

HOW SHOULD MALDEN SPEND ITS MONEY?  
MAKE YOUR VOICE HEARD! #MALDEN #PEOPLESBUDGET

# MALDEN PEOPLE'S BUDGET

## Introduction

The Malden People's Budget project is a nonpartisan, grassroots, volunteer-run, community-led survey, asking the people who live and work in Malden to share their opinions on how the city should spend its annual budget. Our goal with this project is to unite our community in envisioning our city's future, reaching out across neighborhoods and welcoming the full spectrum of perspectives and ideas. We designed the survey to ensure that anyone taking it would be able to freely share their views. An important part of our work is helping all Maldonians to better understand how city government works and to feel empowered to get more involved, so we worked on the survey to make it as easy as possible to understand how the city budget process works, why it is important, and how the community can influence changes.

Our work arose from the Malden Police Alternatives and Accountability group. After the murder of George Floyd in 2020, a group of Maldonians began meeting regularly to discuss how to make our community safer and more inclusive for currently and historically marginalized people. We divided our work into subgroups based on various aspects of civic life. The People's

Budget group decided to emulate the progressive work done in numerous other cities such as Los Angeles, Nashville, and Chicago by conducting a People's Budget to get Maldonians engaged with local government and excited about enacting change in the community. In addition to the cities mentioned, we have also recently seen participatory budgeting in action locally. In 2021, the city of Boston passed a measure to make its budget process more transparent and inclusive, including the projected formation of an Office of Participatory Budgeting tasked with learning constituents' views on key issues. Many Massachusetts cities have gathered input from residents on how best to spend ARPA funds designated for city governments in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. In March 2023, Somerville launched a participatory budgeting process that allows anyone over 12 to vote on how to spend \$1 million of the city's budget. The Malden People's Budget project was made in the same vein as these local models and intends to make the people's voice heard in ongoing conversation with their elected officials.

MPAA started this project because we recognize that creating a truly safe, anti-racist, and inclusive community will require rethinking public investments across the board. We have collaborated with other progressive organizations in our community to work towards a shared vision. We inaugurated the People's Budget survey in 2021 and plan to continue this work as it evolves to meet new goals.

In April 2022, we met with the Mayor's office to request that the survey responses be considered in the formation of the budget for that year. In January 2023, we spoke to members of the city budget council and filed a request for a grant to assist with distribution of the survey and translation efforts. In order to both improve the survey design and have the impact and reach needed to make the survey as effective as possible, we have realized the necessity of having the city government as an invested member. The City Council asked us to make the survey have questions and items as actionable as possible to yield the best and most usable data. To that end, we constructed the 2023 survey in such a way to help us, along with the city's guidance, create a more usable and actionable survey for 2024.

We hope that we can continue to inspire changes in how our local government operates by sharing the opinions of our survey takers and encouraging increased transparency in city budgeting.

## **Summary of the People's Budget Process**

To create the survey, the People's Budget Team utilized the previous fiscal year's graphs and budget information available on the city's ClearGov platform so that survey takers would have a clear and accurate idea of current spending to better inform their choices. For each category, the survey asked respondents whether they thought the city should spend more, less, or about the same on each department and line item, as we did last year. We also included a category called "Possibilities for Malden's Future," which allowed participants to weigh in on line items that are not currently reflected in the city budget, but which were suggested by two or more participants in the previous year's survey, or from ideas for civic improvement that have been implemented in other neighboring communities.

To help clarify some of the less accessible aspects of city budgeting, City Councilor Ryan O'Malley did a video interview with the People's Budget team in 2021 to explain the timeline and other details of how the city budget is proposed, reviewed, amended and approved. The video of this interview is available on [Youtube](#) and was included at the beginning of this year's survey as well.

On January 14 2023, the People's Budget team held an open-door meeting at Malden City Hall to invite feedback and suggestions on the upcoming People's Budget survey. Our aim was to have members of the public provide suggestions and feedback that would be incorporated into the 2023 survey, to create as open and democratic a creation process as possible.

The survey was open from February 27 through March 31, 2023. It was extensively promoted through social media, including being shared by city leaders and posted in common Facebook groups. Once launched, the People's Budget team reached out to other organizations in the Malden community to support the process and promote the survey (supporting organizations listed below). On March 20, 2023, we held an open, public information and discussion session on Zoom to provide more opportunities to engage in the process.

72 individuals, businesses, or organizations were contacted three times during the period the survey was live in order to inform them about the survey's release, and were asked to inform members and distribute the link to the survey to other friends and neighbors who might be interested in making their voice heard.

Awareness of the survey was also promoted by speaking to city council members at a Budget Committee meeting on March 21, 2023, and by displaying fliers with a QR code linking to the survey around downtown Malden.

