City of Woodstock

Museum Square Benches

Consultation Summary

Background

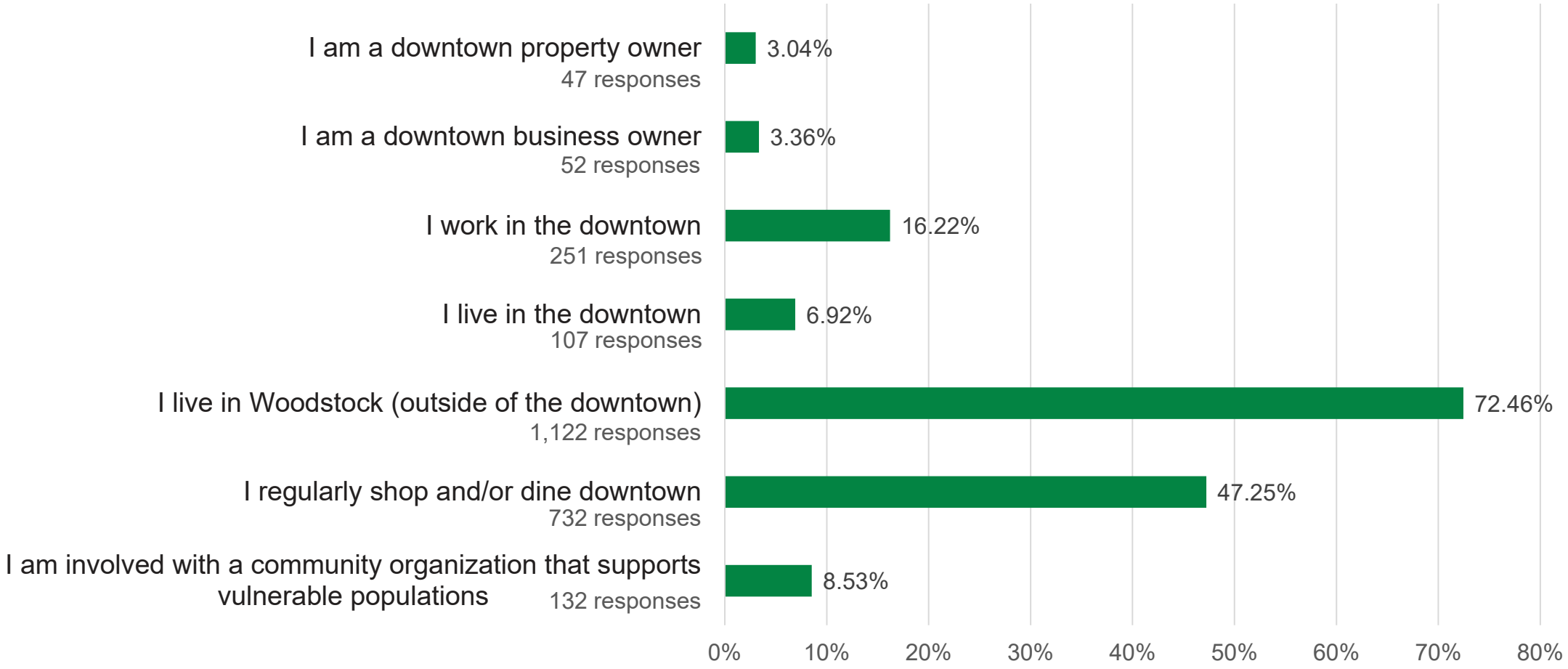
- Council directed staff to undertake a stakeholder engagement process and return to the Feb. 16 meeting where they will consider a motion to reinstate the benches at Museum Square and throughout the downtown
- Used International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) best practices to gather input from a broad range of stakeholders
- An online survey to collect input from the community was open to the public from Jan. 10 – Jan. 31
- Hard copy surveys were made available upon request and several community agencies helped members of the community who were interested, but either didn’t have computer access or are not comfortable with technology, complete the survey

Background (con’t)

- The survey was promoted through the city’s online channels, in What’s on Woodstock, posters throughout the downtown, direct emails to stakeholders and local media
- A total of 1,557 survey responses were received. Additionally, letters were received from 10 stakeholder groups

Q1. What is your interest in this project?

