child Care Concerns	0	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	4	4	5	5	6	7	8
25	12. Increasing Pressure to Address Housing	1	1	1	2	2	3	3	3	4	4	4	5	5	5	5	5	6	6	6	7	7	7	8	9
25	3. Growing Diversity	1	1	1	2	2	2	3	3	3	4	4	5	5	5	5	6	6	6	7	7	7	7	8	
24	6. Increasing Immigrant Role	2	2	2	2	3	3	4	4	5	5	5	5	6	6	6	6	7	7	8	8	8	8	9	
22	8. Increasing Grid Capacity & Demand	0	1	2	2	2	2	3	3	4	4	4	5	5	6	6	6	7	7	7	7	7	8		
22	10. Growing Automation & AI Applications	0	0	0	1	2	2	3	3	3	3	3	4	4	4	4	5	5	5	6	6	6			
20	5. Rising Educational Attainment & Requirements	2	2	3	3	4	4	4	5	5	5	6	6	7	8	8	8	8	8	9	10				
20	13. Growing Climate & Weather Impacts	0	0	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	3	3	4	4	4	4	5	5	5	6	7				
19	1. Increasing Population	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	3	4	4	4	5	5	7	7	7					
18	2. Increasingly Older Population	1	1	3	4	4	4	4	5	5	5	5	5	6	6	6	7	8	10						
18	9. Rising Broadband Connectivity	0	3	5	5	6	6	6	7	7	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	9						
18	18. Growing Employment	3	4	4	5	5	5	5	6	6	6	6	6	7	8	8	8	9	10						
13	15. Increasing Pressure to Increase Water Sustainability	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	3	4	4	5	6											

Phase 2: Imagining

What could happen in Kent County's future?

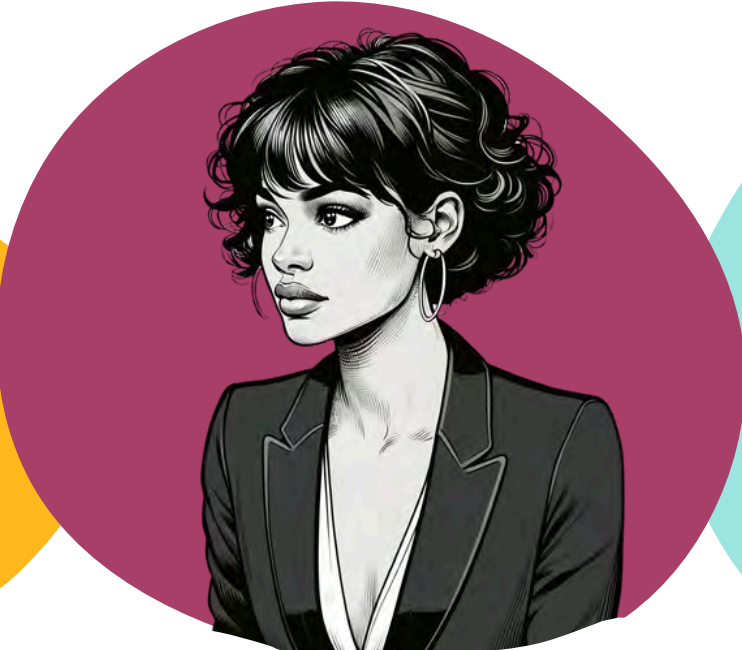


Developed 4 scenario stories, identifying plausible futures to stress-test current strategies against different market conditions, rehearse possible disruptions, and consider a broader range of possibilities



BACK TO OFFICE

THE EXPECTABLE FUTURE



ATENA'S DECISION

THE CHALLENGING FUTURE



BUILDING BRIDGES

THE VISIONARY FUTURE

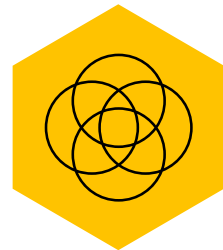


APPETITE FOR SUCCESS

THE VISIONARY FUTURE

Phase 3: Defining

What do we want to happen? What will it take to get there?



Identified crossover levers between the scenarios and ranked them based on the question “what MUST we get right to be good ancestors?”



Attractive, affordable housing that meets diverse needs.



Stay ahead of the pace of change to meet emerging needs.



Connect communities through innovative, convenient, and accessible mobility/transportation solutions.



Kent County employers embrace flexible solutions to support their employees.



Innovative zoning and land use to accommodate different housing and mixed-use.



Leaders across sectors work and plan together for Kent County's future.



Expand educational models to meet diverse learners' needs to prepare them for the future they're going to live in.



Nurture entrepreneurial thinking and innovation in the public, private, and social sectors.



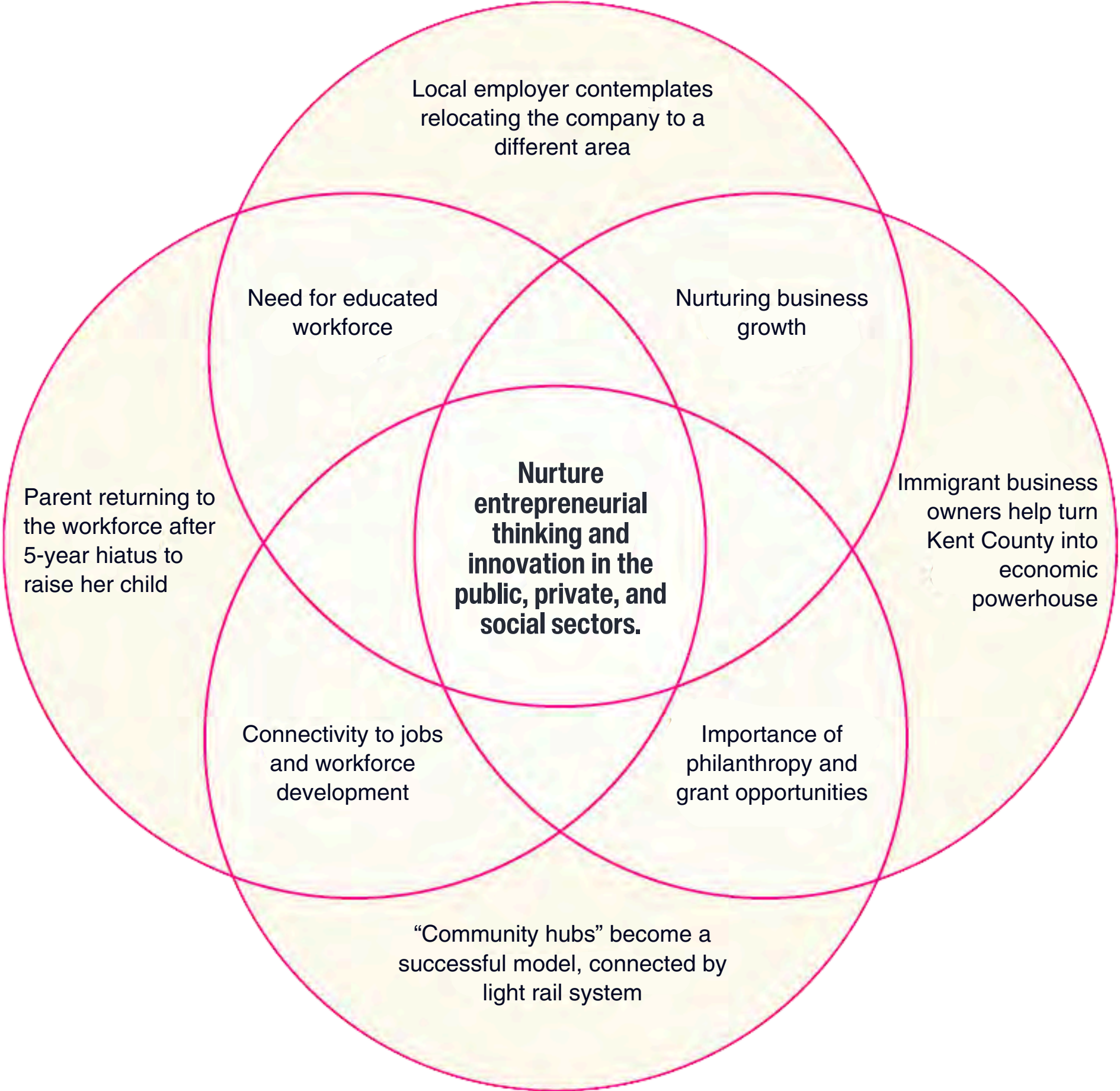
Match education and training programs to employer's current and future needs.



