

COMMUNITY ISSUES & CONCERNS

Overview

Ridgefield is updating the 2010 Plan of Conservation and Development for the community. A Plan of Conservation and Development (POCD) is a document which lays out the long-term vision for the physical, economic, and social development of a community and recommends strategies to realize that vision.

In order to learn about community issues and concerns and set the stage for the POCD update, the Planning and Zoning Commission and their consultant conducted several exercises:

- A discussion of issues by the Planning and Zoning Commission,
- A telephone survey of 100 randomly selected Ridgefield residents,
- An on-line survey of Ridgefield residents,
- A survey of Town department heads,
- Interviews with some Town department heads and residents, and
- Field trips around Ridgefield.

“There is no power for change greater than a community discovering what it cares about.”

Margaret Wheatley
Writer

Conservation Strategies



Development Strategies



Infrastructure Strategies



Survey Results

In order to learn about issues important to Ridgefield residents, two surveys were conducted in November - December 2018:

- A telephone survey of 100 randomly selected households in order to get a general sense of issues and concerns, and
- An on-line survey made available after the telephone survey was completed.

The telephone survey randomly selected telephone numbers (landlines and cellphones) registered to Ridgefield addresses. There were quotas for age distribution and gender in order to reflect the overall population distribution. Overall, 66 surveys were completed from landline connections and 34 surveys were completed from cellphone connections.

The availability of the on-line survey was publicized a variety of ways:

- Press releases to local media outlets (newspaper, radio, etc.)
- Posting on Town website
- Social media (Facebook / Twitter)
- Email distribution

Overall, 428 people participated in the survey over the course of November – December 2018. Half the participants heard about the survey on social media.

How Hear of On-Line Survey	
I heard about it on Facebook / Twitter	50%
Someone told me about it / email	22%
I heard about it / read about it on-line	12%
I read about it in a newspaper	10%
Other (found on website, heard at a meeting, etc.)	5%

Comparisons Of Survey Results

Questions were almost identical on both surveys so the results can be compared and contrasted. Overall, it appears the telephone survey results are more likely to reflect the feelings of longer term residents while the on-line survey results are more likely to reflect the feelings of shorter term residents.

Length of Residence	On-Line	Phone
More than 20 years	40%	55%
11 to 20 years	26%	28%
10 years or less	30%	17%
Other (work here, just like Ridgefield)	4%	0%

The telephone survey results contained more people from Ridgefield Center and Northern Ridgefield (people self-identified their area of residence). The on-line survey results contained more people from western Ridgefield.

Area of Residence	On-Line	Phone
Ridgefield Center-	29%	35%
Northern Ridgefield	20%	30%
Western Ridgefield	19%	8%
Southern Ridgefield	11%	15%
Eastern Ridgefield	10%	7%
Branchville	6%	5%
Other (not sure, don't live in Ridgefield)	4%	0%

Overall Quality Of Life

While most everyone felt the quality of life was good or very good, participants in the phone survey were more likely to rate overall quality of life as very good.

Overall Quality of Life	On-Line	Phone
Very good	68%	76%
Good	31%	22%
Poor / Very Poor / Other	1%	2%
Other (work here, just like Ridgefield)	4%	0%

People generally feel the overall quality of life in Ridgefield is good or very good ...

Ridgefield's Main Attraction

From a pre-determined list of options, people were asked to identify what was the main thing that attracted them to Ridgefield as a place to live. Overall, ambience and amenities are the main things that attracted people to Ridgefield.

Main Thing That Attracted People	On-Line	Phone
I moved here primarily because of community ambience (character, reputation, appearance)	42%	27%
I moved here primarily because of amenities / services (education system, recreational facilities, etc.)	27%	30%
I moved here primarily because it was close to work	4%	14%
I moved here primarily because of housing (type, value, affordability, etc.)	9%	8%
Other (grew up here, came with spouse / family, for family reasons, etc.)	18%	21%

People are generally attracted to Ridgefield by the ambience and amenities

Like Most About Ridgefield

When asked what they like most about Ridgefield today, the responses to the telephone survey were characterized as follows:

Again, people generally most like the ambience and amenities in Ridgefield

Theme		(listed in order of number of responses)
Character / Ambience	67%	Sense of community & togetherness, Downtown area / Main Street, Safe place to live / low crime, Friendly people / residents, Quiet / peaceful / relaxing, Small / home town feel, Family-friendly town, Pretty / attractive town, Clean, well-maintained, healthy town, Open spaces, Comfortable, Good place to raise kids / kids friendly, Privacy, Rural terrain, Country feel, Atmosphere, New England town, Culture, Neighborhood, Lack of businesses/shopping
Amenities / Services	14%	Good schools/high quality education, Recreational activities/events, The arts
Location	11%	Location/convenience, Family/friends are nearby, Close proximity to other states
Other	5%	Town management/well run town, Grocery/ Farmer stores, Holidays
DK / Nothing	3%	None/nothing, Don't know/Refused

From the on-line survey, a “word cloud” was generated which uses a larger font for words which appear more often.

The individual responses which generated the “word cloud” for Question #7 of the on-line survey are available separately.

education quiet natural beauty pretty many Arts Culture culture caring neighborhoods everything town center woods Ambience overall restaurants friendly cultural offerings safe stores restaurants beautiful quaint arts live people beauty open space cultural charm quaint town Small town feel history feel Education system town Strong community variety Sense community town feel downtown close schools Small character place Main Street walk amenities vibrant downtown Small town love family neighbors events Village safety Founders Hall etc Historic great housing rural Main St good Open space rural atmosphere services residents New England

344 responses

As a follow-up question, people were asked *what else* they like most about Ridgefield today. The telephone survey responses were grouped as follows:

Theme		(listed in order of number of responses)
Character / Ambience	46%	Sense of community & togetherness, Safe place to live/low crime, Overall happy/nice place to live, Friendly people/residents, Pretty/attractive town, Variety of shops/restaurants, Quiet/peaceful/relaxing, Character of town, Small/home town feel, Neighborhood, Clean, well-maintained, healthy town, Wildlife/environment, Downtown area/ Main Street, Good place to raise kids/kids friendly, Culture, Lack of businesses/shopping
Amenities / Services	24%	Good schools/high quality education, Town services/amenities, Good senior services, Recreational activities/events, Municipal facilities, The arts
DK / Nothing	23%	Don't know/Refused, None/nothing
Location	6%	Location/convenience, Family/friends are nearby
Other	1%	Looking to move

People again indicated they most like the ambience and amenities in Ridgefield ...

From the on-line survey, the following “word cloud” was generated:

Rec center local shops area lots New England Arts culture variety location
 beautiful Ridgefield beauty things shops good cultural
 Education system charm ambience activities much
 Small town feel Sense community Great love people
 Prospector downtown shopping restaurants
 open space ambience Main Street
 neighborhoods town food schools Safe
 community good schools arts parks restaurants
 events library theater character Friendliness
 school system quality school feel amenities small trails
 playhouse Main St small town Prospector Theater safety
 beautiful Main Street Founders Hall life Hiking trails etc center
 Downtown area

The individual responses which generated the “word cloud” for Question #8 of the on-line survey are available separately.

293 responses

Like Least About Ridgefield

When asked what they like least about Ridgefield today, the responses to the telephone survey were characterized as follows:

People generally least like taxes, traffic, and what they perceive as threats to character in Ridgefield

Theme		(listed in order of number of responses)
Taxes / Cost	27%	High taxes/ property taxes, High cost of living, Board of Ed/ school budget
Traffic / Transp.	19%	Traffic/congestion, Difficult to commute, Poor drivers, No sidewalks
Character	12%	Lack of diversity, Rude, unfriendly people/ Bad attitudes, Noise, Rural community, Crime, Too conservative
Growth	10%	Getting too big/population growth, Too many new developments, Zoning regulations
Other	16%	Poor management/politicians, Poor location/not convenient, Storms/trees falling, Difficulties in winter season, Lack of public sewer system, Lack of job opportunities, High gas prices, Lack variety of restaurants, Other
DK / Nothing	16%	Don't know/Refused, None/nothing

From the on-line survey, the following “word cloud” was generated:

The individual responses which generated the “word cloud” for Question #9 of the on-line survey are available separately.