## **Who took the Malden People's Budget Survey?**

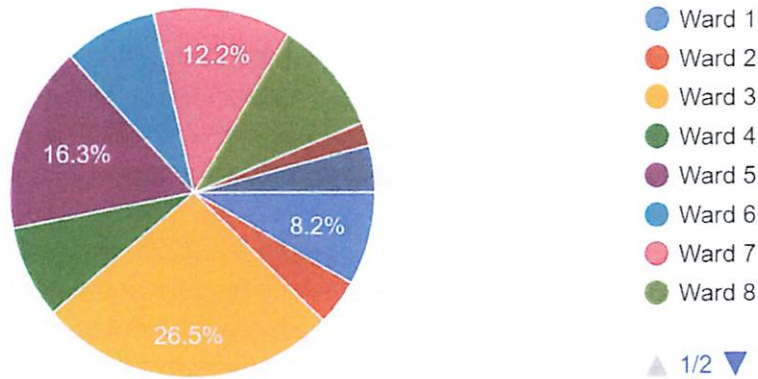
**Total Unique Responses: 49**

### **Demographics**

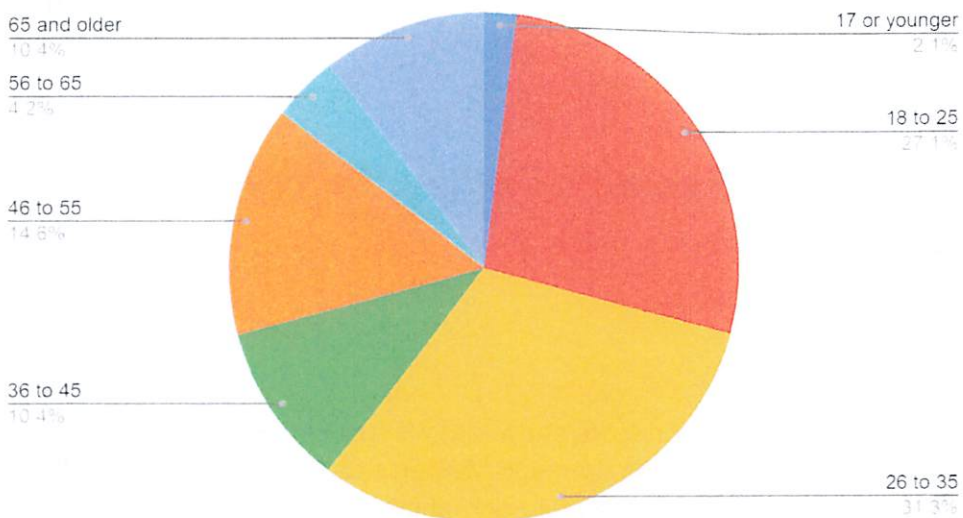
The demographic breakdowns of respondents show that we have more work to do in promoting the survey and encouraging engagement among Malden's diverse population, as the responses are not proportionate to or reflective of the demographics of those currently living in Malden. In 2022-2023, digital communications have become increasingly decentralized, and more one-on-one contact is required to bring in more diverse responses. We know that with translation and promotion assistance from the City we will be able to see responses from a more diverse group of survey takers in 2023.

What city ward do you live in? Use the 2020 Census Map to help you figure this out.