Kent County intentionally develops its future community leaders.

ATENA'S DECISION

BACK TO OFFICE



APPETITE FOR SUCCESS

BUILDING BRIDGES

Phase 3: Defining

What do we want to happen? What will it take to get there?



Conducted a public survey to ask residents the same question and help us prioritize and elicit ideas we hadn't considered *(17,240 votes received)*

What MUST we get right to be good ancestors for Kent County through 2050?

Expand affordable childcare options for working families.

[Flag as inappropriate](#)

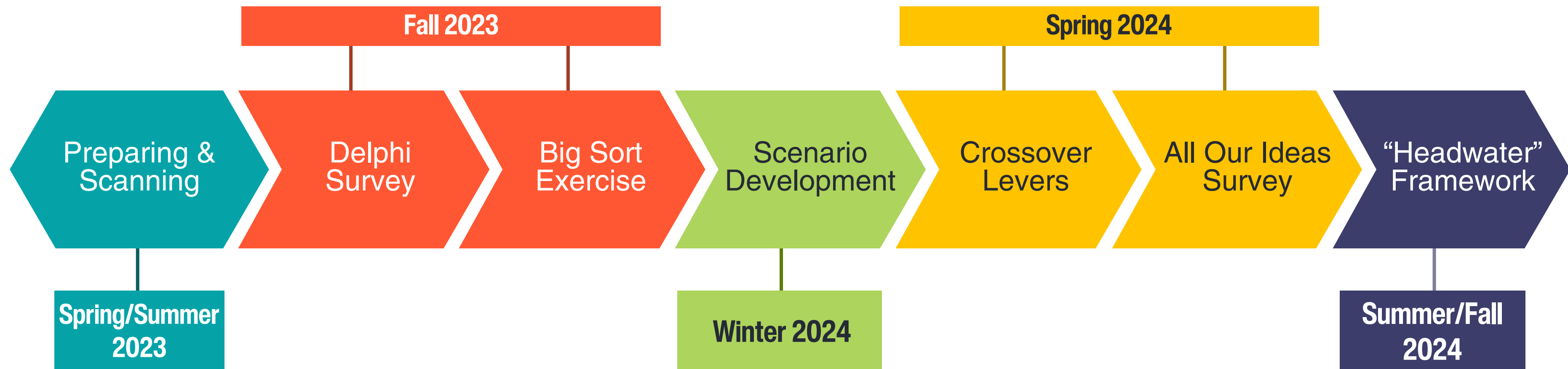
Encourage infill development where infrastructure already exists. Avoid sprawl and loss of open space.

[Flag as inappropriate](#)

[I can't decide](#)
53 votes on 5 Ideas

Add your own idea here...

What Have We Accomplished Together?



An aerial photograph of a river winding through a dense, green forest. The river is a light blue color, contrasting with the vibrant green of the trees. The perspective is from a high angle, looking down at the river as it flows towards the horizon. The sky is a pale, hazy blue, suggesting a clear day.