Answered by: 1,548 Skipped by: 9



City of Woodstock

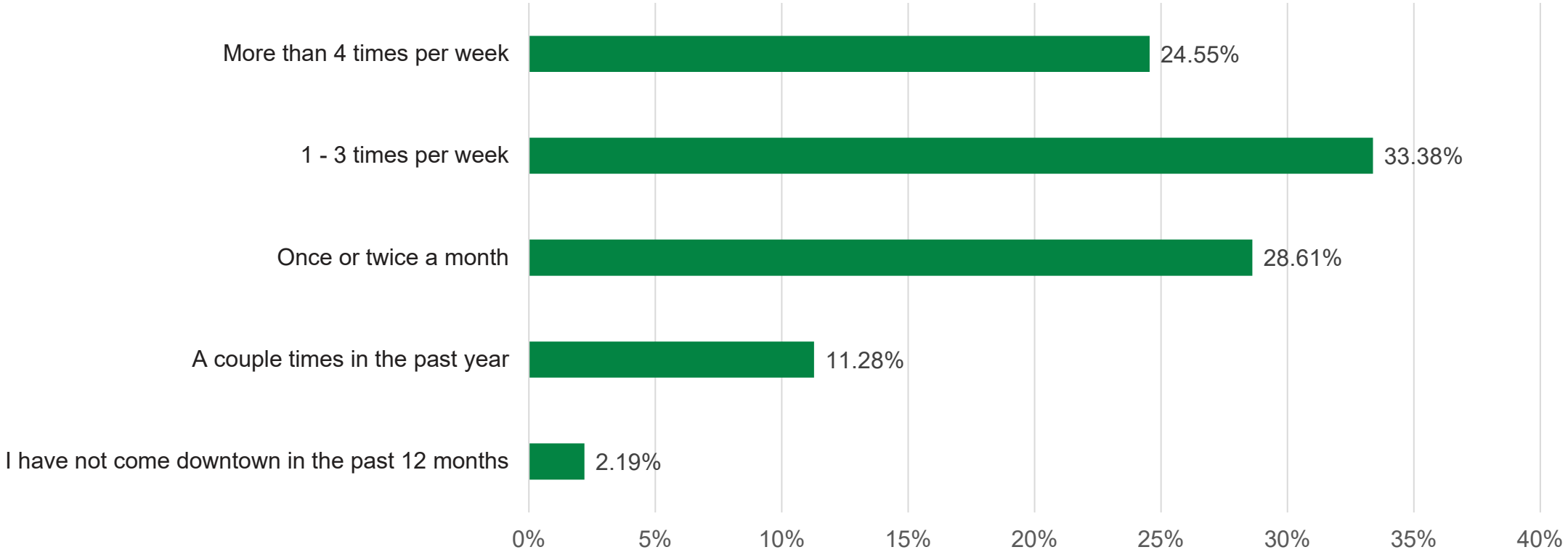
Identified community organizations

Some of the community organizations that support vulnerable populations represented in the survey results include:

- Operation Sharing
- Thames Valley District School Board
- Women's Employment Resource Centre
- Oxford County Community Health Centre
- Wellkin
- Community Free Table
- Woodstock Public Library
- Children's Aid Society
- United Way Oxford
- Canadian Mental Health Association
- Ingamo Homes
- Big Brothers Big Sisters of Oxford County
- Domestic Abuse Services Oxford
- Social Planning Council of Oxford County
- Oxford Coalition for Social Justice
- Southwest Public Health

Q2. In the past 12 months, how often have you come to downtown Woodstock?

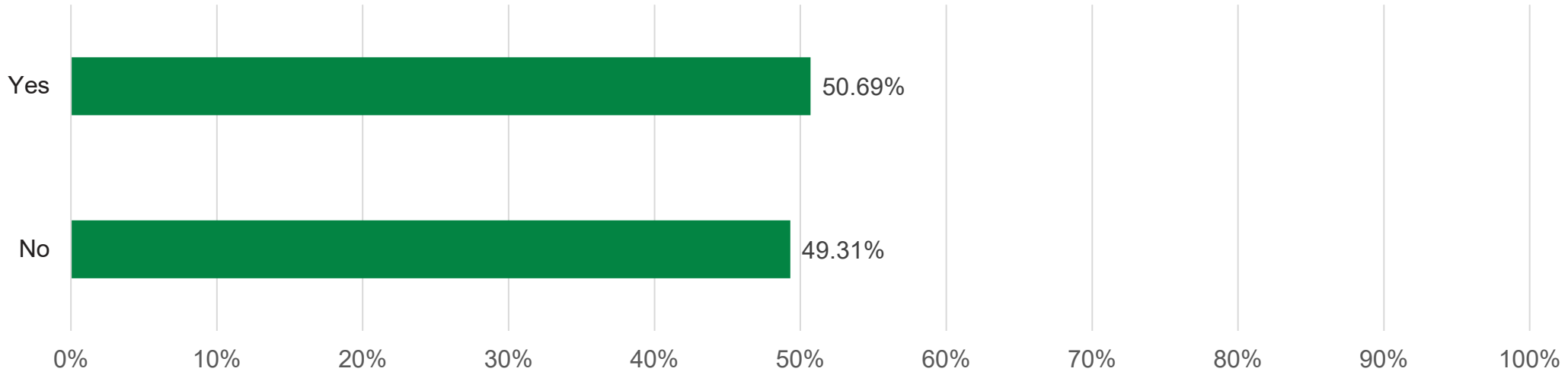
Answered by: 1,551 Skipped by: 4



City of Woodstock

Q3. Have you, or an organization you're directly involved with, been impacted by negative or undesirable behaviour in downtown Woodstock?

Answered by: 1,530 Skipped by: 25



City of Woodstock

Q4. If you have been impacted by negative or undesirable behaviours, please tell us about your experiences

Answered by: 1,530 Skipped by: 25

Themes:

- Negative interactions (being asked for money, yelled at, followed, touched)
- Observable drug use or drug paraphernalia
- Observable garbage, litter, human/dog waste
- Feeling afraid or uncomfortable

Other comments expressed:

- Empathy for vulnerable populations
- Inability to come downtown due to lack of seating