49 responses

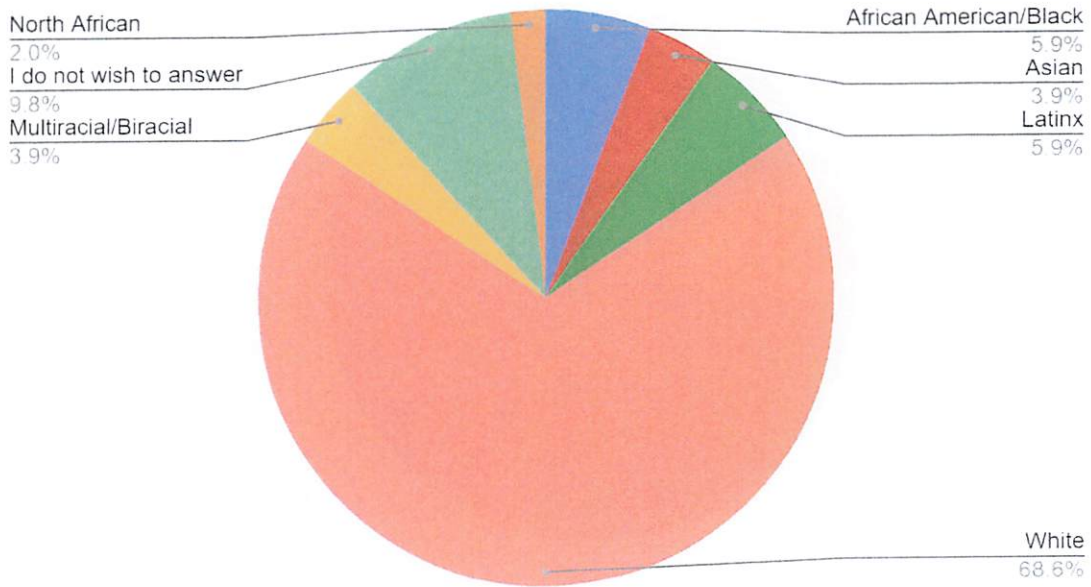


### Age

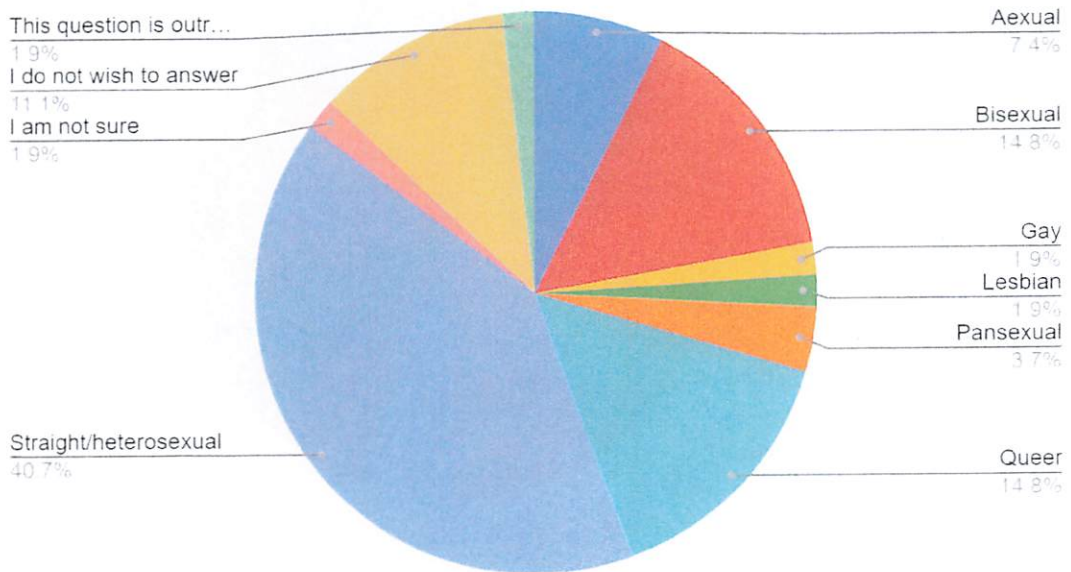




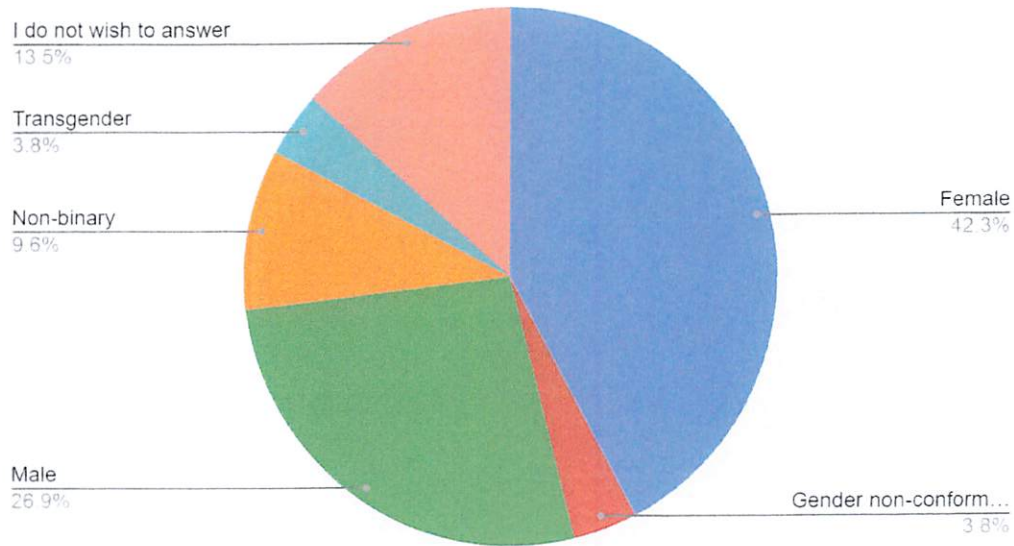
Please select which racial and ethnic groups you identify with:



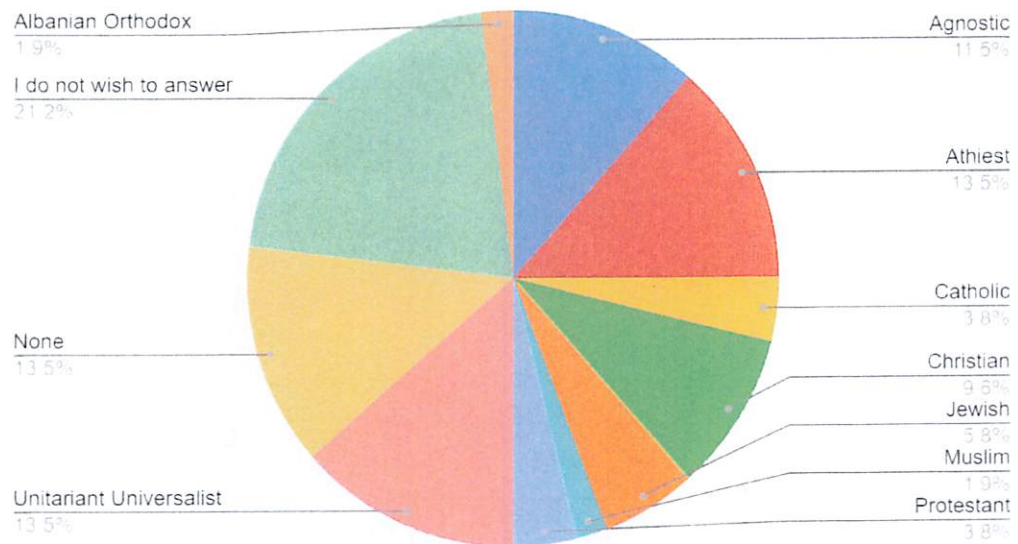
What is your sexual orientation?