HEADWATER



City Market, Island Park, 1916



P. M. BRIDGE OVER GRAND RIVER, LOWELL, MICH.





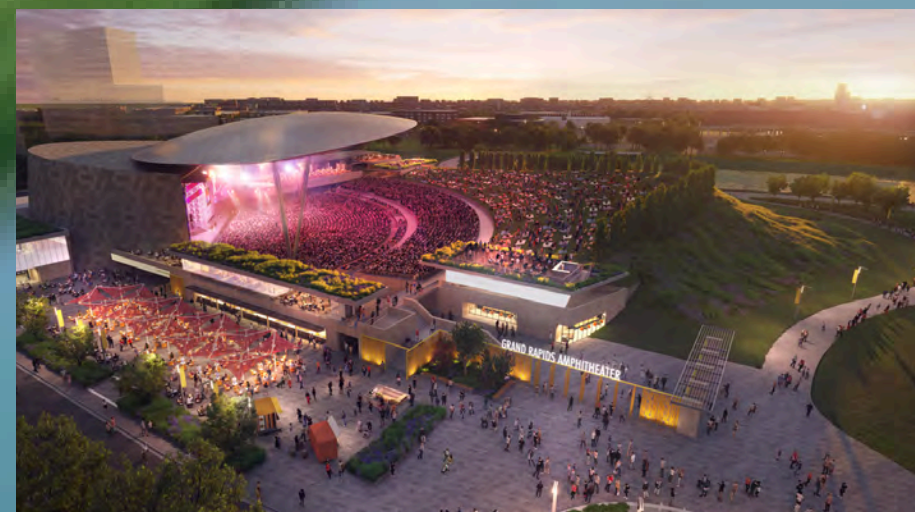
City Market, Island Park, 1916

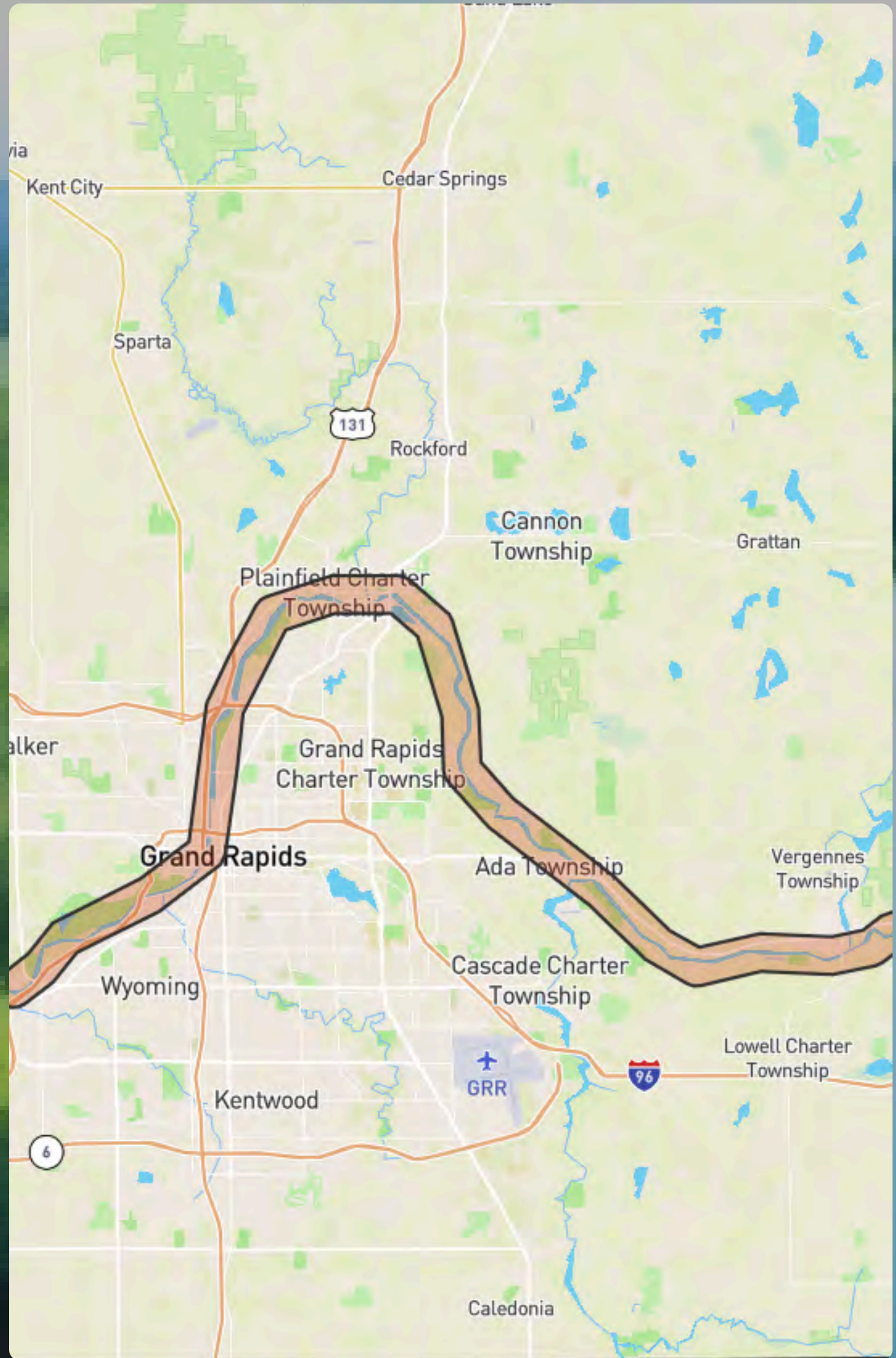


P. M. BRIDGE OVER GRAND RIVER, LOWELL, MICH.



CHIEF HAZY CLOUD PARK TO ROSELLE PARK PEDESTRIAN BRIDGE







Imagine it's 2050...

Imagine Kent County in 2050. How old will you be? How old will your kids or grandkids be? Who will be living here, and what will their lives be like?

Jonas Salk said, "The most important question we must ask ourselves is, 'Are we being good ancestors?'" That question is at the heart of this plan. What must we get right to give our children and theirs the best place to call "home?"

In 2050, Kent County will be 214 years old. That's 11 generations. And long before Kent County's incorporation, the Grand River was shaping this region and its inhabitants. If you go to the headwater of the Grand River to the Fen Preserve, you see a narrow river of water flowing through rich wetlands, a whisper of what the river becomes as it gains volume and strength and flows through our county.

We see this plan as a headwater, a starting point for what's possible in 2050.

A few thousand Kent County residents joined us at the headwater. Some participated for five minutes, some for several hours, and others for over a year. But what we've started will grow as more people take action, as more leaders recognize the wisdom and foresight in this plan, and as more residents and change agents do what we did: work together and think strategically about the future.

This plan is dedicated to the future generations of Kent County,

KENT COUNTY 2050 STEERING COMMITTEE



AL VANDERBERG
Kent County



JOHN VAN FOSSEN
Meijer



RANDY THELEN
The Right Place



CHERYL SCALES
North Kent Connect



KEVIN POLSTON
Kentwood Public Schools



RICK BAKER
Grand Rapids Area Chamber of Commerce



EUREKA PEOPLE
Housing Kent



KRISTA FLYNN
PNC Bank



STACIE BEHLER
Grand Valley State University



EVELYN ESPARZA-GONZALEZ
Hispanic Center of Western Michigan



MARK WASHINGTON
City of Grand Rapids



STAN STEK
Kent County



HOLLY JOHNSON
Frey Foundation



MICHELLE LAJOIE-YOUNG
Kent County Sheriff's Office



STEFF ROSALEZ
Grandville Avenue Arts & Humanities



JACOB MAAS
West Michigan Works!



MICHELLE VAN DYKE
United Way



TASHA BLACKMON
Cherry Health



MIKE MRAZ
Rockford Construction

Focus Areas and Guiding Principles

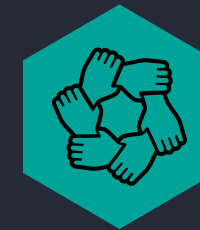
The four **Focus Areas** and four **Guiding Principles** of the Headwater plan aim to shape the future of the places we live, work, play, and learn. The vision for Kent County 2050 is a future-minded vision created through the engagement of residents, and expresses what we strive to be as a community by 2050 and beyond.

Kent County 2050 Headwater plan includes the **Focus Areas**, **Guiding Principles**, and a series of **ambitions** to further articulate the desired long-range outcome we are setting out to achieve. These were inspired by feedback from thousands of residents about what they want for the future of Kent County.

Kent County 2050 partners will use the following **Focus Areas** to outline our vision for the future:



Kent County 2050 partners will use the following **Guiding Principles** as a guide to advance and achieve our vision:



WELCOMING AND BELONGING

We believe in the power of our people. As we look to the future, our greatest asset will be the sense of belonging that unites us. We envision a community where everyone feels at home. In this future, belonging isn't just about feeling welcome—it's about knowing that you are an integral part of the community's growth and prosperity.



SHARED GROWTH, SHARED PROSPERITY

We believe in the power of growth—not as something to be imposed, but as an opportunity to harness our strengths. Strategic, intentional growth will propel us forward, creating opportunities for all residents and ensuring that our community remains vibrant and competitive. Growth benefits every individual, every family, and every future generation.



PARTNERSHIP

We believe in the power of collaboration. Our future will be forged by partners working together and leading the way. We will partner with other change agents as conveners, leaders, or supporters to effect change.



GOOD ANCESTORS

We believe in tomorrow. We are not just building a plan for ourselves; we are laying the groundwork for the lives of those who come after us. We will anticipate future needs and ensure that our actions and decisions benefit current and future generations.