High Allowing sidewalks much development housing built changes crowded
 Lack public transportation much building education going character much
 number many High density housing Property taxes issues
 condos Main Main Street especially increasing ruining
 roads make Lack problems development decisions
 town construction Traffic Lack diversity taxes area
 building Route people feel housing developing
 schools amount parking low income housing apartments
 condos going Overdevelopment politics
 traffic congestion High cost living large Ridgefield downtown
 center High taxes side expensive many condos affordable housing
 enough small way

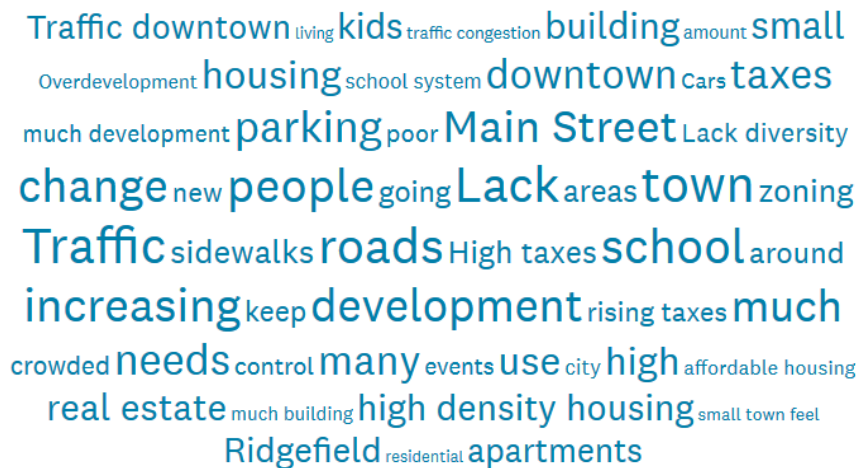
336 responses

As a follow-up question, people were asked *what else* they like least about Ridgefield today. The telephone survey responses were grouped as follows:

Theme	(listed in order of number of responses)
DK / Nothing 58%	Don't know/Refused, None/nothing
Traffic / Transp. 13%	Traffic/congestion, No transportation, Poor road conditions, Difficult to commute, Need traffic lights, No train station
Taxes / Cost 11%	High cost of living, High taxes/ property taxes, Board of Ed/ school budget, No services for the taxes
Growth 5%	Too many new developments, Getting too big/population growth, Zoning regulations
Character 4%	Rude, unfriendly people/ Bad attitudes, Lack of diversity, Too conservative, Too many trees
Other 9%	Weather, Poor location/not convenient, Difficulties in winter season, Lack variety of shops/ restaurants, Lack of activities/things to do, Poor Town Services, Too many people leaving, Other

While most people did not have a second concern to add, traffic and taxes were sometimes mentioned

From the on-line survey, the following “word cloud” was generated:



260 responses

The individual responses which generated the “word cloud” for Question #10 of the on-line survey are available separately.

Most Important POCD Topic / Most Important Issue

Participants in the on-line survey were asked what three topics or issues they felt should be given the most emphasis in the Plan. Responses indicated the following:

From a pre-set list of options in the on-line survey, the top three issues important to residents include:

- ***Open space***
- ***Downtown***
- ***Natural resources***

Answer Choices	First	Second	Third	TOTAL
Preserving Open Space	57	50	47	154
Invigorating / Enhancing Downtown	50	46	47	143
Protecting Natural Resources	46	51	40	137
Promoting Business/Econ. Dev.	46	38	31	115
Addressing Vehicular Transportation	39	28	29	96
Enhancing Community Character	31	25	35	91
Sustainability / Resiliency	22	20	30	72
Improving Comm. Facilities / Services	15	26	17	58
Address Residential Dev. / Housing	19	21	17	57
Addressing Utility Services	9	12	18	39

<p>CONSERVATION THEME - Protecting Things Important To Residents (454)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Preserving Open Space (154) ○ Protecting Natural Resources (137) ○ Enhancing Community Character (91) ○ Sustainability / Resiliency (72)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DEVELOPMENT THEME – Guiding Growth And Change (314) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Invigorating / Enhancing Down-town (143) ○ Promoting Business/Economic Development (115) ○ Addressing Residential Development / Housing Needs (57)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • INFRASTRUCTURE THEME – Providing Services / Facilities (193) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Addressing Vehicular Transportation (96) ○ Improving Community Facilities / Services (58) ○ Addressing Utility Services (39)

Participants in the telephone survey were asked what they felt was the most important issue facing Ridgefield today. Responses were grouped as follows:

Theme		(listed in order of number of responses)
Development	30%	Over development, More affordable housing, Economic growth, More employment opportunities for locals, Ice rink, Maintain Downtown area/Main Street, Land use/conservation, Managing/controlling development, Declining population, Subsidized housing, Business turnover
Taxes / Cost	25%	Lowering taxes/property taxes, High cost of living, Budget, School budget, Property values
DK / Nothing	15%	Don't know/Refused, None/nothing
Infrastructure	13%	Sewer system, Improve road conditions, Improving local infrastructure, Traffic/congestion, No access to municipal water system, Maintain / update school facilities, Improve school system,
Character	6%	Over crowded, Do not make changes to Main Street, Lack of diversity, Fear of being a sanctuary city
Other	11%	Management/leadership, General inclusion/ keep improving town, Other, Parking, Planning and Zoning, Create strategic plans

With no pre-set list of options in the telephone survey, development issues and fiscal issues were considered the most important ...

When asked what was the next most important issue facing Ridgefield today, 42 percent did not have anything to add ...

Theme		(listed in order of number of responses)
DK / Nothing	42%	Don't know/Refused, None/nothing
Taxes / Cost	18%	Lowering taxes/property taxes, School budget, Budget, High cost of living, Town spending, Fair taxes, Building tax base
Infrastructure	15%	Traffic/congestion, Improve school system, Improve road conditions, Transportation
Development	8%	Declining population, More affordable housing, Sewer system, Over development, Poor Main Street shopping
Character	7%	Preserving open space, Lack of diversity, Over crowded, Culture
Other	9%	Parking, Other, Business turnover, Planning and Zoning, General inclusion/ keep improving town, Viability of small businesses, Combine Police and Fire in one building, Keep up the good work/all is good

Greatest Challenge Or Need

When asked what they felt was the greatest challenge or need facing Ridgefield today, the responses to the telephone survey were characterized as follows:

People feel that fiscal issues and threats to character were the greatest challenges facing the Town

Theme		(listed in order of number of responses)
Taxes / Cost	25%	Taxes/Property taxes, High cost of living, Building tax base, Property values, Costs of schools, Reduce spending, Strain on resources, Lack of services, Budget
Character	22%	Getting too big/population growth, Too many new developments, Maintain small town feel, Managing/controlling development, Diversity, Preservation of open spaces, Sense of community & togetherness, Maintain town character
Development	14%	Affordable housing, Economic growth, More employment opportunities for locals, Viability of local businesses, More senior services/senior housing, Expansion on Rt 7, Attract/retain businesses,
DK / Nothing	13%	Don't know/Refused, None/nothing
Schools	9%	Lack of funding for school, School system, Maintain/update school facilities, Overcrowded schools, School closing, Declining school enrollment,
Infrastructure	8%	Traffic, Improving local infrastructure, Train station, Parking, Improve road conditions, Water/sewer access to residents,
Other	9%	Town planning/vision for future, Retaining current residents, Declining population/leaving town, Federal/State government imposing will on town, Illicit drug addiction

From the on-line survey, the following “word cloud” was generated for the question about the greatest challenge or need facing Ridgefield today:

quality low income housing values moving change small town character residential
pressures 8-30g Board Addressing Losing enough young people
affordable Rising Protecting resources open space ruining
Infrastructure local property taxes shops high
neighborhoods overdevelopment stop building live
downtown remain budget make growth
business development population lack business Allowing
increase economic development development
balance need Keeping Ridgefield town people moving
taxes Attracting Keeping High taxes traffic unique
Maintaining maintaining small town housing
property values schools high density housing
Preserving crowding will tax base Ridgefield caused
affordable housing needs addressed people concern
charm Reducing small town feel Aging population
Controlling Controlling growth community levels state area
seniors Keeping character town low traffic congestion education
character town issue parking costs CT much school system Overcrowding
business economic feel Managing roads town character Controlling development
Sustaining

The individual responses which generated the “word cloud” for Question #12 of the on-line survey are available separately.

327 responses

If Could Make One Thing Happen

When asked about the one thing they wished they could make happen, the responses to the telephone survey were characterized as follows:

There was a diversity of opinions in the telephone survey about what the community would like to see happen in the future ...