## What is your gender?



## Please select which faith categories you identify with



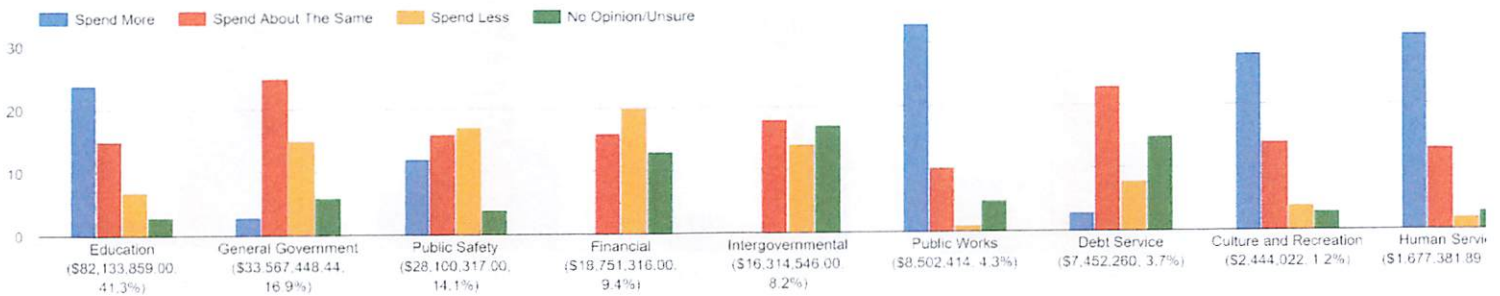
## Topline Results

Here we collected and summarized the most significant findings from the 2023 survey. In general, residents would like to see the city spend more or about the same on

most city services, with some exceptions. Several comments expressed gratitude for the survey and for the option to express their opinions about the city budget.

- Over 50% of respondents said we should spend more on:
  - Public Works (67%)
  - Culture and Recreation (57%)
  - Human Services (63%)
- Categories with the highest rate of responses saying to spend less were:
  - Financial (40.8%)
  - Public Safety (34.7%)
- Categories with highest rate of responses saying they were unsure or had no opinion:
  - Intergovernmental (34.7%)
  - Debt Services (30.6%)

How would you rate the priority of each of these budget areas? (Please scroll for all options on mobile)

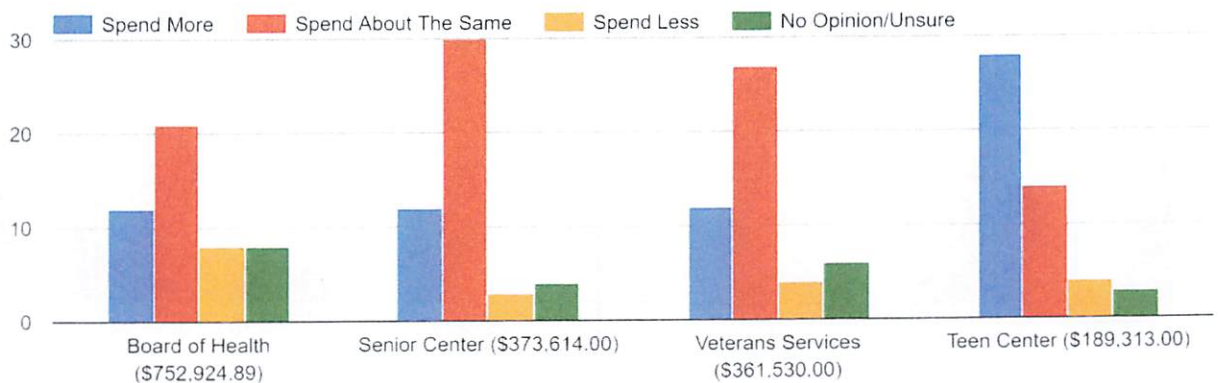


## Human Services

The majority of survey takers preferred to either maintain or increase spending on Human Services, with the Teen Center receiving an overwhelming request to increase funding (28 votes, compared to 21 for the other options). The Teen Center saw an increase to their budget last fiscal year after the results of the 2022 People's Budget survey showed a similarly large support for this budget area to be increased.

*"Spend more on infrastructure and human services to support people - we are losing through difficult times and we need to invest in our community. We invest in our community by helping each other."*

How would you rate the priority of each of these budget areas? Note that some may not currently be funded through the city budget. (Please scroll for all options on mobile)





# Public Safety

For the second year in a row, Public Safety saw interesting results, with a wide majority of respondents voting to spend less on police (this year, 57%). By contrast, 69% of respondents voted to spend the same amount on the fire department, with other results for parking and traffic enforcement mixed between “Spend Less” and “Spend About the Same.”

