



CHAPTER TWO: CURRENT CONDITIONS

Local Context | Current Conditions | Related Plans & Initiatives | Public Input

LOCAL CONTEXT

The City of Marion is located in the mountains of Western North Carolina in McDowell County. On the edge of the Blue Ridge Mountains, Marion is a charming small town “Where Main Street Meets the Mountains.” The City was named in honor of Brigadier General Francis Marion, an American Revolutionary War Hero.

Marion serves as a gateway from Interstate 40 to many nearby attractions and recreation activities in the Blue Ridge Mountains. There are seven parks in Marion operated by the city, the main one being downtown beside the Community Building. In 2010, the City opened the Joseph McDowell Greenway. Named in honor of the county’s namesake, Joseph McDowell, the greenway follows the flow of the Catawba River. Benches, picnic tables, fishing piers, and fitness stations are scattered throughout the Historic Joseph McDowell House, with access from Highway 70 between the intersections of Highway 221/226 By-Pass and Roby Conley Road.

Historic homes such as the Carson House and the Joseph McDowell House have kept the history of Marion alive for decades. In downtown Marion, the beautifully restored Marion Depot, the oldest surviving depot on the Western Rail Line, hosts numerous community events each month. Lake James provides fishing, camping, and recreation for McDowell and Burke Counties and is just minutes from Marion. Lake Tahoe,

Linville Caverns, Linville Falls, and the Blue Ridge Parkway are also very close to town, and exhibit the diverse scenery of Western North Carolina. There are also several golf courses outside of town, as well as two waterparks and numerous campgrounds.

While Marion continues to grow and evolve economically, culturally, and environmentally, the City is committed to preserving Marion’s historically significant architecture, cultural and natural resources, and most of all its sense of place .

Marion is bound by the Catawba River to the north and US Interstate 40 to the south. The City is situated between the crossroads of three other major transportation corridors including US Highway 70, US Highway 221 and US Highway 226. As of the 2013 U.S. Census estimate, the population of Marion is 7,997.

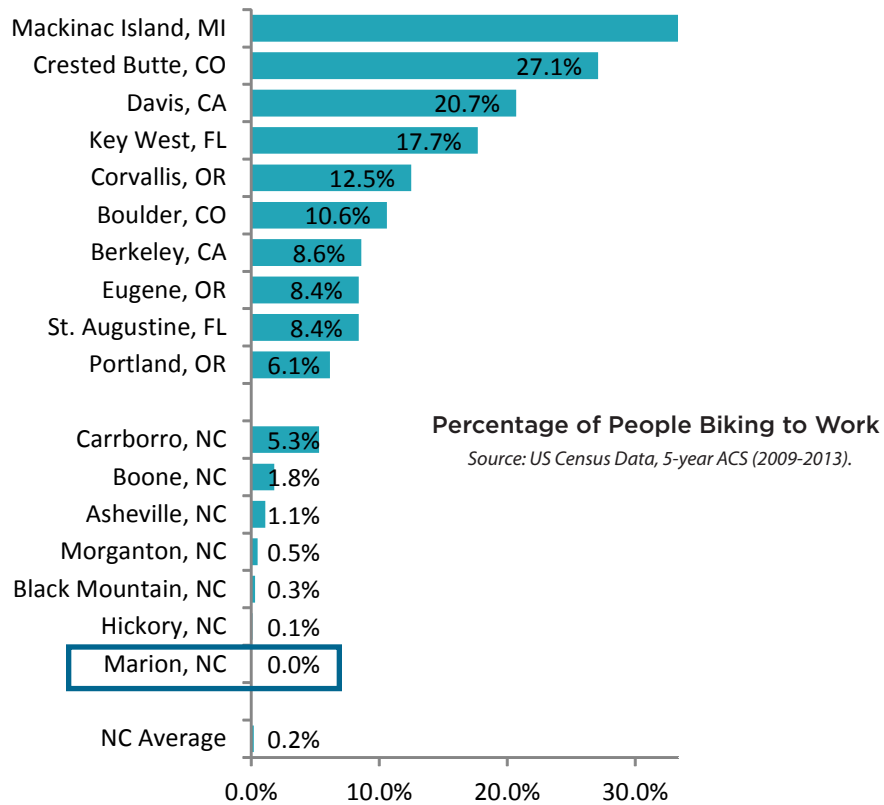
Table 2-1 provides a comparison of demographic data for Marion, McDowell County, and the State of North Carolina. The median age in Marion is 36.3, which is below the state average of 37.4 years. The average household income in Marion is \$24,509, which is around half of the state average of \$46,344. Safe and accessible bikeways will be an essential element of the transportation system for residents without access to a vehicle, for which Marion has double the state average of 6.6%.

	Marion	McDowell County	North Carolina
Population ¹	7,997	44,965	9,651,380
Median Age ¹	36.3	41.4	37.6
Median Household Income ¹	\$24,509	\$35,297	\$46,344
% Households without a Vehicle ¹	13.5%	8.3%	6.6%
% Walk to Work ¹	2.6%	0.8%	1.8%
% Bike to Work ¹	0.0%	0.0%	0.2%

Table 2-1. Demographic Comparison

¹ US Census Bureau, 2009-2013 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

“Marion should strive to match the bike-to-work rates of Morganton, NC”



BICYCLING RATES

According to the latest census data, zero percent of Marion residents bike to work. For those who do live and work in Marion, there is ample opportunity to increase bicycling rates as compared to other communities statewide and nationally.

The chart above provides bicycle-to-work rates for model communities across the country, in North Carolina, and in peer communities for Marion. These numbers show that, with some effort to improve infrastructure, policies, and programs, high rates of walking and bicycling to work are possible in communities of all sizes.

In the short-term, Marion should strive to reach the bike-to-work rates of Morganton, NC, which has a 0.5% bike-to-work percentage. As bicy-

cling becomes more popular, Marion should work toward even higher rates to rival Asheville, NC and Boone, NC in western North Carolina.

CURRENT CONDITIONS

Current bicycling conditions in Marion are variable. There are local streets in and around downtown that have low traffic volumes and low speeds that can serve as the foundation of a bicycle network. There are several local destinations that are within a mile from the downtown core, thus easy to reach for all levels of bicyclists. However, two of the most desirable destinations to access by bike are further away: the Catawba River Greenway Trail Head is 3 miles and McDowell Technical Community College is 4 miles from the heart of downtown. Several key transportation corridors carry higher traffic volumes and speeds without dedicated space for bicycles.