Theme		(listed in order of number of responses)
Character	18%	Controlling development/proper zoning, More diverse, Preserving open spaces, Sense of community/community involvement, Noise ordinance, More open minded people, Control population
Infrastructure-Related	17%	Improve road conditions/repair roads, Less traffic, Provide train station/train to NYC, More transportation options, Install traffic lights, Fire hydrants on streets, Improve local infrastructure, Bike paths, Road expansion
Development-Related	16%	Affordable housing, More retail shops, Upgrade Downtown, No ice rink, More employment opportunities for locals, Viability of local businesses, Restaurant/leisure time locations, Better hotel selection,
DK / Nothing	17%	Don't know/Refused, None/nothing
Other	13%	Other, Create long term plans, Less republicans, Freedom of ownership to homeowners, Frequent tree trimming/removal, Build turf field, Re introduce tree lighting, Elected offices in 2 to 3 year terms, Keep up the good work/all is good,
Taxes / Cost	12%	Lower taxes/property taxes, Affordable cost of living, Balanced budget, Fair taxes, Excused from school tax, Increase real estate value
Schools	7%	Improve school system/education, Maintain school facilities, Increase school budget

From the on-line survey, the following “word cloud” was generated for the question about the one thing they wish they could make happen:

don t Take low income housing allow destination Main leaving
Reduce taxes S developers retail building high density zoning Lower taxes
property taxes biking paths high density housing
neighborhoods Keep Street will traffic lights residential Bring business
put store area trucks new great parking low housing
center Improve encourage downtown see Ridgefield
children school tax base traffic create need
downtown area make center town town many Stop
come development issues Main Street route
people condo Reduce buses building
STOP 8-30g developments Increase thing business charm
shopping well Limit around town better Improve traffic Add
STOP 8-30g developments Increase thing business charm
shopping well Limit around town better Improve traffic Add
construction taxes bicycling safe open space roads back sidewalks
Branchville area 8-30g cut space Bring walking Preserve transportation
spending including especially board help

The individual responses which generated the “word cloud” for Question #13 of the on-line survey are available separately.

306 responses

Demographics

There are some subtle differences with regard to the age, gender, and household compositions of the survey participants. Overall, the surveys seemed reasonably representative of the community.

Age Group	On-Line	Phone	Town-wide Estimate
Age 18 to 34	8%	11%	13%
Age 35 to 54	46%	39%	44%
Age 55 to 74	40%	39%	33%
Age 75 or over	5%	10%	10%

Gender	On-Line	Phone	Town-wide Estimate
Male	35%	49%	49%
Female	62%	51%	51%
Prefer not to answer	3%	-	-

Children Living At Home	On-Line	Phone	Town-wide Estimate
None	53%	64%	58%
1-2 children	18%	15%	17%
1-2 children	22%	11%	18%
3 or more	7%	8%	7%
Prefer not to answer	-	2%	-

Possible Key Issues

From research, investigations, surveys and interviews, the following topics were identified as possible key issues for consideration as part of updating the Plan of Conservation and Development.

Much of the discussion in this section is organized around the three main thematic elements of the 2010 Plan of Conservation and Development:

- What Ridgefield may want to protect (conservation-related strategies),
- How Ridgefield may want to guide future growth and change (development-related strategies),
- What Ridgefield may want or need to support its overall vision (infrastructure-related strategies).

In addition, a new theme – “Sustainability” is recommended for consideration.



Conservation Theme

1. Natural Resources

- a. Generally sense is that good controls are in place to protect natural resources although increasing development pressures may be adversely affecting steep slope areas
- b. Balancing environmental protection with property rights will be a continuing issue in Ridgefield
- c. Ridgefield is establishing a separate wetlands commission

2. Open Space

- a. Ridgefield has about 25% of the community preserved as open space (town goal is 30%)
- b. Intent is to continue acquiring open space as opportunities arise
- c. In next 10 years, are hoping to complete Norwalk River Valley Trail in Ridgefield (and other trails where feasible)
- d. It would be great to expose people to the Great Swamp area as a community asset
- e. Maintenance of open space areas is a continuing effort

3. Community Character

- a. Generally sense is that good controls are in place to protect community character
- b. Ridgefield's "brand" is the village appeal, strength of the arts offerings, and its perception as a shopping/foodie destination
- c. Design review process is working effectively
- d. Historic resources are being protected
- e. Sign regulations could / should be improved