We saw a diversity of opinions related to law enforcement funding, including suggestions for alternatives or reforms to police.

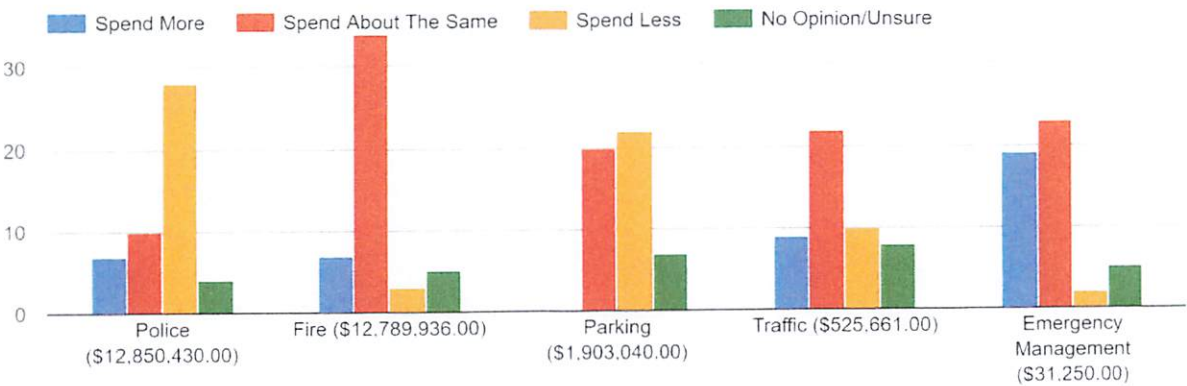
*“Priorities should be in education, housing, green space. Not in law enforcement.”*

*“I would love to see Malden divert funding from police to support mental health and social services responses, similar to Cambridge HEART (trained first responders who can take 911 calls instead of police).”*

*“With the increase in crime in the city cutting the police budget would not be a good idea.”*

Note that a lot of the data the survey produced points to opportunities the city has to better inform residents on Malden finances and operations, including this last comment. According to the [FBI Crime Data Explorer](#), violent crime continues to decrease in Malden, pointing to a need to better educate residents on safety trends in our city.

How would you rate the priority of each of these budget areas? Note that some may not currently be funded through the city budget. (Please scroll for all options on mobile)

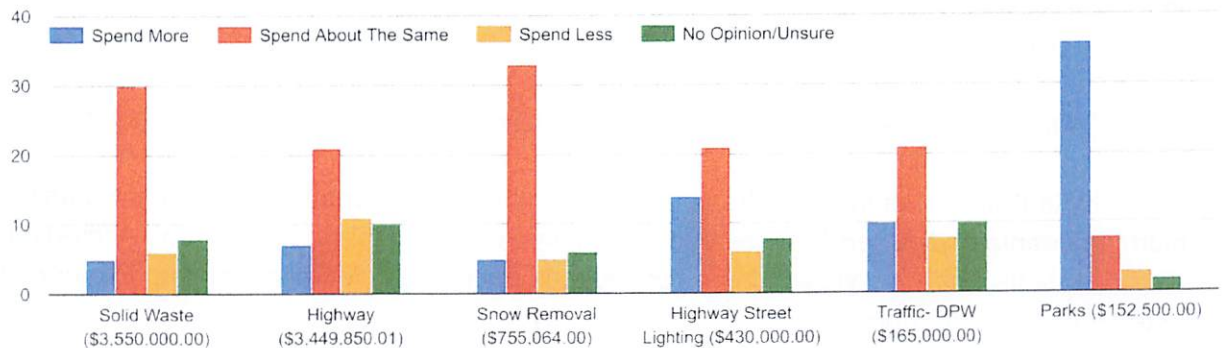


## Public Works

In the category of Public Works, survey takers overwhelmingly urged maintaining or increasing spending, with strong support for increasing spending on parks and green spaces (73%). In the comments, some respondents asked for greater investment in climate neutrality, green initiatives, and park space.

*“Our parks need a bigger budget for maintaince (sic). We need to keep our parks grass, not plastic turf. Roosevelt Park should have the lead soil removed and new soil installed for real, living green space. Our living public green spaces should be prioritized as our summer grow hotter.”*

How would you rate the priority of each of these budget areas? (Please scroll for all options on mobile)