Live Well

All residents live healthy, safe, and fulfilling lives.

Ambitions



Affordable and Accessible Housing: Attractive, affordable housing is attainable and suitable to the diverse needs of our communities.



Care for All: Residents of all ages and abilities can access exceptional care services and enrichment opportunities, ensuring that the youngest and oldest thrive within our communities.



Comprehensive Health Access: Residents live healthy and active lives in communities that support their physical, mental, and social well-being.



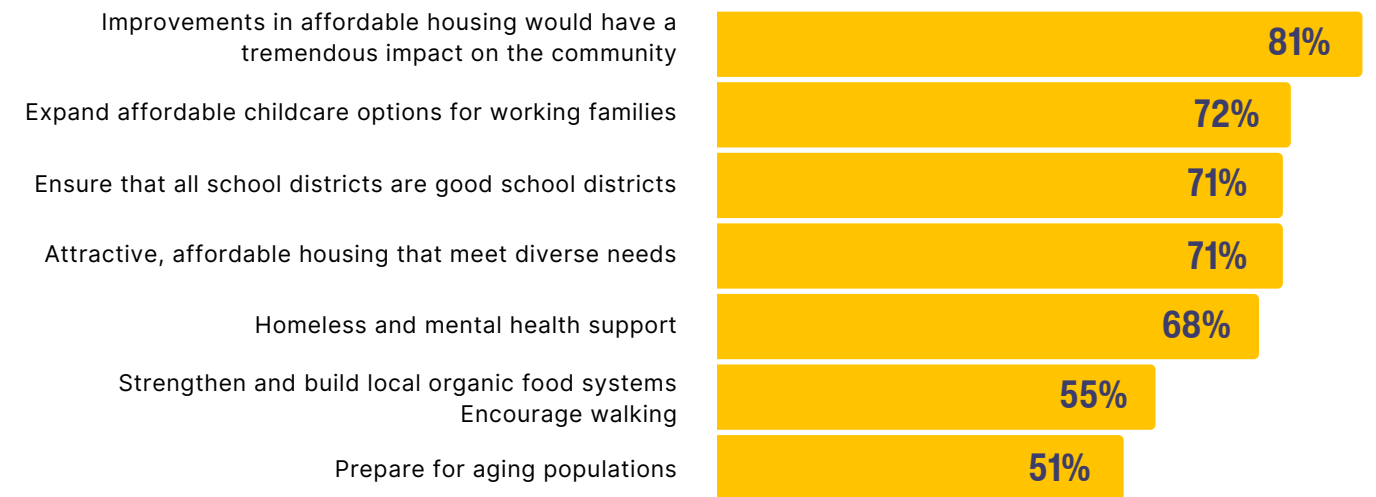
Superior Educational Opportunities: Every child receives an education that prepares them for a successful future, tailored to their unique learning needs.



Safe Communities: Residents live, work, and play in communities that prioritize their safety.

Residents highlighted the following:

Source: All Our Ideas Survey



"A lack of affordable housing is a major problem in my area. I work in the mental health field, and it is difficult to help people make progress in their mental well-being when they have the chronic stress of homelessness and housing insecurity."

~ Kent County CHNA Respondent (2023)

Live Well

All residents live healthy, safe, and fulfilling lives.

**Affordable and
Accessible Housing**



Care for All



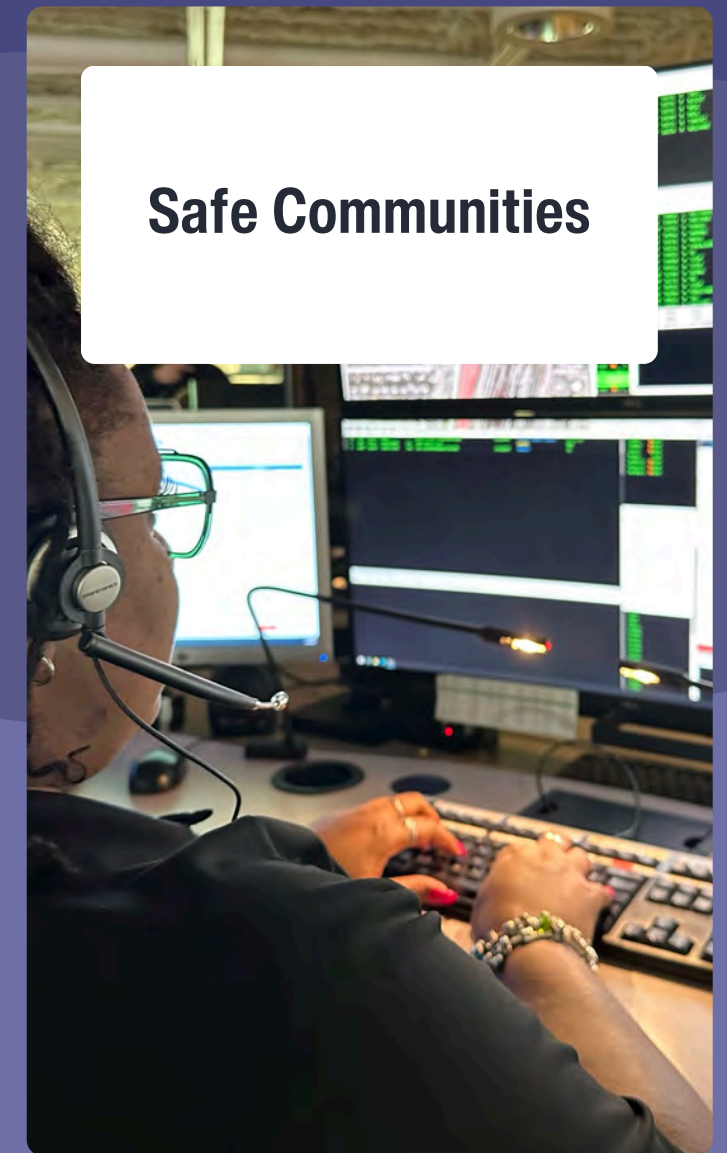
**Comprehensive
Health Access**



**Superior Educational
Opportunities**



Safe Communities



Residents highlighted the following:

Source: All Our Ideas Survey

Improvements in affordable housing would have a tremendous impact on the community