4. Sustainability / Resiliency

- a. Sustainability could/ should be a topic or theme in this POCD
- b. Ridgefield has already achieved "Bronze" certification from SustainableCT and is working on higher certification
- c. POCD should advocate for programs/measures to help people promote sustainability and support a healthy environment:
 - conserve energy
 - reduce water consumption
 - reduce costs of living
- d. Ridgefield should be on the forefront of promoting green/sustainable practices for both municipal and residential use

Development Theme

1. Downtown

- a. Continue to maintain and enhance Main Street and Downtown - it is a great asset and deserves pro-active management
- b. May benefit from one group to oversee / coordinate downtown activities (and coordinate with Playhouse to keep downtown open later, etc.)
- c. Traffic issues are in the process of being addressed
- d. Revisit the zoning / parking regulations so good controls are in place
- e. Consider a comprehensive parking study to address parking issues (employee parking and customer/resident parking)
- f. Encourage / require retail on first floors with office / housing above
- g. Encourage a "boutique" hotel

2. Branchville

- a. Promote transit oriented planning to develop Branchville
- b. Development visions are challenged by lack of utilities

3. Business / Economic Development

- a. Ridgefield may no longer have potential for 15-20% business tax base due to rezoning of land
- b. Promote economic development / diversification
- c. May need to invest money to maximize return (staff, improvements, marketing, etc.)
- d. Economic development should not detract from character
- e. Economic development may include housing for older residents (either in existing homes or new construction) and helping seniors age in place. May be seen as an economic development strategy
- f. Consider the arts as an economic driver of the future
- g. Should revisit home-based business provisions

4. Residential Development

- a. Discourage commercial activities in residential zones
- b. May be time to provide a framework in the zoning regulations for solar panels, wind generators, etc.

5. Housing Needs

- a. Continue to address the need for housing for a growing older population and for housing which is more affordable for local workers
- b. Consider adopting a model "housing affordability plan"
- c. Figure a way to retain affordable units as they come off appeals list.
- d. Consider adopting regulations to allow for "workforce housing at 80-125% of area median income"
- e. Seek opportunities to expand the number of Housing Authority units to meet anticipated demand / need

Infrastructure Theme

1. Community Facilities / Services

- a. Some facilities experiencing space constraints (police / fire / EMS / public works)
- b. School enrollments are not increasing but should identify options ways to address if enrollments increase in the future
- c. Some issues related to maintenance of Town / BOE buildings and sites and funding allocations
- d. Synthetic surfaces with lights may be needed to address future recreation field needs
- e. Demand at senior center will grow in the future

2. Vehicular Transportation

- a. Continue to work with CTDOT and WestCOG to manage traffic on local roads
- b. Continue to seek ways to reduce traffic congestion / improve traffic flow
- c. Pavement management / drainage issues will likely become more significant in the future
- d. Traffic issues downtown are being addressed

3. Pedestrian / Bicycle / Transit

- a. Ridgefield might consider a “complete streets” philosophy / policy
- b. Ridgefield might benefit from an overall sidewalk / bicycle vision plan
- c. As the population ages, Ridgefield should investigate ways to improve transit service, especially for people with disabilities
- d. Need to do more for ADA accessibility on streets, sites, and in buildings (public and private)

4. Utility Services

- a. Ridgefield is improving sewage treatment plant, addressing inflow / infiltration, and will seek to expand sewer area in the future
- b. Water supply is expected to be adequate for community needs
- c. Stormwater drainage issues are important, new regulations are being sought, but would be nice to have an overall drainage master plan
- d. Broadband capacity is becoming an important quality of life issue and Ridgefield could lead the way on this (exceptional speed at a higher cost and slower speed available at a lower cost or free)
- e. Expanded wi-fi in the downtown area would be key

Implementation

1. POCD Maintenance / Implementation

- a. How can we better maintain / manage the POCD over 10 years?
- b. How can Ridgefield best configure for implementation?
- c. How can we set aside the resources we will need for implementation?

2. Fiscal Stress

- a. Fewer staff positions / budget decreases / retirement programs may increase turnover and have impacts for the community in the future
- b. As the state economy / budget changes, how will Ridgefield and other communities deal with shifting finances?

3. Attitude

- a. How can Ridgefield change the perception among residents from limiting / restricting growth towards an attitude of applying smart growth principles and growing the town wisely?