OPPORTUNITIES

An analysis of existing conditions reveals several opportunities and constraints for bicycle network development in Marion. Opportunities include:

- » **Roadway configuration:** Several key roadways such as McDowell Ave, Main Street, Henderson Street and Rutherford Road have sections of pavement width and/or right-of-way to add bicycle facilities.
- » **Catawba Greenway Trail:** The existing 1.6 mile trail provides an excellent opportunity for recreation in Marion and McDowell County.
- » **YMCA Trail Network:** McDowell County partnered with the Corpening YMCA to develop two greenway loops off of Sugar Hill Road, near McDowell Hospital.
- » **Low volume streets:** Several streets such as State Street, Georgia Street and Park Avenue are quiet low traffic volume/speed streets that are already safe for bicycling and connect key locations in and across the City.
- » **Peavine Rail Corridor:** Marion purchased the right-of way of the former Peavine Rail Corridor, the section that extends from State Street to Jacktown Road.
- » **Existing groups:** Local efforts from McDowell Trails Association, McDowell County, NCDOT, private businesses, residents, and the City have already had a lasting effect on bicycling in Marion. They serve as a key building block for programmatic and bicycle infrastructure improvements.
- » **Downtown Marion:** Recent investments in the downtown core have continued to enhance economic activity in the heart of Marion.
- » **Programming:** The NCDOT Active Routes to School program has conducted bicycle education and outreach and the City will also be participating in the 2015 Watch for Me, NC education and enforcement campaign.



Catawba River Greenway



City-owned Peavine Rail Corridor



Downtown Marion



YMCA trail system

CHALLENGES

The following list is an overview of the potential challenges facing the existing bicycle network in Marion. These observations are based on input from the Steering Committee, general public, field review, and available data.

- » **Lack of existing bicycle facilities:** Besides the Catawba Greenway Trail and the YMCA Trail network, there are no existing bicycle facilities.
- » **High-volume, high-speed roadways:** There are several high-volume roadways throughout the City with high speeds and little shoulder with no off-road facility for bicyclists to travel safely. Examples include Court Street, Main Street (including the Five-Lane), Henderson Street, Sugar Hill Road, and Rutherford Road.
- » **Narrow roadways and lanes:** Many roadways do not contain enough space within the existing pavement to add separated facilities for bicyclists. State Street, Garden Street, Madison Street, and Fleming Avenue are examples.
- » **Lack of signage:** There is an overall lack of traffic and wayfinding signage for bicyclists. More signage is needed to make drivers aware of bicycle traffic, direct bicyclists to safe routes and crossings, and provide directions between popular destinations.
- » **Geographical constraints:** Steep topography is a limiting factor in encouraging more residents to cycle as a form of transportation and in bicycle facility development.
- » **Peavine Corridor Extension** The City owned right-of-way terminates near the intersection of Plato Drive and Jacktown Road. Connecting to the college campus will require extensive coordination with Norfolk Southern, CSX, NCDOT and private property owners.



The underpass of NC 226 and I-40



Narrow, rural roadways in and around downtown



Steep grades are present on Court Street, headed east to Main Street



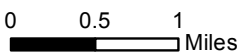
Peavine trestle bridge over NC 226

Map 2.1 - Current Conditions



Marion Comprehensive Bicycle Plan 2015

Base Map



LEGEND

- | | | | |
|--|-----------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| | Bicycle Crashes (2007-2012) | Destinations | |
| | Existing Trails | | College |
| | Proposed Trails | | Government Services |
| | County Bike Routes | | Shopping/Grocery |
| | Rail Line | | Library |
| | Planning Boundary | | Medical |
| | City Limits | | Park/Open Space |
| | Body of Water | | School |