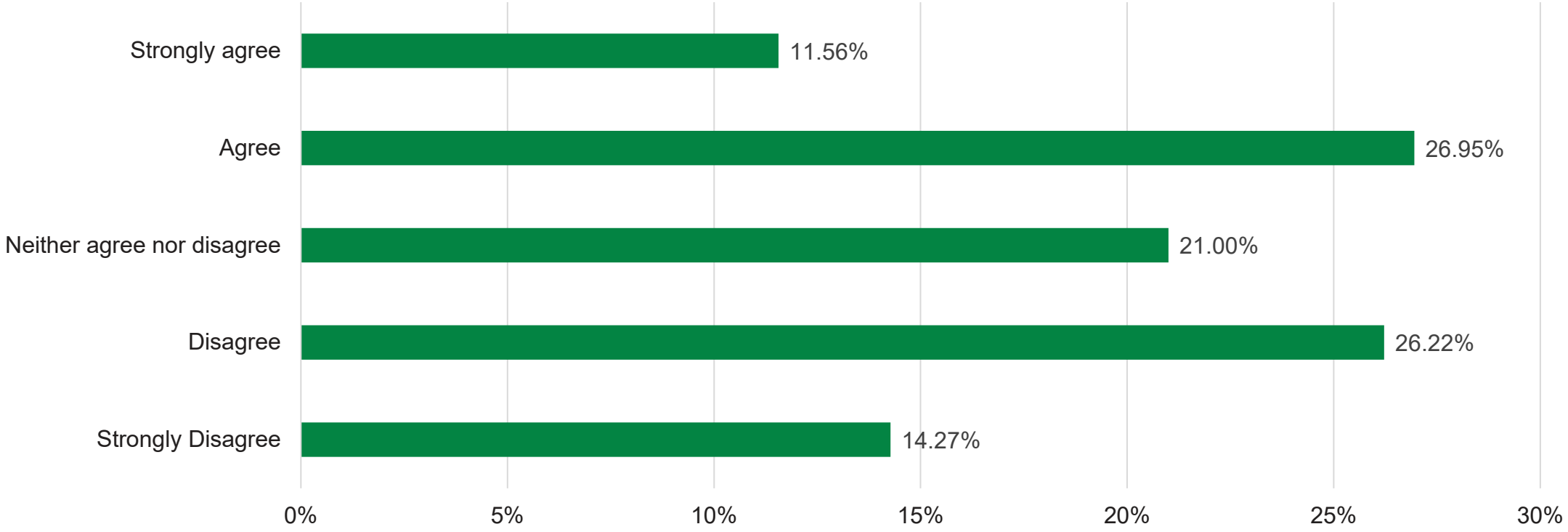
Questions 5 - 8

Respondents were asked how much they agree or disagree with the following statements

City of Woodstock

Q5. I feel safe coming downtown

Answered by: 1,514 Skipped by: 42



City of Woodstock

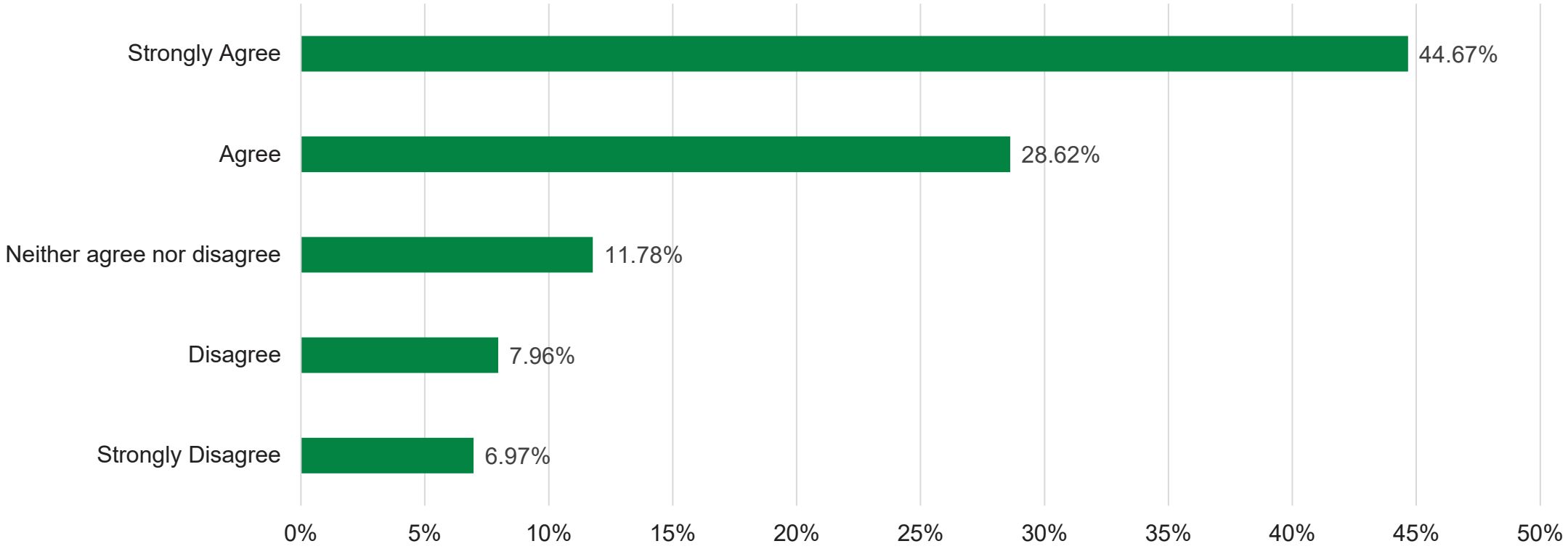
Comments submitted with Q5

Q5. I feel safe coming downtown

- There were 392 comments
- Some people noted that while they feel safe during the day, they do not feel safe coming downtown at night. Others noted that gender may influence feelings of safety
- There were comments saying downtown feels safer since the benches were removed, while others said they feel less safe since they were removed
- A few commented that the infrastructure doesn’t feel safe or inviting
- Several comments received touched on how more patrols would make people feel safer. It was also noted that the police presence makes some people less comfortable

Q6. Benches and other seating options make it easier and safer for seniors, people with mobility issues and families to come downtown