Expand affordable childcare options for working families

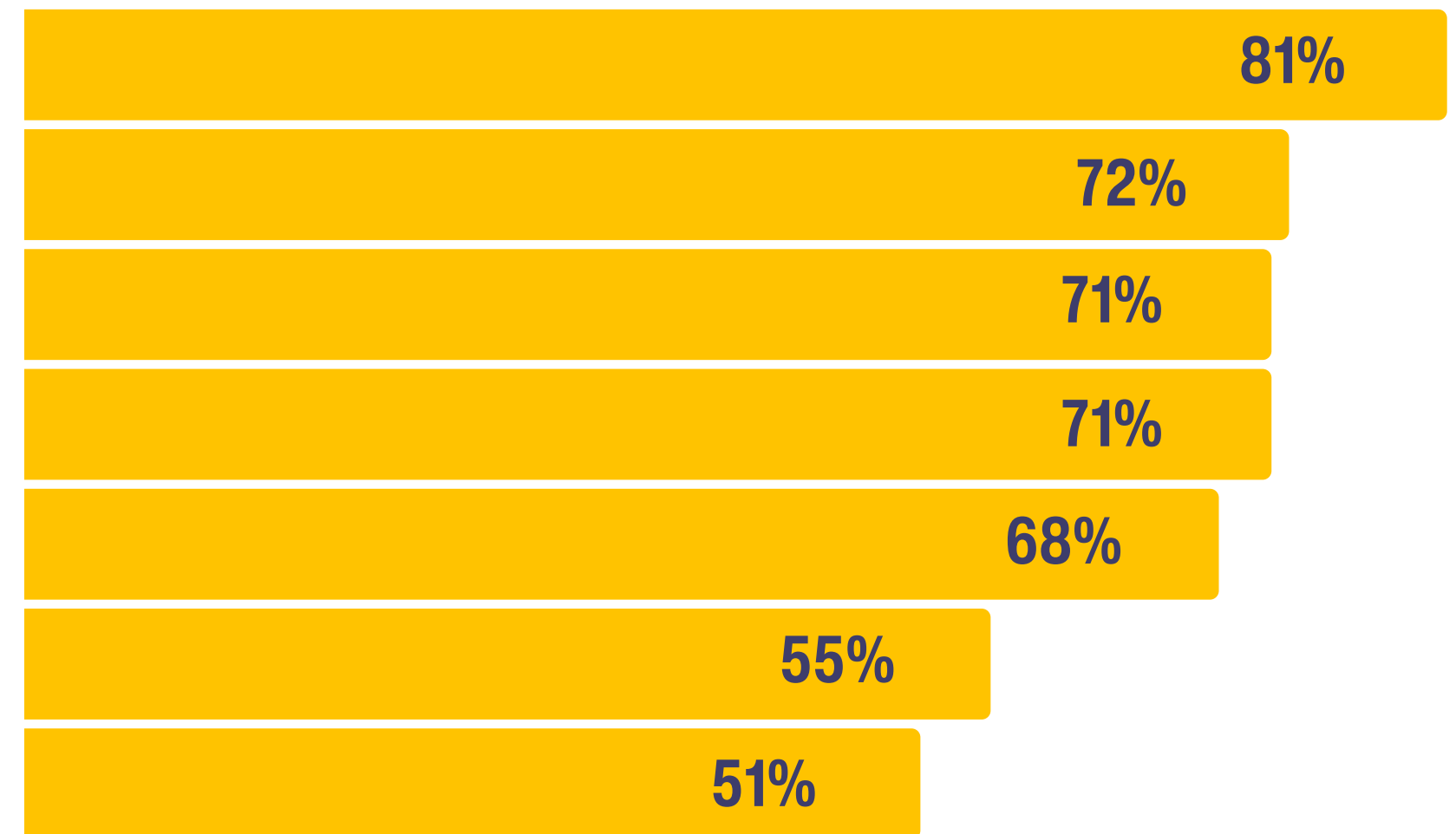
Ensure that all school districts are good school districts

Attractive, affordable housing that meet diverse needs

Homeless and mental health support

Strengthen and build local organic food systems Encourage walking

Prepare for aging populations



“A lack of affordable housing is a major problem in my area. I work in the mental health field, and it is difficult to help people make progress in their mental well-being when they have the chronic stress of homelessness and housing insecurity.”

~ Kent County CHNA Respondent (2023)

Thrive Together

Kent County is an ecosystem of economic prosperity and cultural richness accessible to all.