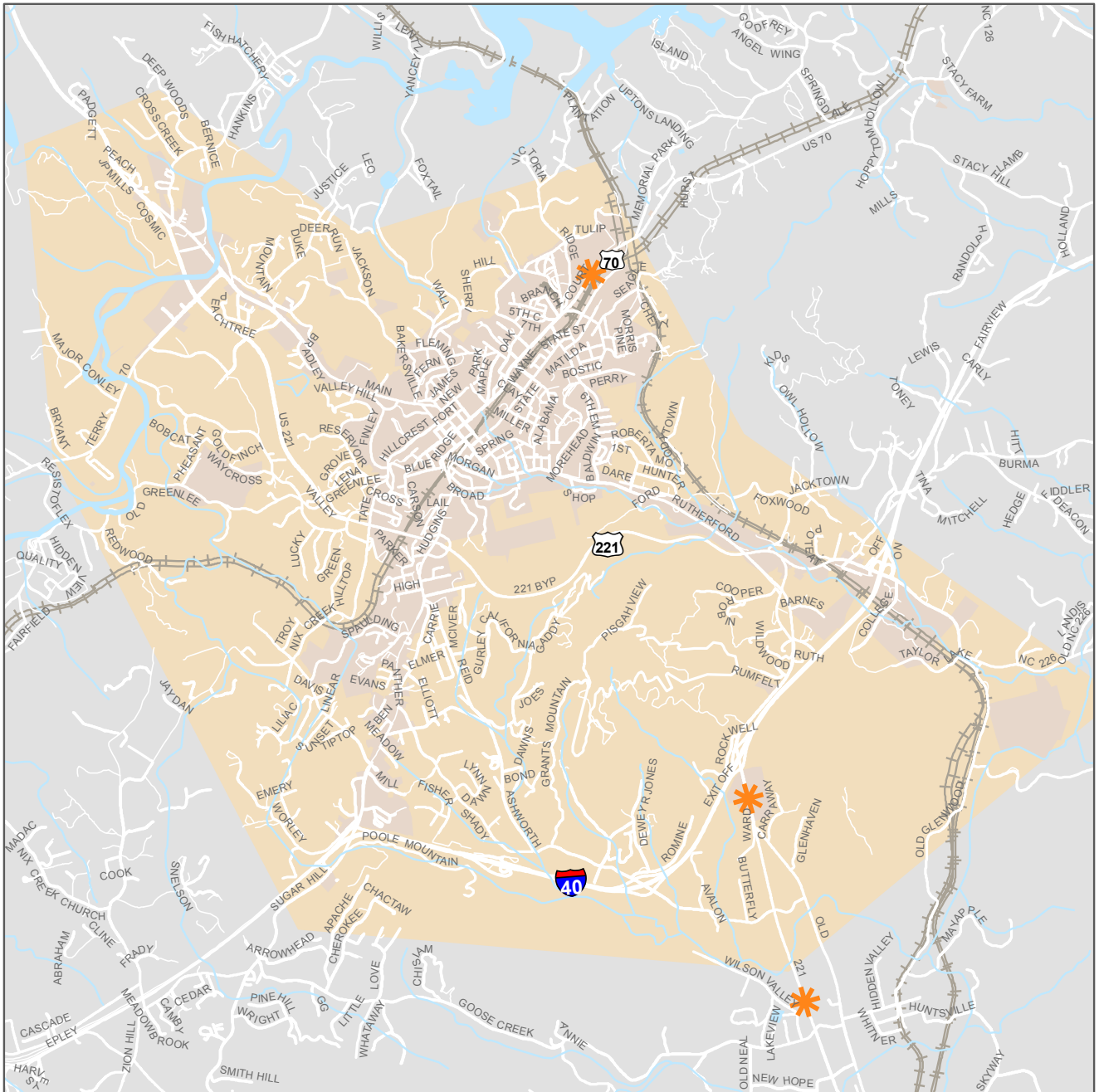


Data obtained from City of Marion. Map created April, 2015.

Table 2-2. Roadway/Potential Bike Route Inventory

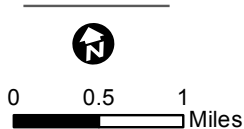
Road	From	To	Approximate Road Width (edge of pavement)	Existing Road Configuration	Curb/Gutter (Y/N)	Parking (Y/N)	Speed Limit (mph)	Nearby Destinations
Main St	US 70	Logan St	47 ft	3 - 5 lanes	Varies	N	35-45	Catawba River Greenway, Restaurants/ Commercial, Downtown
Main St	Logan St	Garden St	38-50 ft	3 lanes	Y	Y	20	City Hall Downtown, Peavine Trail, Gazebo, Restaurants, Shopping
Rutherford Rd	Garden St	Georgia Ave	30 -35 ft	2 lanes	Y	N	35	Neighborhoods, Oak Grove Cemetery, Gazebo, Peavine Trail
Court St	Pulliam St	Park Ave	35.5 ft	2 - 3 lanes	Y	Varies	20	Downtown, Marion Train Depot, County Rec Dept, County Library
Court St	Park Ave	4th C St	32 - 43 ft	2 - 3 lanes	Varies	N	35	Marion Elementary School, East Junior High, Clinchfield Greenway, Commercial
McDowell High School Rd	Main St	US 70	23 ft	2 lane	N	N	35	McDowell High, Catawba River Greenway, Commercial

Map 2.2 - Crashes








**Marion
Comprehensive
Bicycle Plan
2015**

Bicycle Crash Map



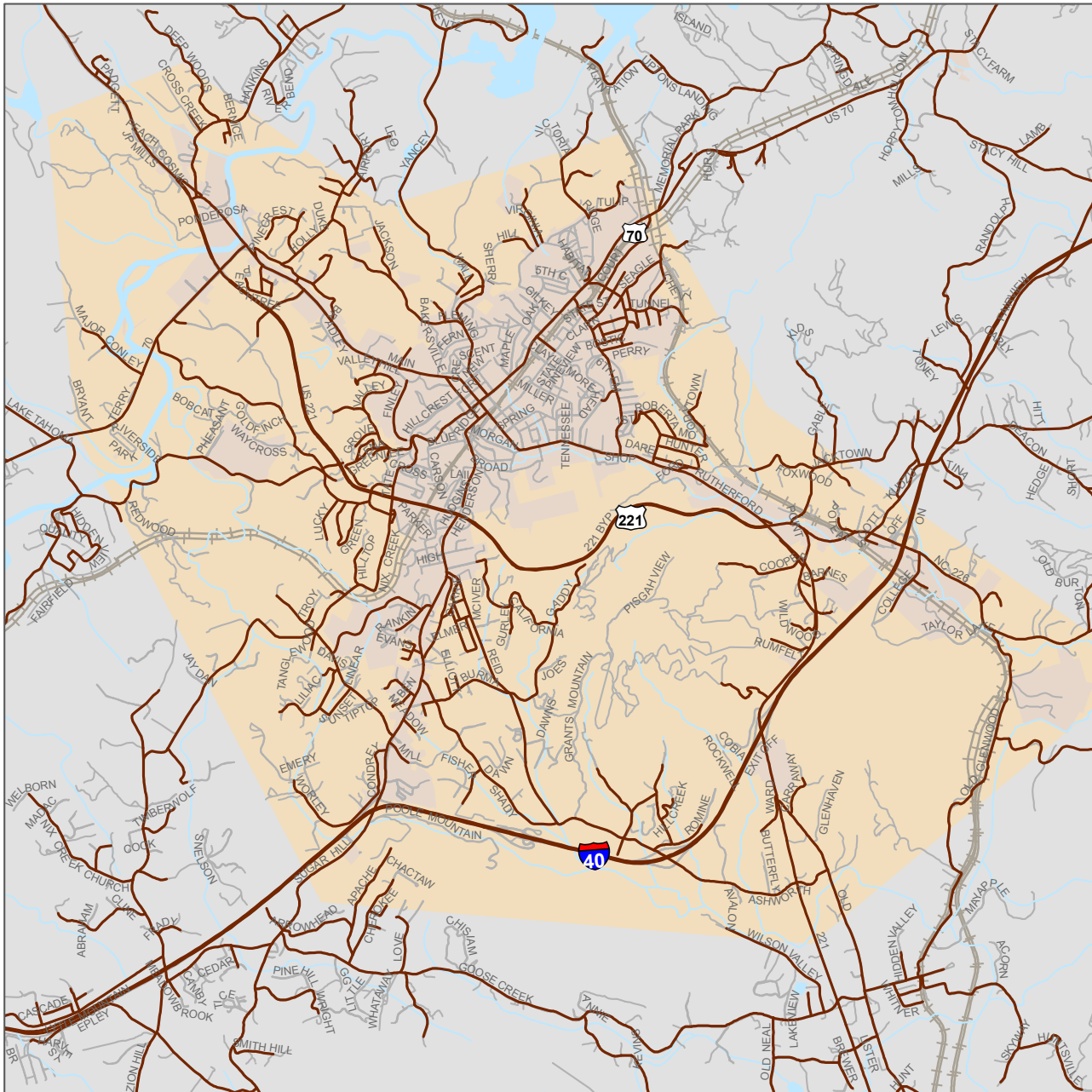
LEGEND

-  Bicycle Crashes (2007-2012)
-  Rail Line
-  Planning Boundary
-  City Limits
-  Body of Water



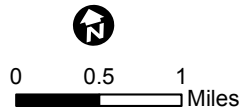
Data obtained from City of Marion.
Map created April, 2015.