Answered by: 1,520 Skipped by: 36



City of Woodstock

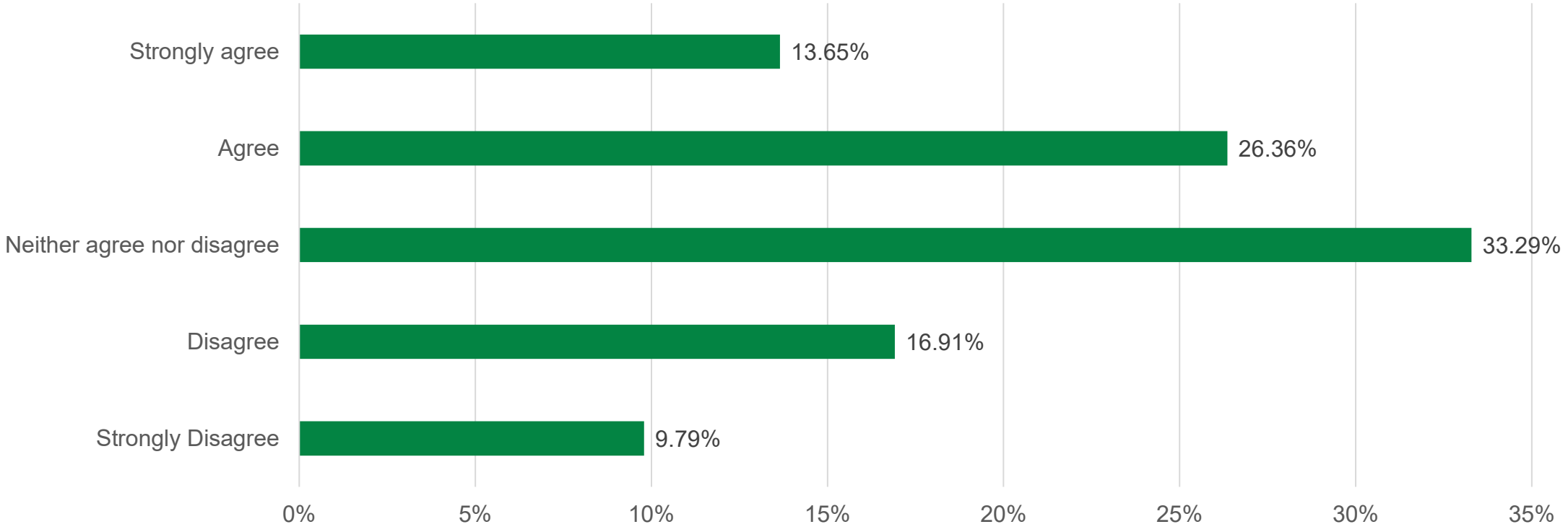
Comments submitted with Q6

Q6. Benches and other seating options make it easier and safer for seniors, people with mobility issues and families to come downtown

- There were 384 comments
- Two prevalent themes from the comments:
  - Support for, examples of and reasons for why they agree with the statement that benches and other seating options make it easier and safer
  - That while they may agree with the statement, they believe people won't use them or don't feel safe using them when they are being used by people experiencing homelessness or using drugs
- There were also comments expressing empathy for people experiencing homelessness - that benches are for everyone, not just those we deem "appropriate"

Q7. The increase patrols and additional actions to help support vulnerable populations, including those experiencing homelessness and addiction, has had a positive impact on my perception of downtown Woodstock.

Answered by: 1,502 Skipped by: 54



City of Woodstock

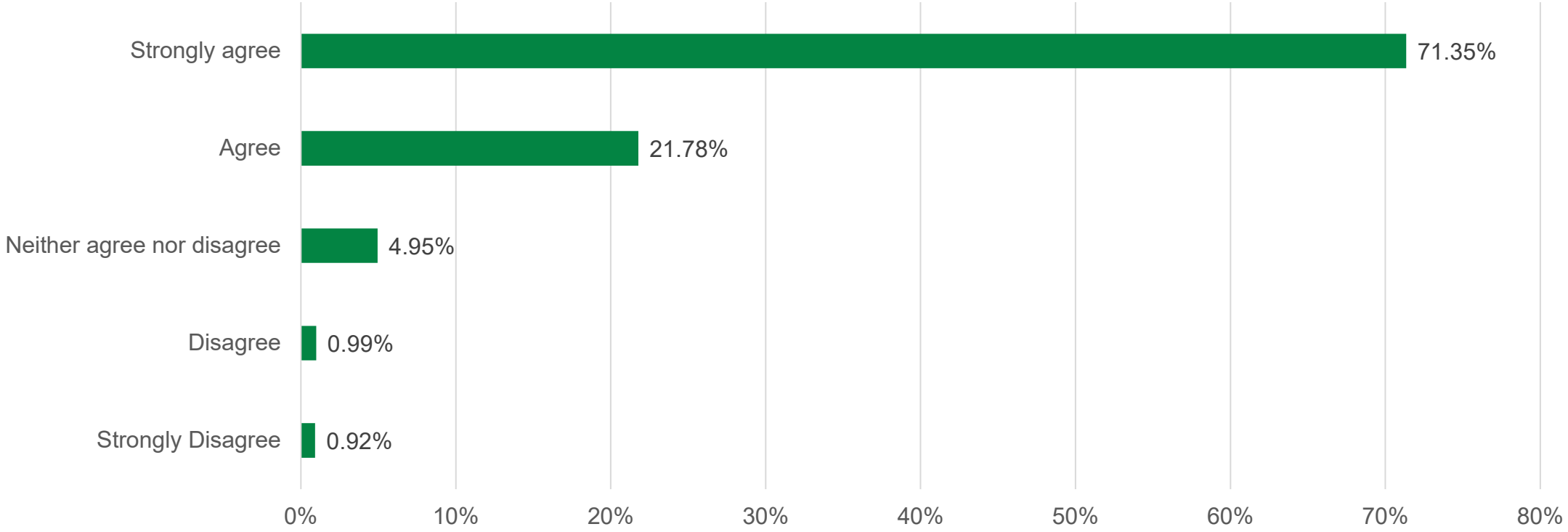
Comments submitted with Q7

Q7. The increase patrols and additional actions to help support vulnerable populations, including those experiencing homelessness and addiction, has had a positive impact on my perception of downtown Woodstock.