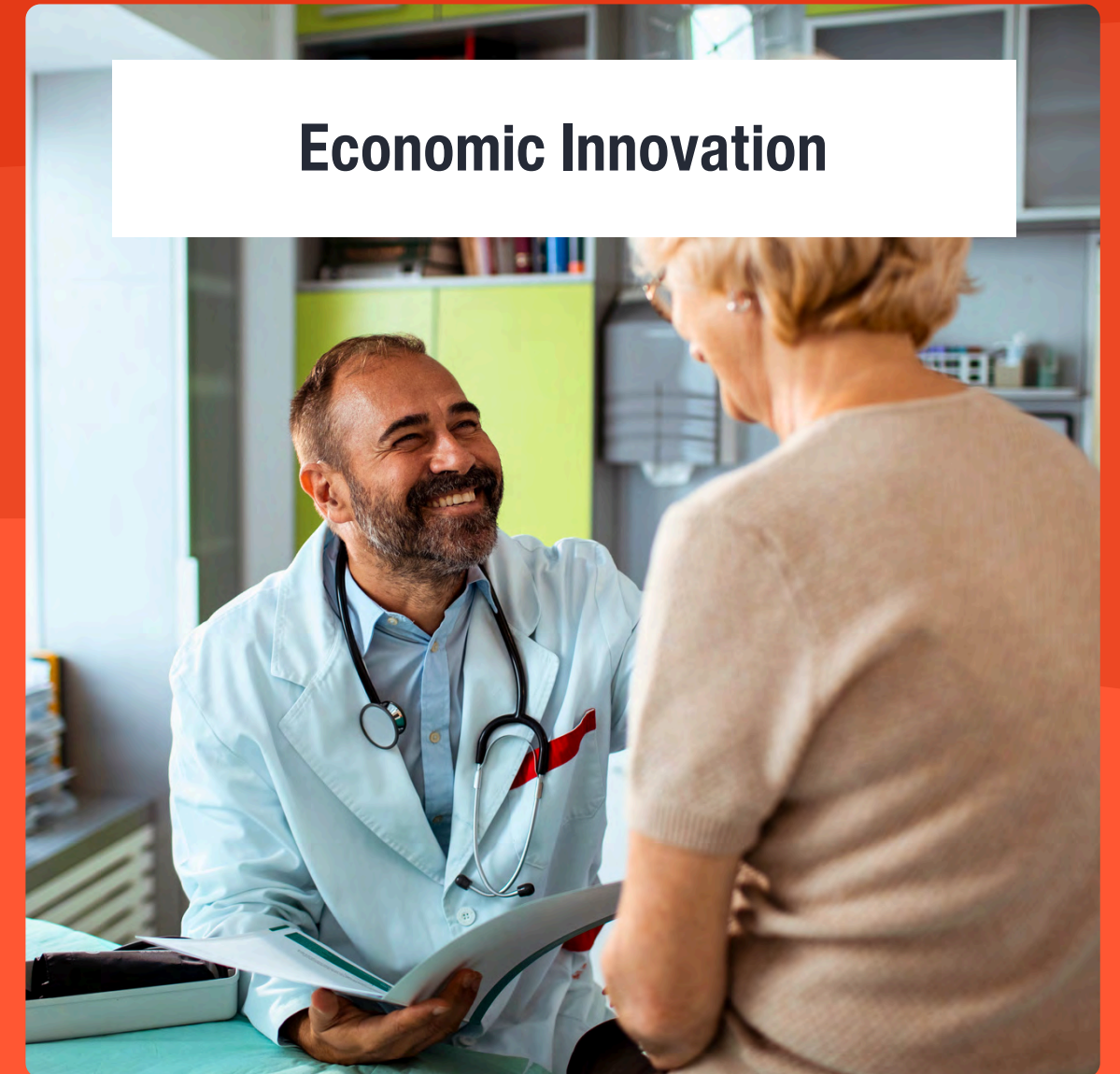
Accomplished Workforce



Entrepreneurial Support

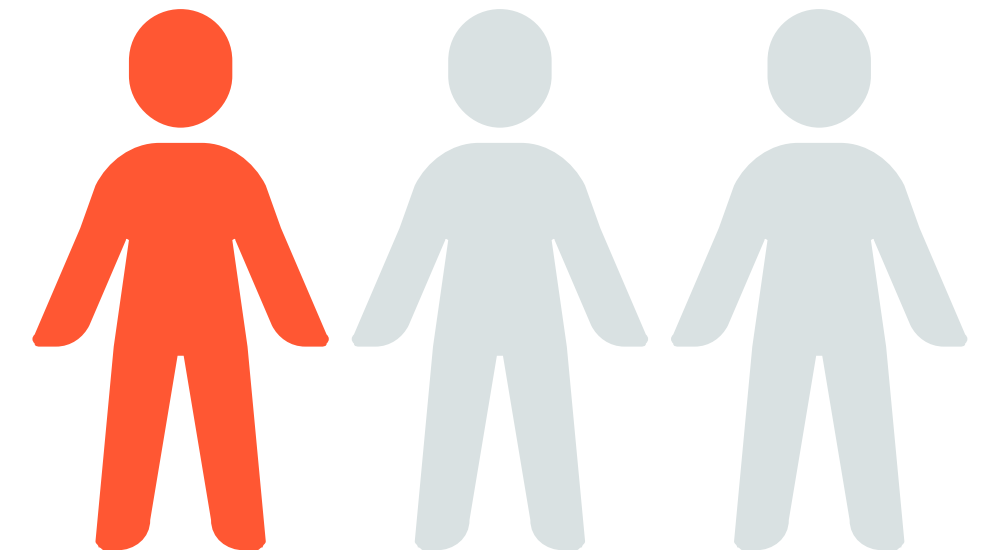


Economic Innovation



Residents highlighted the following:

Source: All Our Ideas Survey



About **1 in 3 residents** is satisfied with the availability of jobs that pay a living wage.

Source: Kent County Community Survey 2024

“Building a strong and sustainable economic base should be a top priority. This includes attracting new businesses, supporting existing ones, and diversifying the local economy to create jobs and provide financial stability.”

~ Kent County 2050 Survey Respondent

Cultivate Community

Kent County is a mosaic of inclusive communities where people experience the cultural, artistic, and natural landscape it has to offer

Inviting and Distinctive Places



Quality Parks and Recreation



Welcoming and Belonging

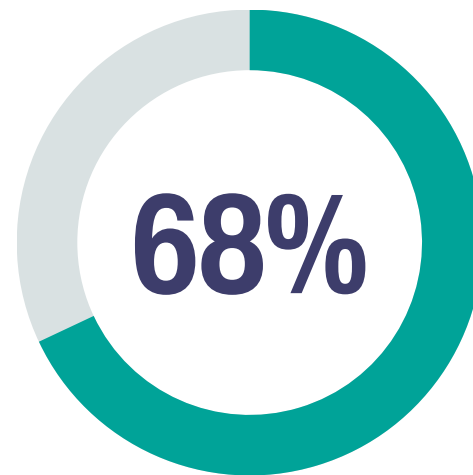


Residents highlighted the following:

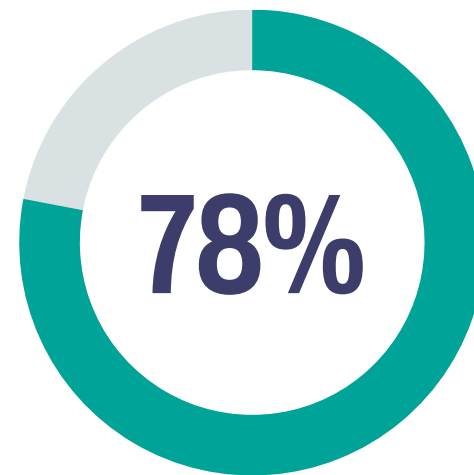
Source: Kent County Community Survey (2024)

“[The future] requires us to be open, inclusive, welcoming and to have a vision that drives us forward.”

~ Kent County 2050 Survey Respondent



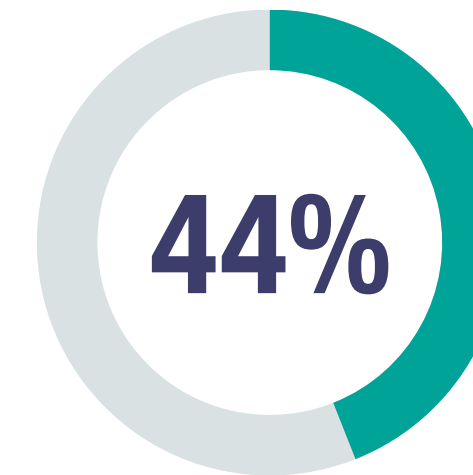
of residents would recommend Kent County as a place to live



of residents are satisfied with the availability and variety of arts and cultural events