Map 2.3 - NCDOT Owned Roads









**Marion
Comprehensive
Bicycle Plan
2015**

Road Ownership Map



LEGEND

-  NCDOT Owned Roads
-  Local Roads
-  Rail Line
-  Planning Boundary
-  City Limits
-  Body of Water



Data obtained from City of Marion.
Map created April, 2015.

More details regarding the various route options are discussed in Chapter 3.

NCDOT-REPORTED PEDESTRIAN AND BICYCLE CRASHES

Map 2.2 on page 2-8 shows bicycle crashes in Marion that were reported to the NCDOT between 2007 and 2012. During this period, 2 crashes were recorded within the City of Marion planning boundary and one just outside the boundary in McDowell County.

ROADWAY JURISDICTIONS

The roadway network in Marion is a combination of City-owned and state-owned roads. Knowledge of roadway ownership is important for determining the types of facilities that can be recommended along a roadway, the agency in charge of maintaining the roadway and implementing bicycle facility recommendations, and how improvements are scheduled, funded, and constructed. Map 2.3 on page 2-9 shows which roadways in Marion are state-owned.

RELATED PLANS AND INITIATIVES

MARION COMPREHENSIVE LAND USE PLAN (2012)

The Comprehensive Plan is the City's official statement of policies for direction growth and development in Marion for the next 20 years. Several goals and objectives relate directly to bicycle transportation. Goal 3.2 reflects the vision statement and goals of this study developed through the bicycle planning process:

- » Goal 3.2: Provide safe and comfortable routes for walking, bicycling, public transportation to increase use of these modes of transportation, enable convenient and active travel as part of daily activities, reduce pollution, and meet the needs of all users,

including children, families, older adults, and people with disabilities.

MARION SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL ACTION PLAN (2009)

In 2008 the City received a technical assistance grant from NCDOT to complete a Safe Routes to School Action Plan for five area schools to improve bicycle and pedestrian safety within a two-mile radius of each campus. The planning radius for each school essentially allowed for a citywide bicycle and pedestrian plan to be developed based on existing roadway conditions to improve bicycle and pedestrian safety.

MCDOWELL COUNTY COMPREHENSIVE PARKS AND RECREATION MASTER PLAN (2014)

The McDowell County Comprehensive Parks and Recreation Master Plan 2014- 2024 provides the framework for guiding The County Board of Commissioners and Staff in both its current evaluation of/and long-range planning for the parks and recreation system for McDowell County. This effort was part of the Healthy Places NC initiative, and made possible by a grant from the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust. The framework for this Master Plan is based upon conducting a review and inventory of the existing park system (including trails) and recording the observations. The assessment of these facilities, or lack of facilities, identified the immediate facility needs in the community and predicted the future needs of residents.

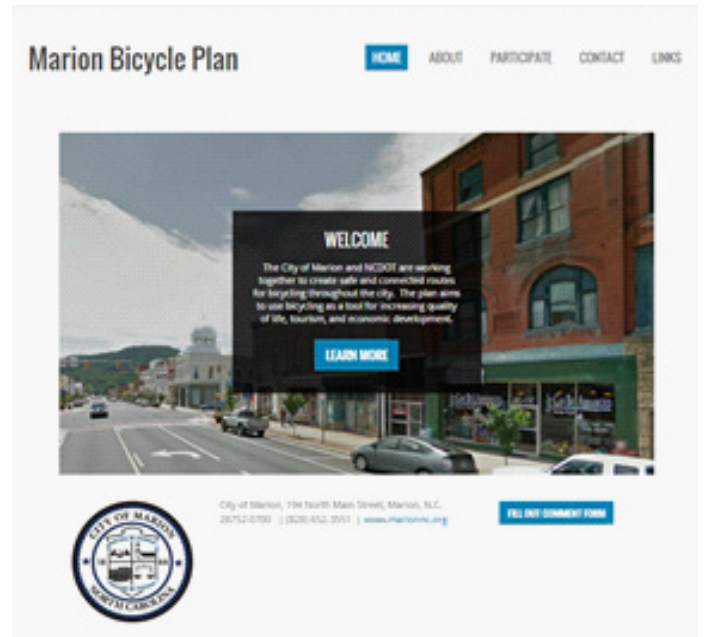
A community survey was crucial in developing a plan that reflects the needs and desires of residents. 413 surveys were completed, representing 1,098 individuals. 93% of survey participants were in favor of the continued expansion of the existing greenways throughout McDowell County.

PUBLIC INPUT

PUBLIC INPUT ON EXISTING CONDITIONS

Public input for this plan was collected through the project website, public comment form, and public workshops. Generally, the feedback from residents, visitors, and property owners is that they feel the current bicycling conditions are fair (47%) to poor (52%) and that improving them is very important (62%). Safety, opportunities for recreation and exercise, and increased overall quality of life/livability were the main topics identified by the public through the comment form as being important for this plan to address. 52% of participants were somewhat willing to pay an increase in taxes to fund bicycle improvements.

These issues were reflected in the public comments received about the desire to connect safely to the downtown core, grocery/shopping areas, and Catawba River Greenway Trail. Specific insight from the Steering Committee and members of the public from public outreach events is displayed in Map 2.5 on the following page.



Screenshot of the Project Website (marionbikeplan.weebly.com)