- There were 407 comments
- Many commented that they had not noticed increased patrols or any improvement as a result of them
- There were also a lot of comments supporting the need for more outreach or social services instead of patrols/policing
- Some suggested that more patrols were still needed, while others have indicated that there has been a positive change
- Others noted that people experiencing homelessness and addiction are now spread throughout the city

Q8. I believe there needs to be more effort put towards identifying and implementing solutions to address homelessness, addiction and abuse.

Answered by: 1,515 Skipped by: 41



City of Woodstock

Comments submitted with Q8

Q8. I believe there needs to be more effort put towards identifying and implementing solutions to address homelessness, addiction and abuse.

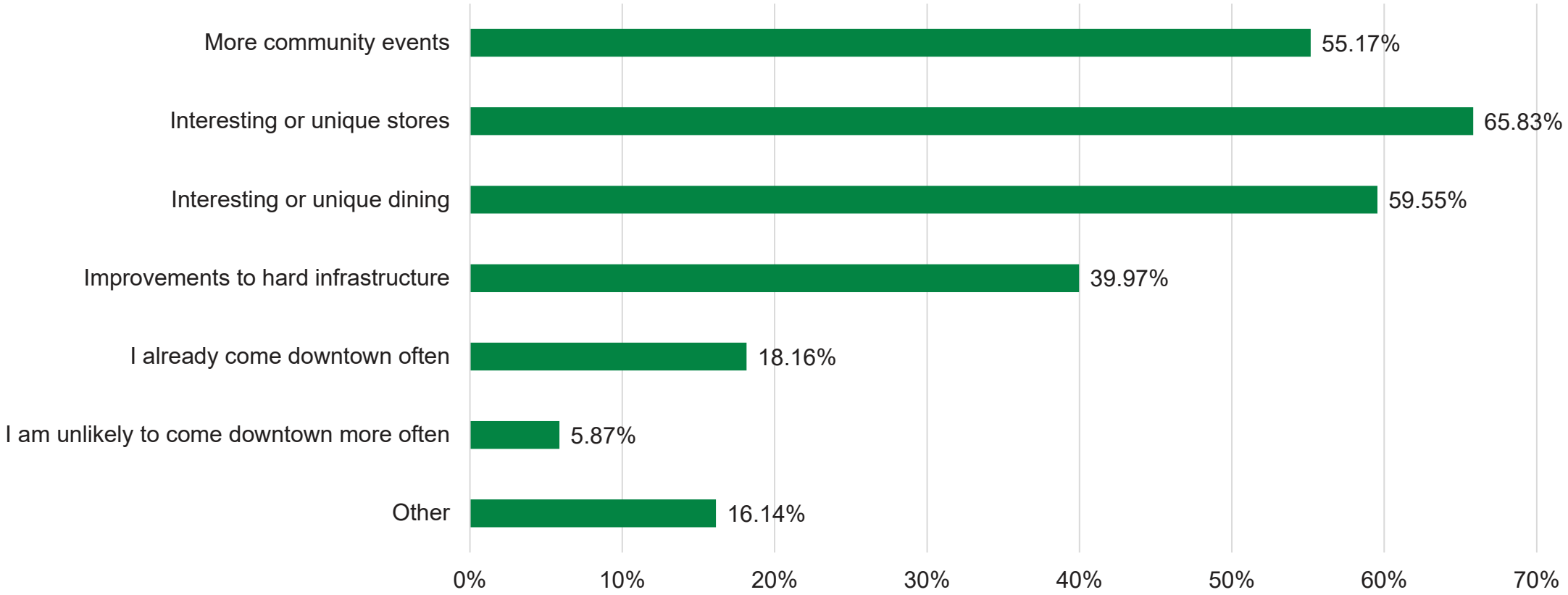
- There were 322 comments
- Identifying the need for increased mental health and addiction/substance abuse support
- Many commented on the need for shelter/affordable housing solutions – “housing first”
- Calling for a coordinated, collaborative solution and that community groups and all levels of government should work together
  - Several noted that this isn’t a lower tier responsibility
- There were also comments around people needing to want help and that there needs to be more enforcement (referenced “catch and release” approach)

Q9. What actions would make it easier or more enjoyable for you to come downtown Woodstock?

- Generally, people are looking for a downtown that feels cleaner and safer
- Some of the comments for achieving that are increased patrols and fewer empty or untidy storefronts
- There were suggestions for additional facilities like public washrooms, and infrastructure improvements like additional bike racks, lighting and waste containers
- People would also like to see the methadone clinic moved out of the downtown, or at least off Dundas Street
- Suggestions also included more events, activities and amenities

Q10. What would encourage you to come downtown more often?