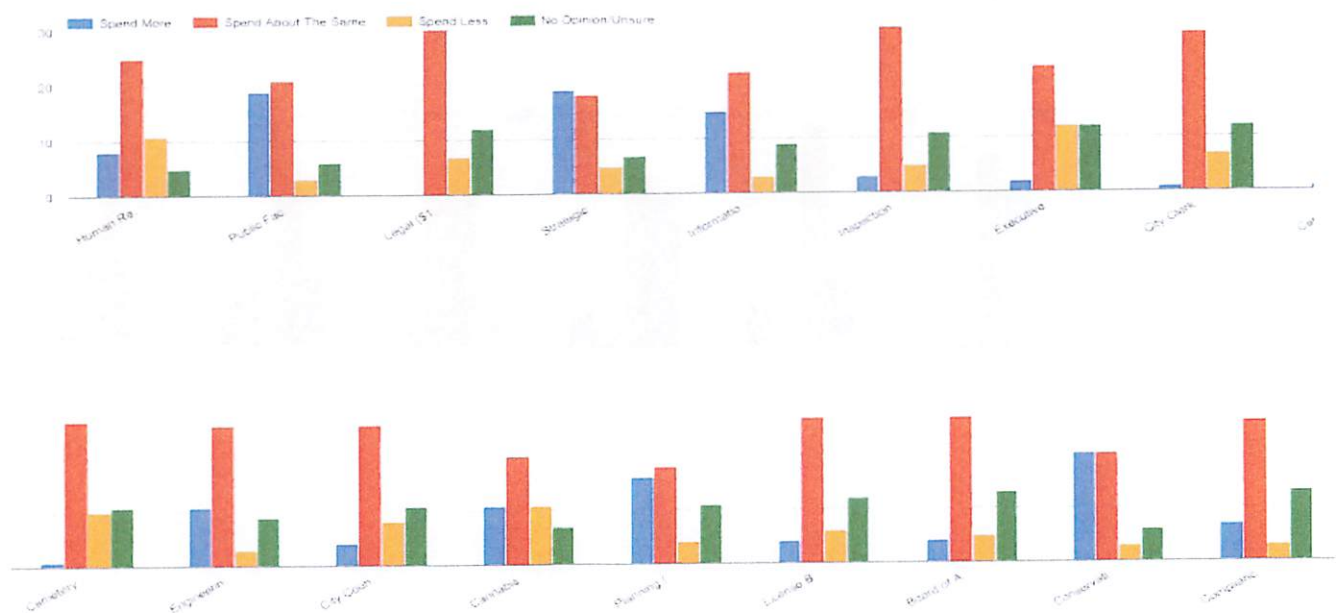


## General Government

In almost every category in General Government, a majority or plurality of respondents selected "Spend About the Same." These results are challenging to draw conclusions from, because over 30% of respondents also indicated that this budget area was not well-understood. The only categories where a plurality of voters picked "Spend More" were Strategic Planning and Community Development (38.8%) and Conservation Commission (40.8%). These generally track with what respondents voted for in other categories, showing broad support for conservation and green spaces and community development.

As in previous years, this section had the least-informed responses and did not garner many strong opinions.

How would you rate the priority of each of these budget areas? (Please scroll for all options on mobile)



## Culture and Recreation

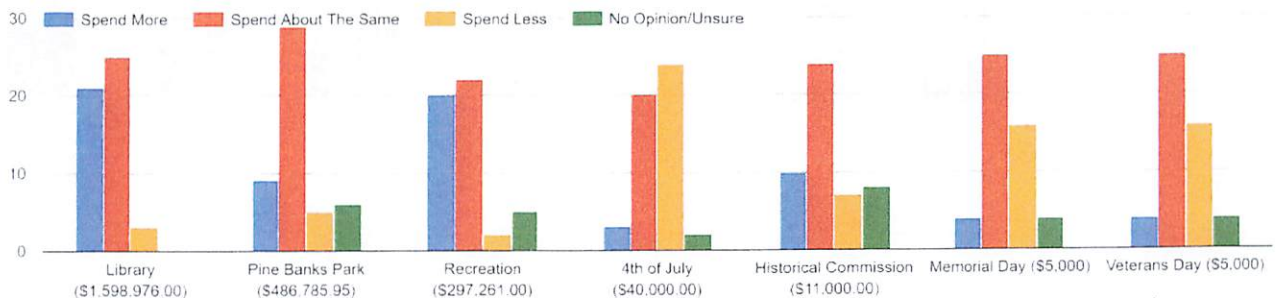
Survey respondents tended to prefer spending the same on Culture and Recreation. The only categories that received a significant number of "Spend More" votes were the Library (42%) and Recreation (40.8%). 48% of respondents asked to spend less on the 4th of July holiday.

*"Open the closed reading room wing of the Malden Library. Fund staff and let teens do their homework there. Hire tutors for teens, have clubs. The library should be a teen center. The Converse Family built the beautiful library for our youth. It is wrong to exclude them."*

*"Developing the Malden Arts and Culture Center at the Courthouse should be a high priority. Planting hundreds of street trees should be a priority."*

*"Juneteenth should be recognized with a budget like July 4th"*

How would you rate the priority of each of these budget areas? Note that some may not currently be funded through the city budget. (Please scroll for all options on mobile)