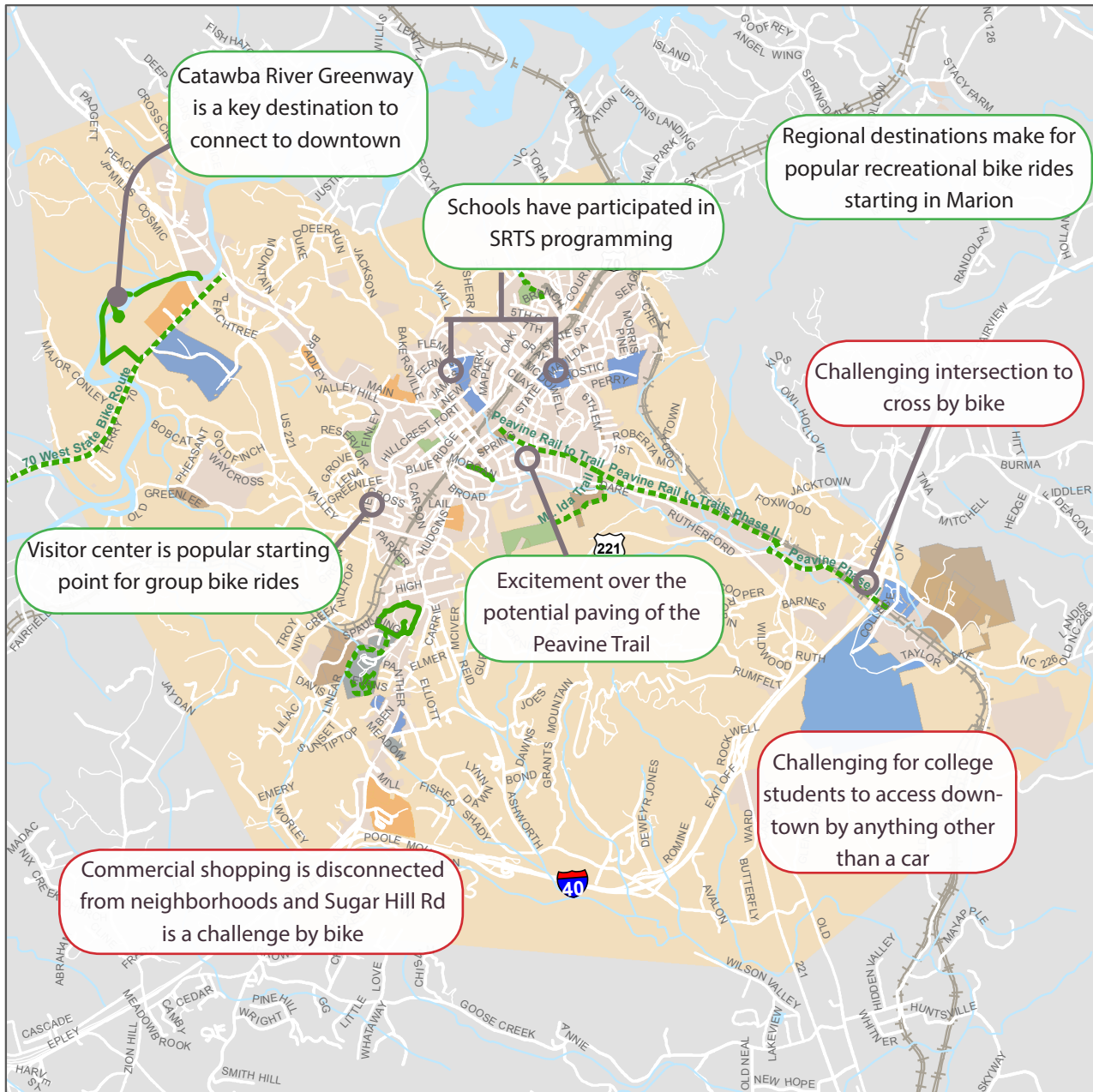


Public outreach at the Relay for Life of McDowell County Event on May 8th, 2015



Public outreach at the Marion Cyclovia on May 9th, 2015

Map 2.5 - Public Input



**Marion
Comprehensive
Bicycle Plan
2015**

Public Input Map



LEGEND

- | | | | |
|--|-------------------|--|---------------------|
| | Existing Trails | | College |
| | Proposed Trails | | Government Services |
| | Rail Line | | Shopping/Grocery |
| | Planning Boundary | | Library |
| | City Limits | | Medical |
| | Body of Water | | Park/Open Space |
| | | | School |



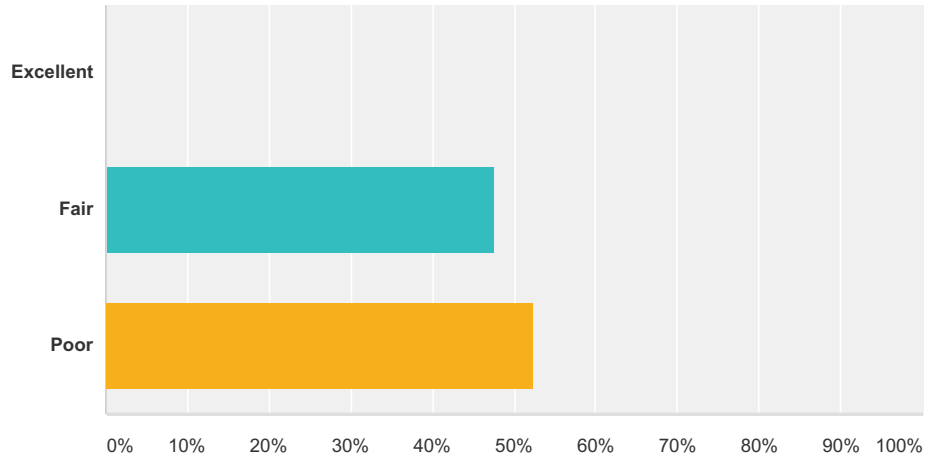
Data obtained from City of Marion.
Map created May, 2015.

PUBLIC COMMENT FORM RESULTS

The charts below summarize public input collected during this planning process in Spring/Summer 2015. 21 local residents, property owners, employees, and visitors contributed their input.

Q1 How do you rate bicycling conditions in Marion?

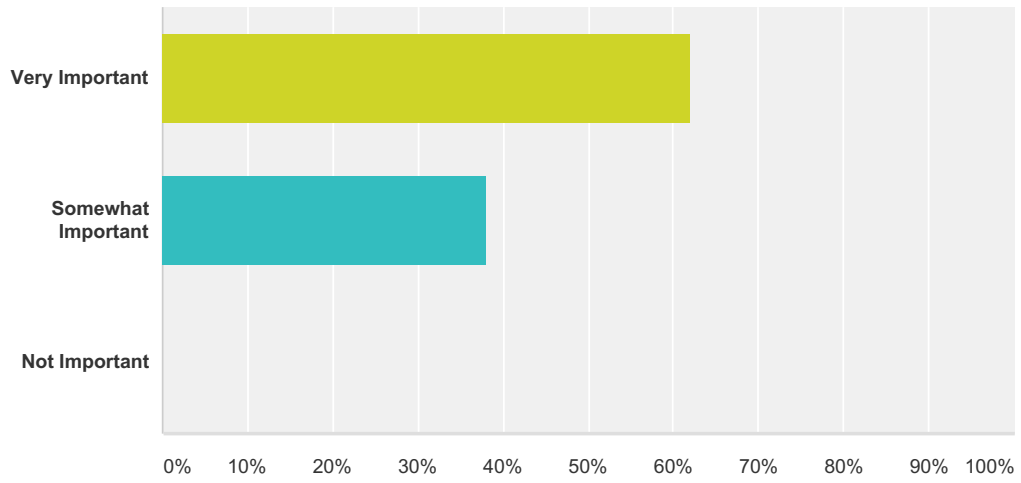
Answered: 21 Skipped: 0



Answer Choices	Responses	
Excellent	0.00%	0
Fair	47.62%	10
Poor	52.38%	11
Total		21

Q2 How important to you is improving bicycling conditions in Marion?