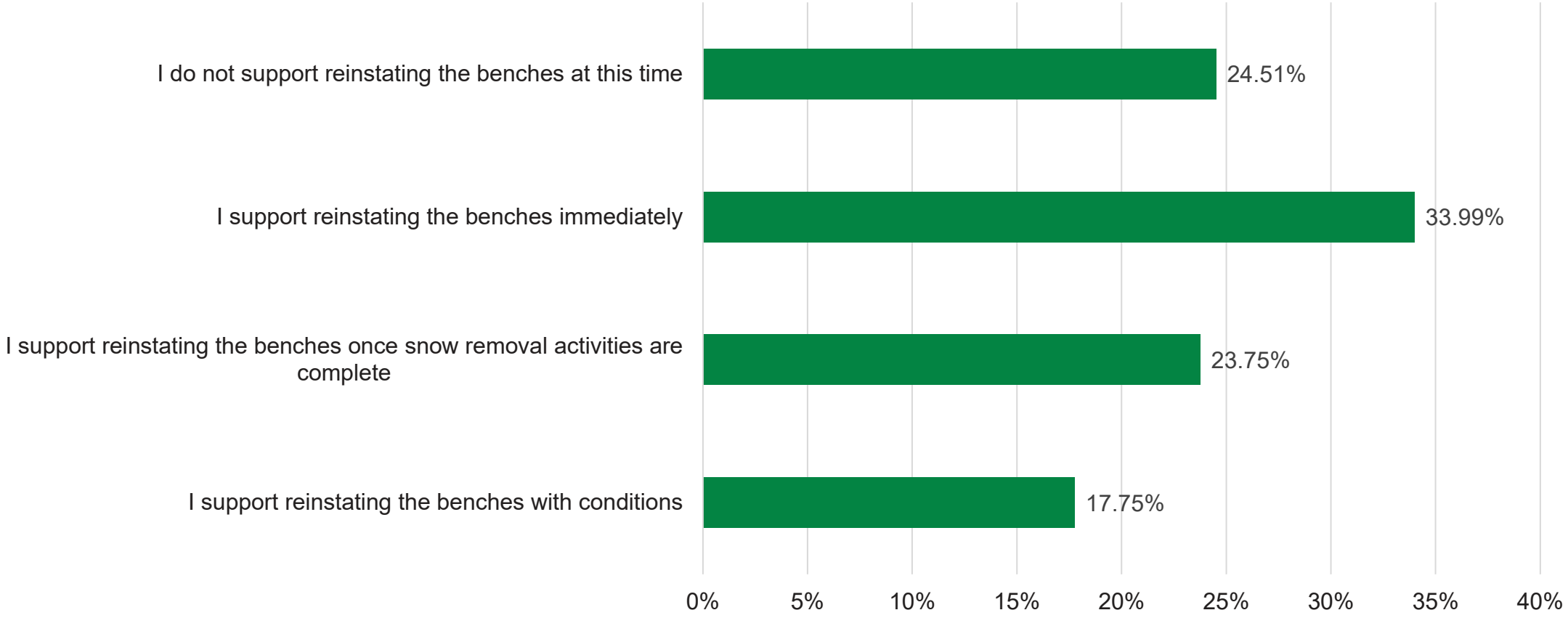
Answered by: 1,481 Skipped by: 76



City of Woodstock

Q11. Do you support reinstating the benches

Answered by: 1,465 Skipped by: 92



City of Woodstock

Q12. If you support reinstating the benches with conditions, what conditions need to be met or what additional actions would have to be taken for you to support reinstating them?

Answered by: 409 Skipped by: 1,148

- Increased security patrols
- Physical changes (style, location and number of benches, security cameras, lighting)
- Lots of comments on style of benches with many suggesting benches that make it difficult to lie down, and others advocating against “anti-homelessness” features
- Increased supports for people experiencing homelessness (outreach, safe places to go, information and resources)

Q13. Is there anything else you'd like to share with Woodstock City Council about this topic?

Answered by: 565 Skipped by: 992

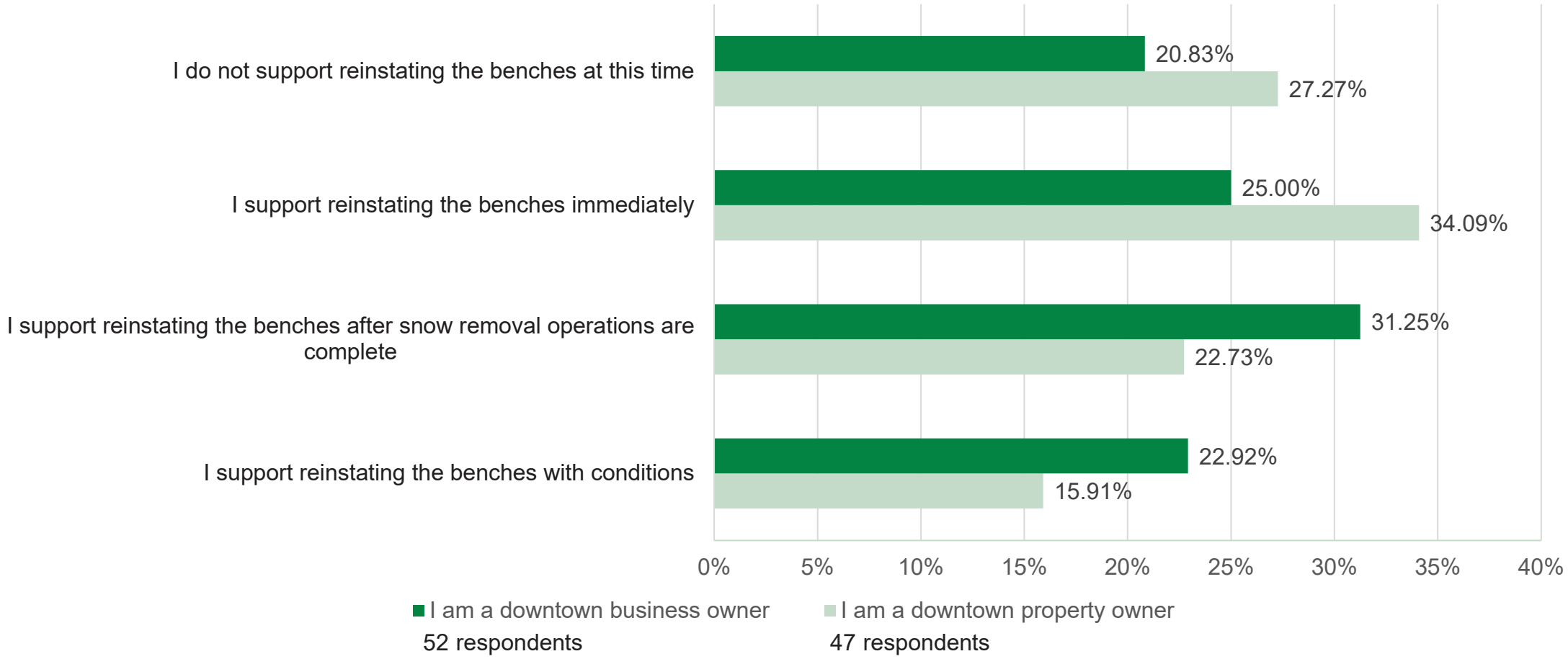
- Overall, it appears people believe that the benches are not the problem and there is a desire to see action towards addressing the underlying social issues
- People reiterated concerns about feelings of safety and the perception that downtown is not safe
- A number of respondents offered ideas on what the City might do to address concerns, including looking to other city's facing similar challenges, additional actions / strategies to undertake etc.
- A theme that was consistently expressed throughout all the question responses was that those experiencing homelessness are mis-using services and amenities and preventing the broader community (and taxpayers) from using them
- There were also a number of responses throughout that expressed empathy for people experiencing homelessness and that they have a right to be treated with dignity and respect
- People also expressed appreciation for the opportunity to provide input as well as encouragement and support for the direction the city is heading