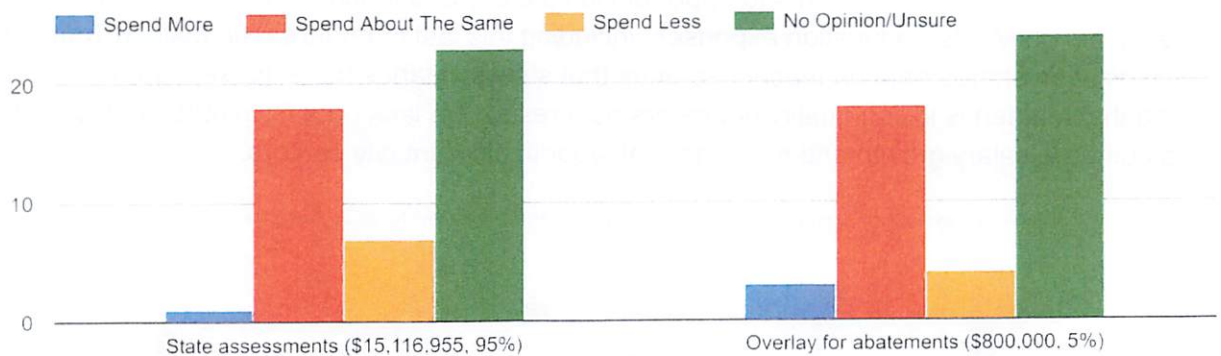
## Intergovernmental, Financial, and Debt Service

Most respondents for the Intergovernmental category voted “Unsure” or “Spend About the Same” for this category. Some people asked for specifics on what these terms mean, which might be something the city could assist with. Many survey takers felt that they did not have adequate access to the definitions and examples needed to understand these categories in layperson’s terms. Further clarity or explanations around this budget area may be needed in future surveys.

*“I didn’t understand most of the budget stuff. I did like that there was a better breakdown of City employees than there has been in the past.”*

*“I would hope that we could work toward paying down the principle of the city’s debt so we can stop paying interest! Why does the city pay for Veteran’s services? I would think that Veteran’s services should be federally funded!”*

How would you rate the priority of each of these budget areas? (Please scroll for all options on mobile)



## Education

As in 2022, we included Education in the survey, even though the education budget is not controlled by the Malden City Council. Respondents had strong opinions about education in Malden, with majorities of respondents voting for increased salaries for teachings and increased spending to cover special education (SPED) expenses. About half of respondents said they would like to spend more on supplies and other operational materials. For Transportation, Custodian costs, Utilities, and Technology, pluralities of respondents indicated “Spend About the Same.” So while there is broad consensus for teachers to be paid more, results are more mixed or lean towards keeping costs status quo for other educational costs.

*“#1 priority should be schools.”*

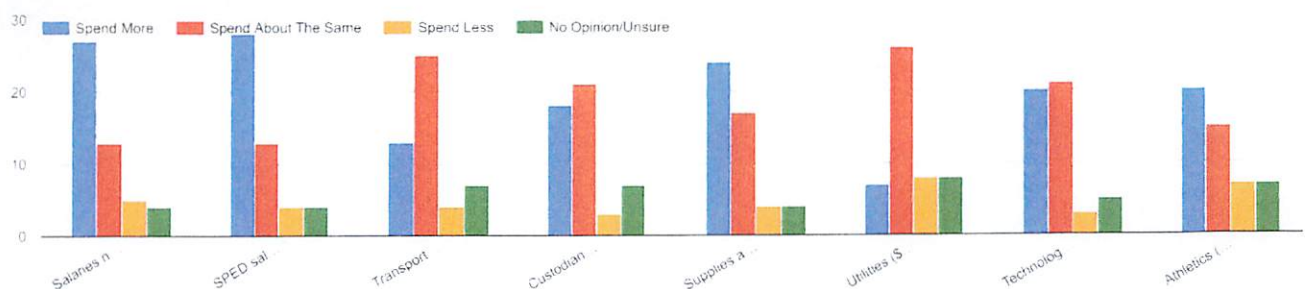
*“I think we should invest as much as we possibly can in our schools. That is my top priority.”*

*“Priorities should be in education, housing, green space. Not in law enforcement.”*

*“Slowing the unsustainable growth in teacher salaries”*

Some of this data points to opportunities the city and teacher’s union have to better inform residents on Malden education expenses, including this last comment. The Malden Teachers Association shares data on teacher salaries that shows salaries have not kept up with inflation and that Malden is losing quality educators as a result. We lack data from other municipal unions to compare salary growth and movement of labor in different city sectors.

How would you rate the priority of each of these budget areas? (Please scroll for all options on mobile)



## Possibilities for Malden's Future

In order to give people additional ideas to vote on and to give voice to more ideas put forward, we included a section called "Possibilities for Malden's Future" that included either suggestions that two or more people had suggested in our 2022 survey, or public improvement projects that have been implemented in other Massachusetts communities. We broke these down into different categories based on broad distinctions.

Understandably, there was a lot of support for many of these ideas. While it might not be fiscally reasonable to implement all of these ideas, especially in the short term, it does show that there is broad support for several ideas for social and municipal improvement.