Answered: 21 Skipped: 0

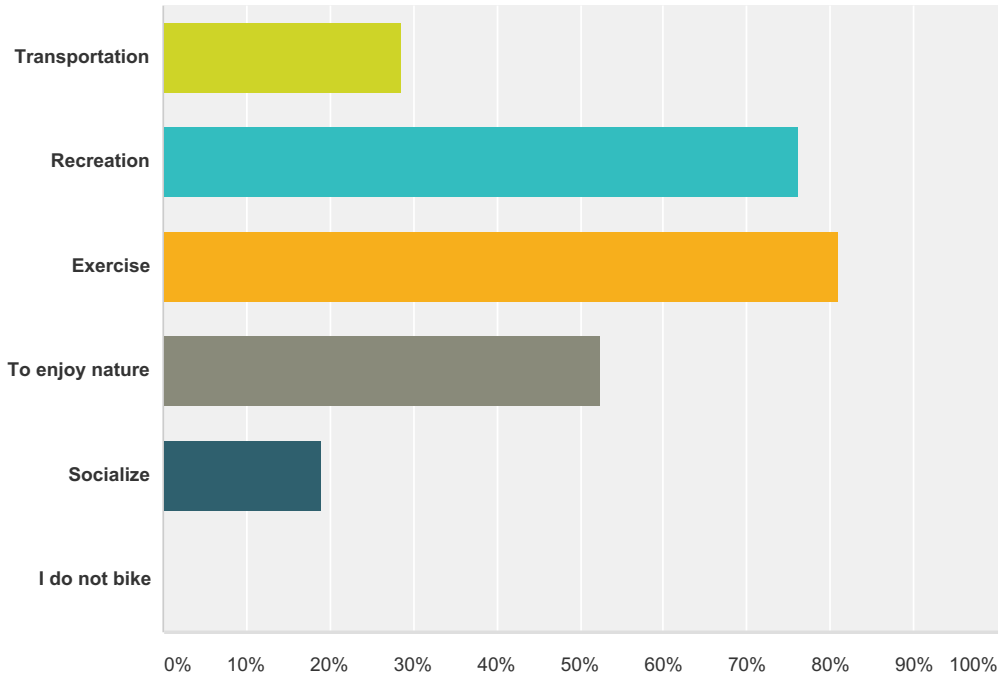


Answer Choices	Responses	
Very Important	61.90%	13
Somewhat Important	38.10%	8
Not Important	0.00%	0
Total		21



Q3 When bicycling in Marion, what is (or would be) the primary purpose of your trip? (check all that apply)

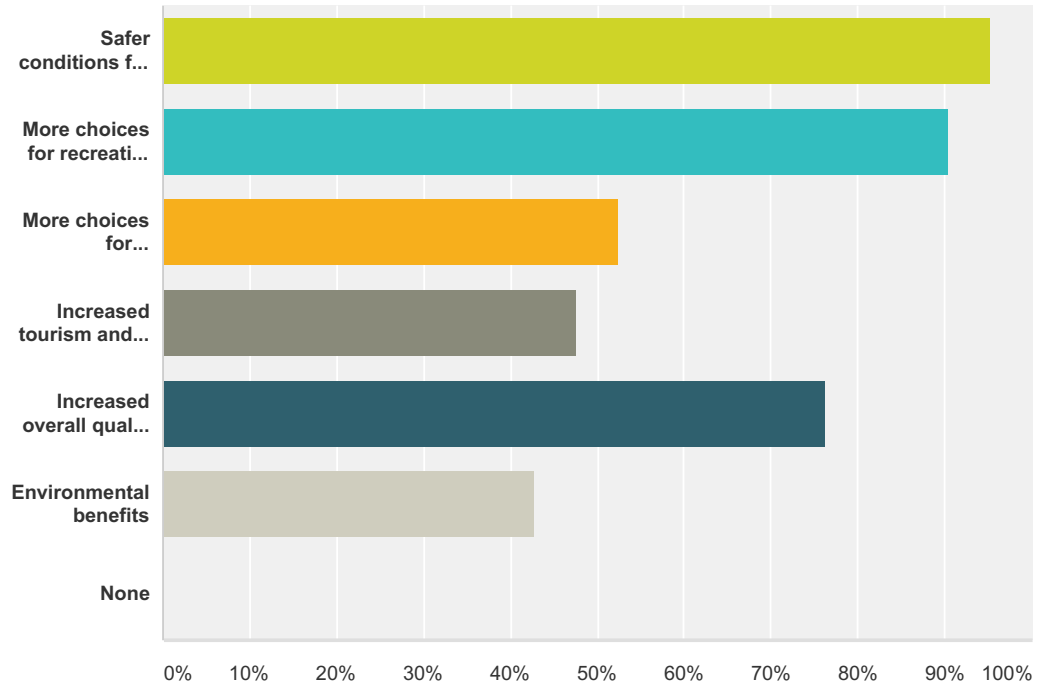
Answered: 21 Skipped: 0



Answer Choices	Responses	Count
Transportation	28.57%	6
Recreation	76.19%	16
Exercise	80.95%	17
To enjoy nature	52.38%	11
Socialize	19.05%	4
I do not bike	0.00%	0
Total Respondents: 21		

Q4 What should be the most important goals and outcomes of this plan? (check all the apply)