Support for reinstatement of benches by interest category

Response to Q13 of the survey filtered by response to Q1

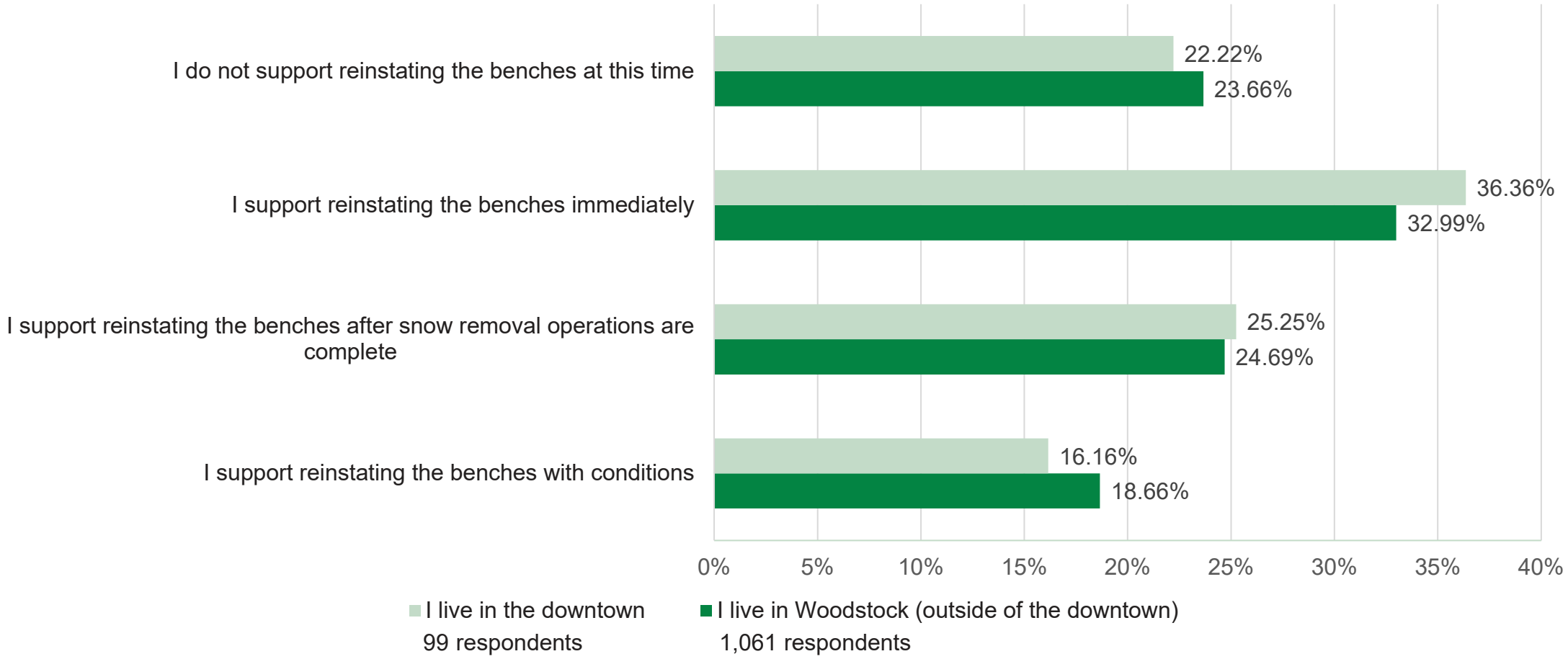
City of Woodstock

Support for bench reinstatement by downtown business or property owners



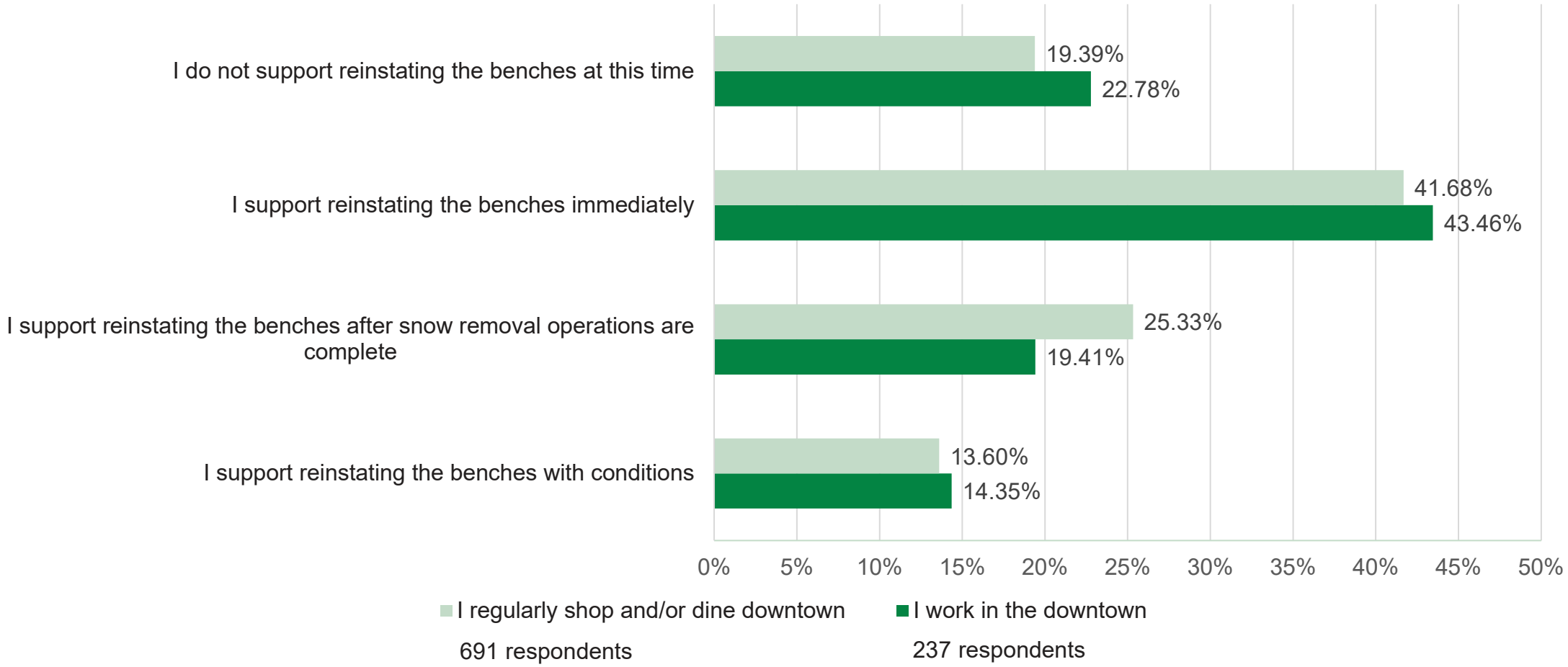
City of Woodstock

Support for bench reinstatement by where people live