Some of the items that had the highest levels of positive feedback to be considered as priorities were:

- Increased non-emergency services outside law enforcement (85.7%)
- Sustainable climate measures (77.6%)
- Funding for composting (57%)
- Park and vegetation maintenance (81.6%)
- Road maintenance (77.6%)
- Divert law enforcement funds to social work services (81.6%)
- Transparency in law enforcement (81.6%)
- Review law enforcement overtime (69.4%)
- Justice, equity, Diversity, and Inclusion department, training, and initiatives in city government (67.3%)
- Transparency in city government (87.7%)
- City translation services (75.5%)
- More information about voting and official city meetings (79.6%)
- Green spaces in Malden (83.7%)
- Affordable housing (75.5%)

*"Social services should include trained mental health crisis workers to respond to mental health emergencies, instead of uniformed and armed police officers."*

*"We should have a participatory budget process."*

*"I think more money should be allocated to Public Safety, both Police and Fire. Overtime should be scrutinized. Both Police and Fire appear to be understaffed."*

*"And deescalation training for police."*

*"I think the city should fund a social worker position. These needs are currently being filled largely by unpaid volunteers, like MNHN who do not have the time and resources to do this adequately."*

*"Have more of a police presence enforcing traffic."*

*"Budget more for buying parcels of undeveloped, forested land for conservation. Malden is a densely developed urban community and we must preserve all remaining parcels of forested land."*

*"The garbage bins are too light/small and fall every time there is a storm, causing debris and garbage in all the streets of Malden."*

## Additional Comments

Here we share some additional feedback from the survey:

*"Glad to have an opportunity to participate."*

*"It was really helpful to have the description of each pieces budget categories described!"*

*"Thanks so much to all involved! I think the work that goes into making this survey possible is very important. We as citizens of this city should have a say in how our tax dollars are used and the opportunity to potentially shape the budget alongside our elected council members."*

*"There were many items, I was not clear what does that imply to me as resident, so i stayed neutral with my answer."*

## Challenges and Opportunities in the Malden People's Budget Process

Any collaborative process takes significant time, effort, planning, and resources. The Malden People's Budget team encountered some issues that slowed progress for the survey this year. Updated city budget information for 2023 wasn't available online until later in the year, which slowed survey updates and distribution. Outreach has become increasingly difficult, unpredictable, and time-consuming in the past few years. Despite digital distribution of information via email and social media, we see more and more that one-on-one contact is the most effective way to get information to people. This year we put out flyers, and we hope to increase outreach in our physical environment in the future. We hope the city will consider investing in one-on-one contact to increase the amount and quality of participation in the budget next year. This might mean a text to all residents about how they can participate, a canvassing effort coordinated with ward committees, tabling at community events to give the residents more information on how to participate in the budget, or support for translation and printing physical copies of the survey for hands-on distribution.

We appreciate the time spent with city officials to learn more about how to collaborate. In January 2023, we filed a request for a grant to assist with distribution of the survey and translation efforts. While a full collaboration did not emerge this year, the city provided guidelines about how to create a more actionable survey for 2024 that would yield better data. In order to both improve the survey design and have the impact and reach needed to make the survey as effective as possible, we have determined that having the city government as an invested member would be useful. **The City should fully invest in a participatory budgeting process** if they would like for the survey design, quality of data, and breadth of response to meet their needs and expectations.

In addition, city officials cited that the populace is not educated enough on the budget to provide valuable feedback as one reason that the survey results may not be included in official



city budget plans. While we advise the city to not underestimate the curiosity and determination of Malden residents to understand our government, our data reinforced this observation, with some respondents stating a need for more information on how the city budget works to feel fully confident in their participation. City officials expressed enthusiasm for holding public informational sessions about the city's budget, and offered to lead these sessions. **The People's Budget team suggests holding quarterly public informational sessions** in 2023 to provide ongoing education on how our city's funding works and what we are funding so that we can all understand the city's values through our financial choices. In addition, funding the production of more brief, visually appealing, and accessible information on the city budget - infographics or videos similar to Councilor O'Malley's rundown - is another way to address the knowledge gap between how the city works and what the residents want to see happen.

## Conclusion and Thanks

We approached the People's Budget with a different aim this year, and we hope our efforts show. Malden has an active and robust community with many opinions, and a clear interest in greater civic engagement. Our hope is that the People's Budget survey is a step towards a more inclusive process and active community, including a participatory budgeting process.

We hope to see a participatory budgeting process led by the city for the FY25 budget. The Malden People's Budget team is ready to use the data from this report and from previous years to work with the budget committee to redesign the survey as needed. We believe that precise questions that show the relation between different categories and a broader range of answer options will lead to answers that City Council will be able to act on in the budget process.

In order to reach more city residents and receive answers from a more diverse part of the city, we would need the city's help in distributing and promoting the survey, both digitally and in paper form, and in translating the survey into different languages.

Our goal is to have a survey the city can work with, and to have 10% of the city population participate in the People's Budget survey. We want to ensure that all respondents feel confident that their voices are heard and valued regardless of political affiliation or ward. We strive to create a space free from bias or assumption where anyone who lives and works in Malden can be included in the decisions that shape our city's future. We acknowledge that some survey takers question the survey's intentions and have commented on a perceived bias in our process: we absolutely want to hear their voices and invite all to engage in the budgetary process!

Thank you to everyone who participated in the Third Annual People's Budget, from editing, promoting, and participating. We hope the experience has empowered you to learn more about how our city's government works and to think more about using your voice and opinions to create change in our community.