Answered: 21 Skipped: 0

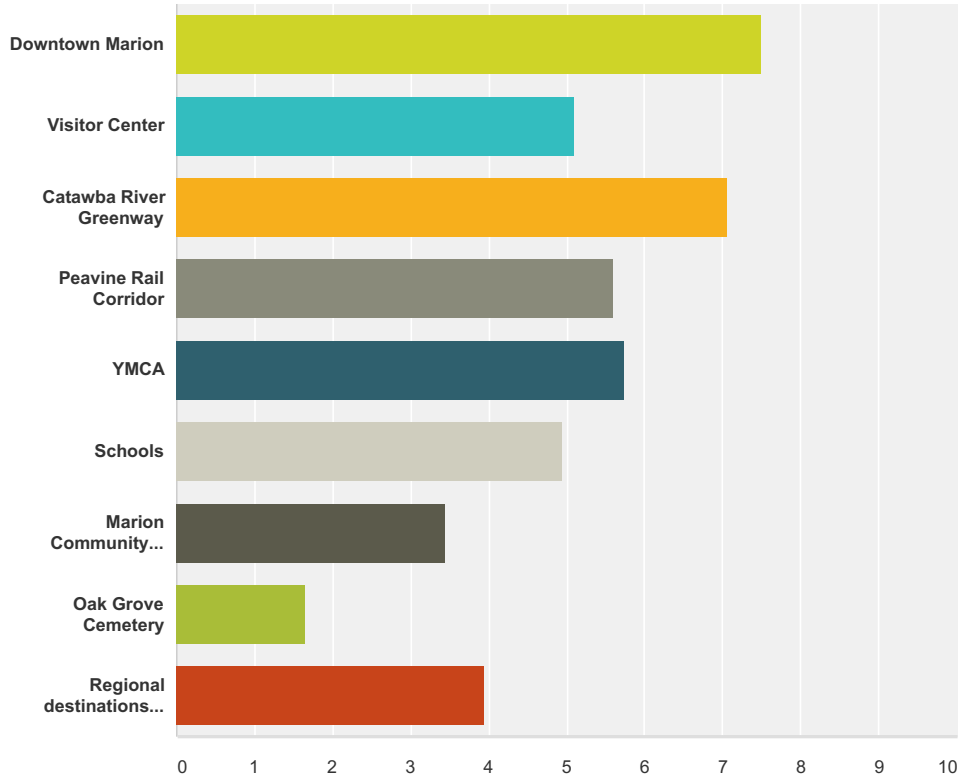


Answer Choices	Responses
Safer conditions for bicycling	95.24% 20
More choices for recreation and exercise	90.48% 19
More choices for transportation between neighborhoods and local destinations	52.38% 11
Increased tourism and property values	47.62% 10
Increased overall quality of life/livability	76.19% 16
Environmental benefits	42.86% 9
None	0.00% 0
Total Respondents: 21	



Q5 What destinations would you most like to be able to reach by bicycling? Please rank (1 = most like to reach, 9 = least like to reach)

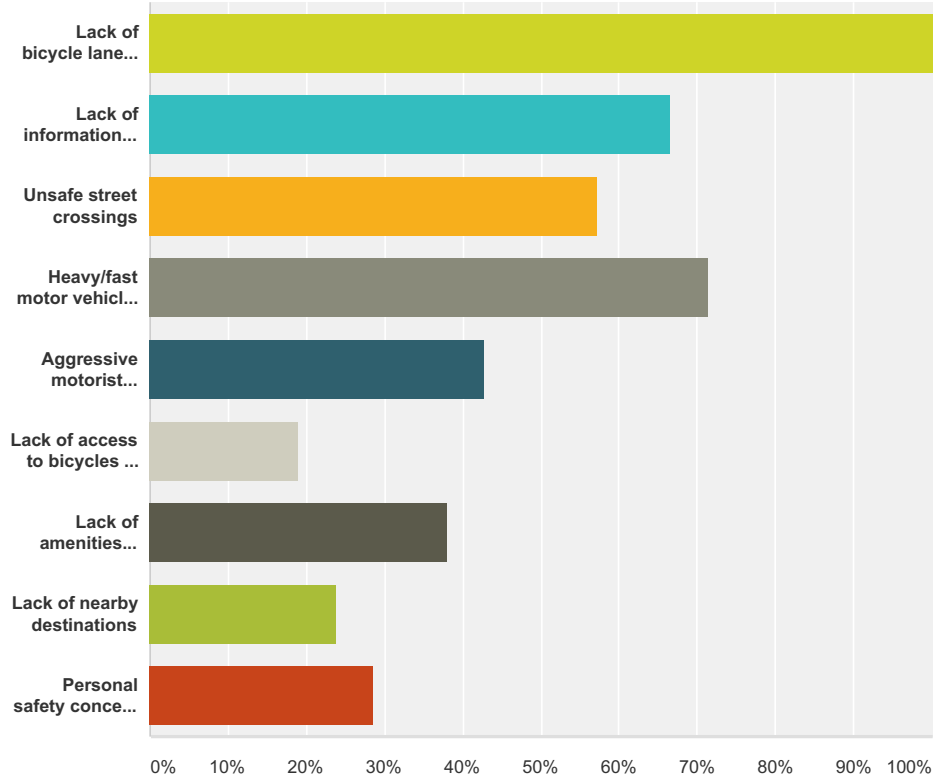
Answered: 20 Skipped: 1



	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Total	Score
Downtown Marion	30.00% 6	15.00% 3	30.00% 6	25.00% 5	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	20	7.50
Visitor Center	0.00% 0	15.00% 3	10.00% 2	20.00% 4	25.00% 5	5.00% 1	10.00% 2	10.00% 2	5.00% 1	20	5.10
Catawba River Greenway	30.00% 6	10.00% 2	25.00% 5	15.00% 3	10.00% 2	10.00% 2	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	20	7.05
Peavine Rail Corridor	0.00% 0	30.00% 6	0.00% 0	25.00% 5	15.00% 3	10.00% 2	15.00% 3	5.00% 1	0.00% 0	20	5.60
YMCA	10.00% 2	10.00% 2	20.00% 4	10.00% 2	25.00% 5	15.00% 3	5.00% 1	0.00% 0	5.00% 1	20	5.75
Schools	20.00% 4	5.00% 1	5.00% 1	5.00% 1	0.00% 0	35.00% 7	15.00% 3	10.00% 2	5.00% 1	20	4.95
Marion Community Building Park	5.00% 1	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	15.00% 3	15.00% 3	35.00% 7	30.00% 6	0.00% 0	20	3.45
Oak Grove Cemetery	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	5.00% 1	5.00% 1	40.00% 8	50.00% 10	20	1.65
Regional destinations (Lake James, Blue Ridge Mountains, etc.)	5.00% 1	15.00% 3	10.00% 2	0.00% 0	10.00% 2	5.00% 1	15.00% 3	5.00% 1	35.00% 7	20	3.95

Q6 What do you think are the factors that most DISCOURAGE bicycling in Marion? Please select up to five factors.