City of Woodstock

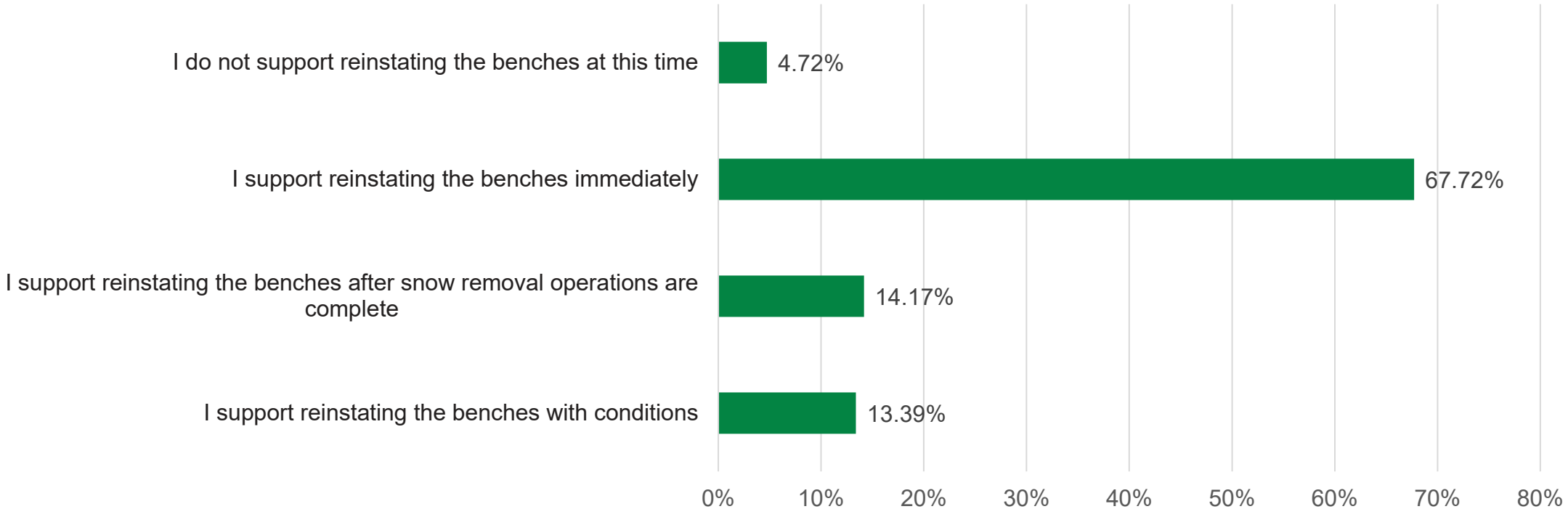
Support for bench reinstatement by why they come downtown



City of Woodstock

Support for bench reinstatement by respondents involved with organizations that support vulnerable populations

Answered by: 132 Skipped by:5



City of Woodstock

Questions?