of residents are satisfied with the quality of parks and recreational amenities



of residents feel a sense of community among residents

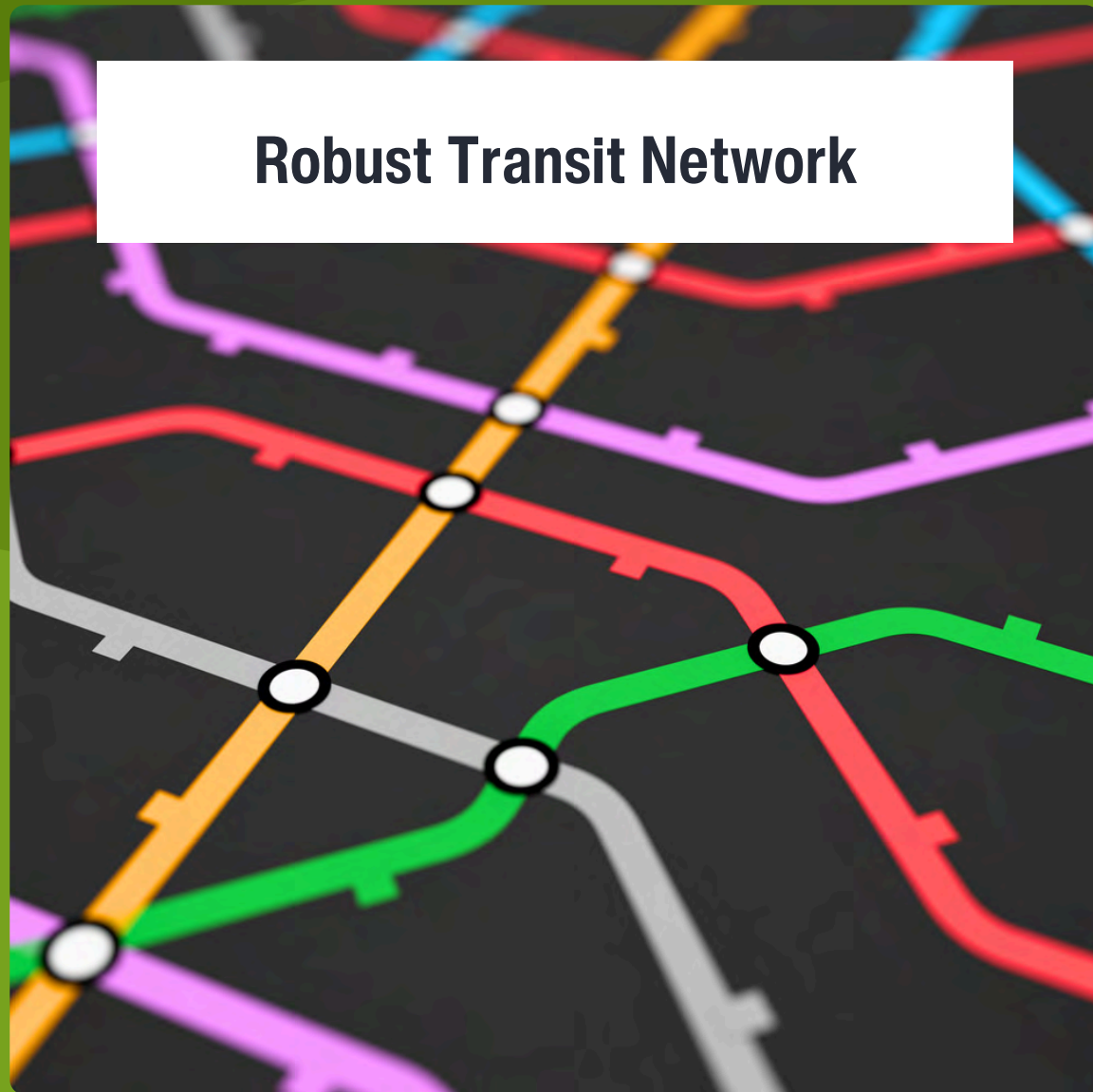
“All my neighbors are nice and they all seem to look out for one another. And just the whole environment is nice and that means a lot to me, like how you are treated in your community.”

~ Kent County Community Survey Respondent

Be Resilient

Kent County is prepared to adapt and thrive in the face of future opportunities and challenges.