Answered: 21 Skipped: 0

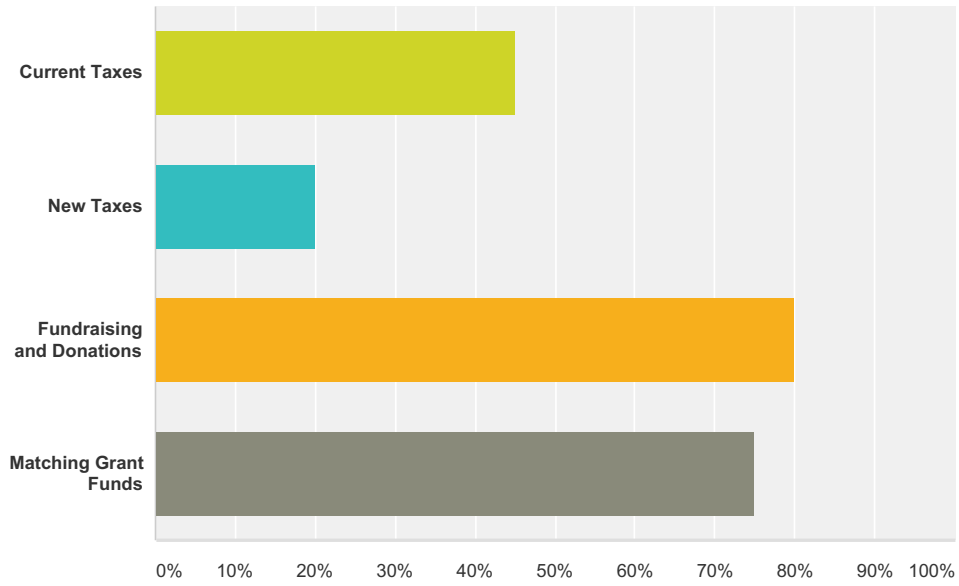


Answer Choices	Responses
Lack of bicycle lanes and trails	100.00% 21
Lack of information about local trails and bicycle routes	66.67% 14
Unsafe street crossings	57.14% 12
Heavy/fast motor vehicle traffic	71.43% 15
Aggressive motorist behavior	42.86% 9
Lack of access to bicycles and bicycling equipment	19.05% 4
Lack of amenities (bicycle racks, wayfinding signs, water fountains, etc.)	38.10% 8
Lack of nearby destinations	23.81% 5
Personal safety concerns (other than traffic)	28.57% 6
Total Respondents: 21	



Q8 How should bicycle facilities be funded within Marion (Select all that apply)

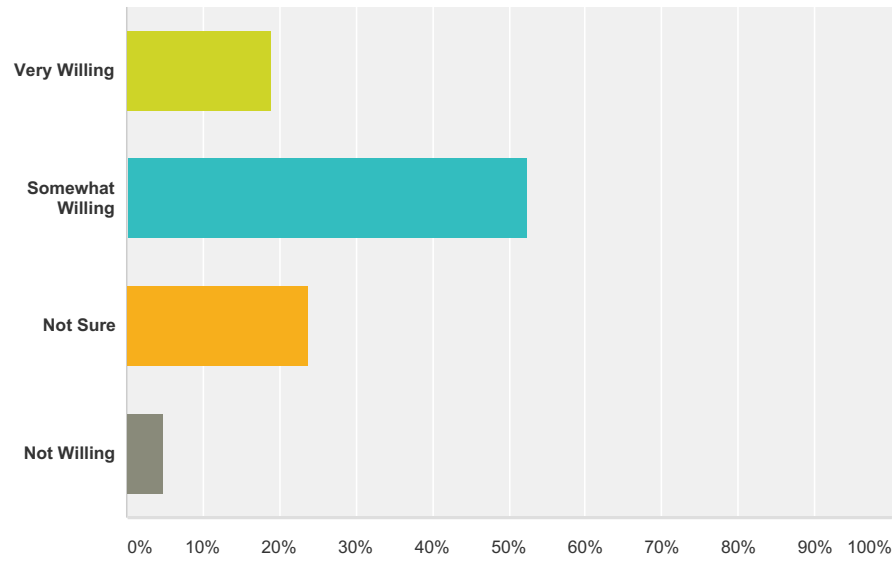
Answered: 20 Skipped: 1



Answer Choices	Responses
Current Taxes	45.00% 9
New Taxes	20.00% 4
Fundraising and Donations	80.00% 16
Matching Grant Funds	75.00% 15
Total Respondents: 20	

Q9 How willing would you be to pay some increase in taxes to fund bicycle facilities in Marion?

Answered: 21 Skipped: 0

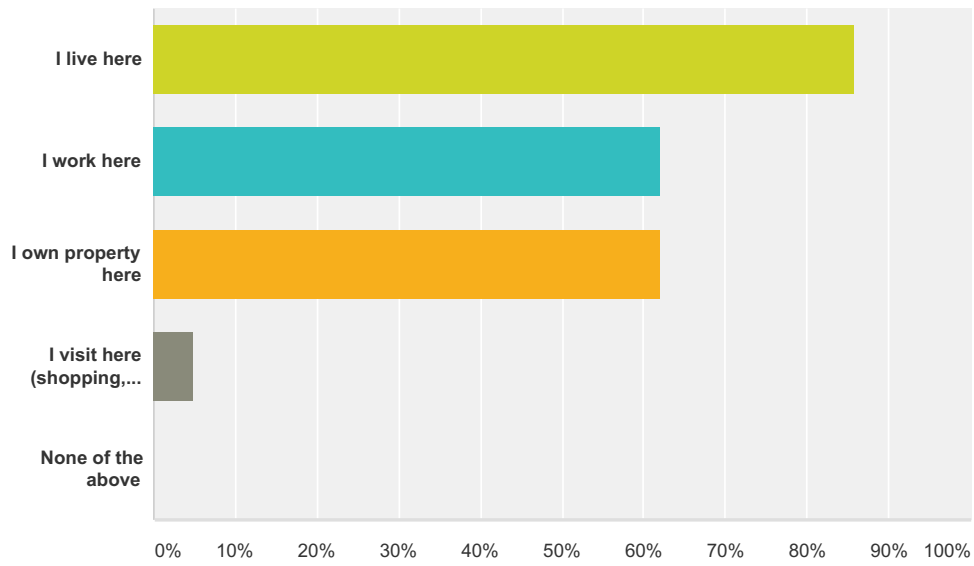


Answer Choices	Responses
Very Willing	19.05% 4
Somewhat Willing	52.38% 11
Not Sure	23.81% 5
Not Willing	4.76% 1
Total	21



Q10 What is your relationship to Marion?

Answered: 21 Skipped: 0



Answer Choices	Responses	Count
I live here	85.71%	18
I work here	61.90%	13
I own property here	61.90%	13
I visit here (shopping, dining, local services)	4.76%	1
None of the above	0.00%	0
Total Respondents: 21		