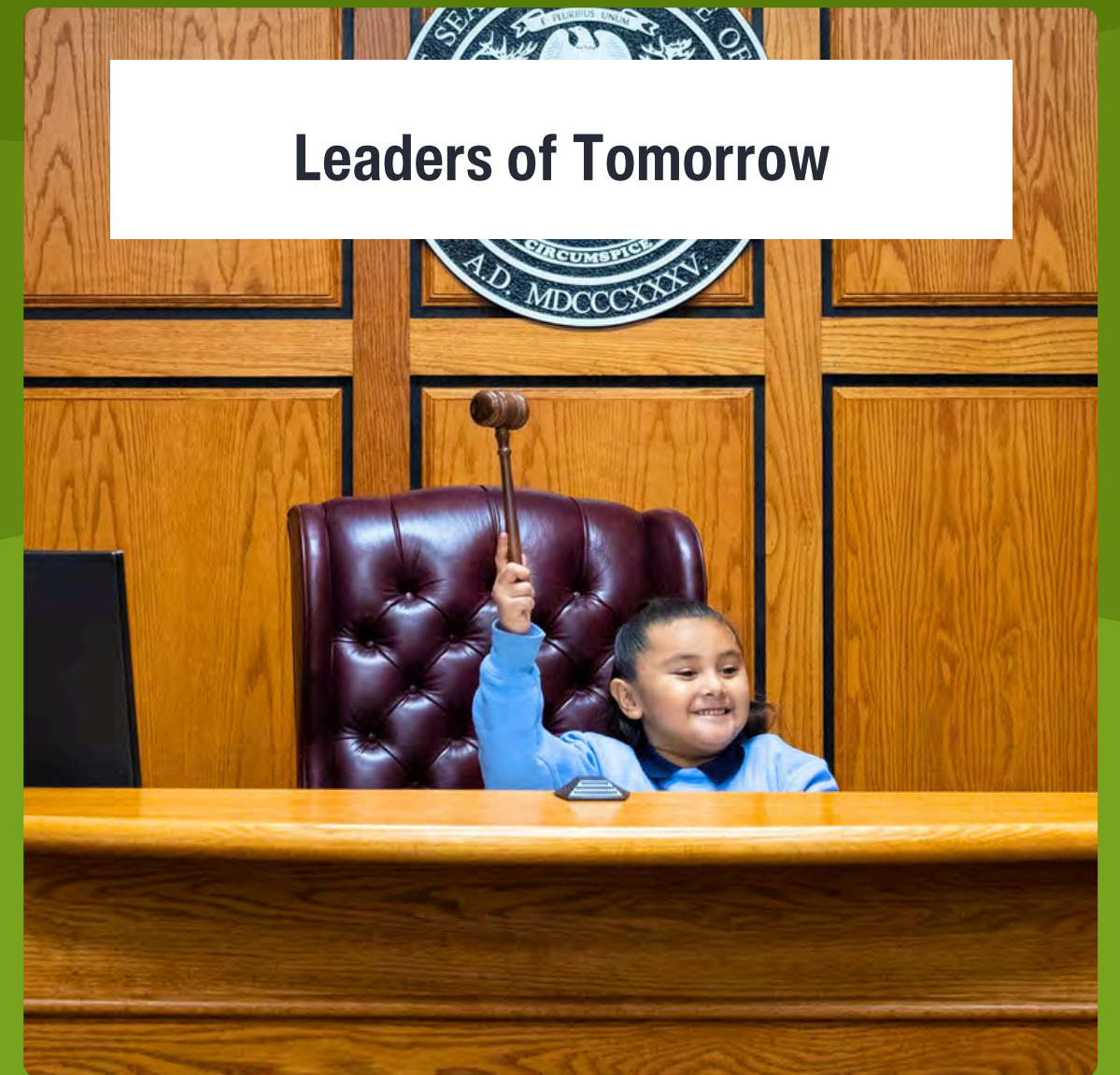
Robust Transit Network



Thoughtful Growth & Stewardship

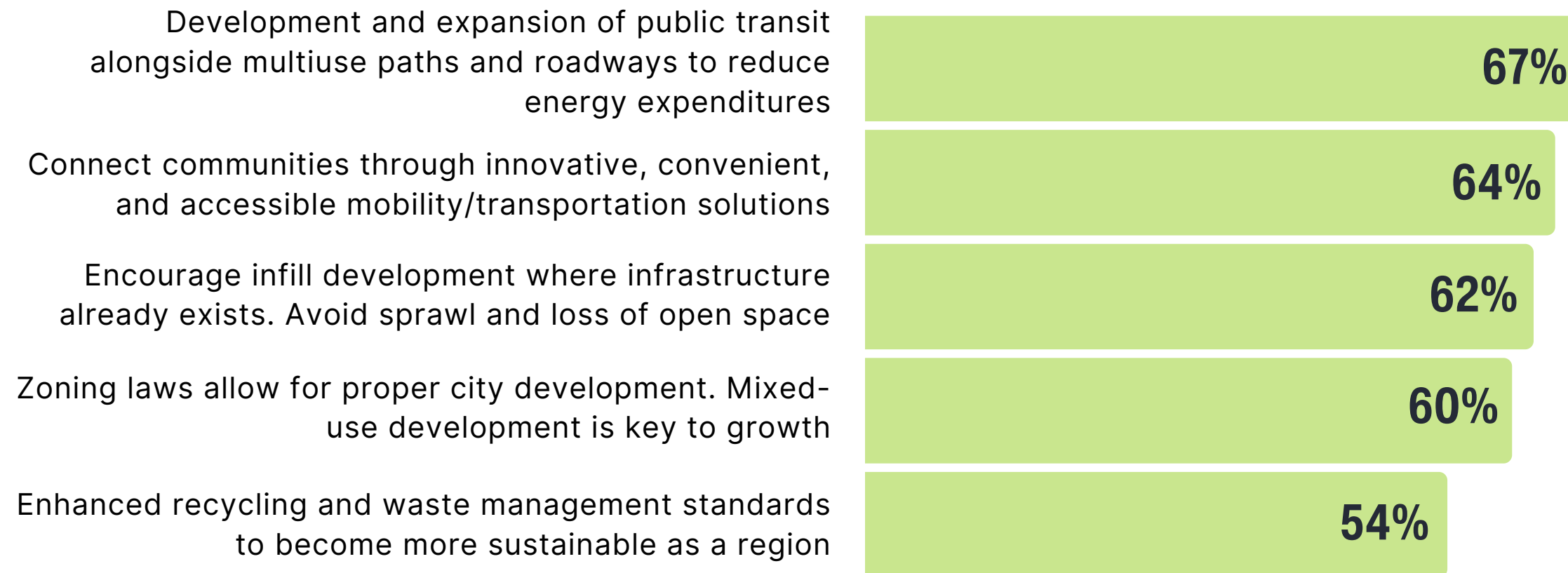


Leaders of Tomorrow



Residents highlighted the following:

Source: All Our Ideas Survey

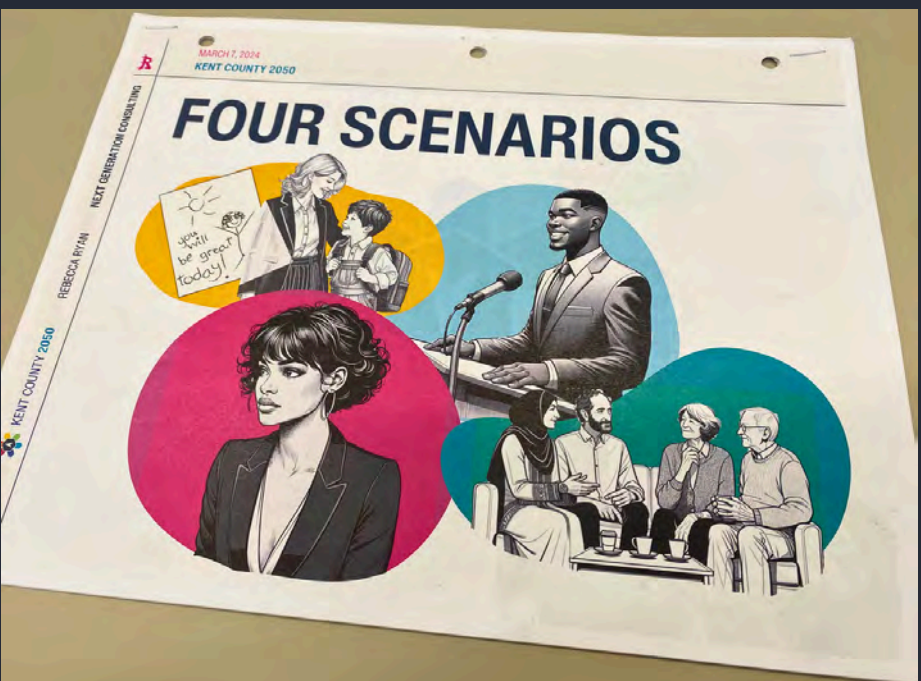
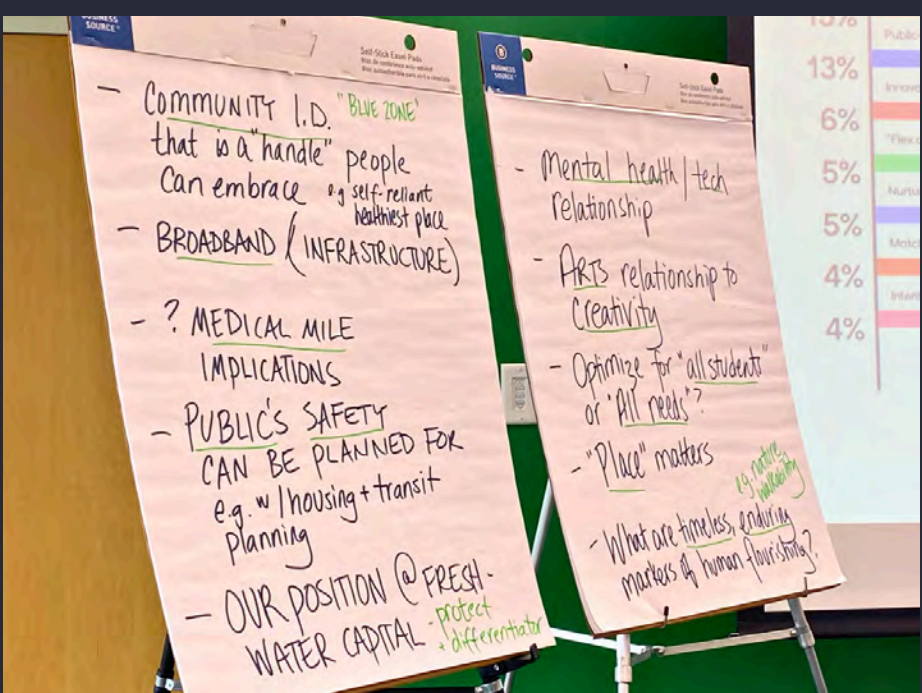


Approximately **4 in 9 residents** are satisfied with the ease of getting around by public transportation.

Source: Kent County Community Survey (2024)

“We have the space and structure to rethink mass transit. I should be able to ride public transportation from the airport to downtown and to connected communities like Grandville, Walker, Kentwood, Ada, Rockford, etc.”

~ Kent County CHNA Respondent (2023)





NEXT STEPS & QUESTIONS



KENT COUNTY 2050

HEADWATER

A Strategic Framework for the Future of Kent County