

Fountain City Community Engagement Report

2026 Resident Survey and Spring 2026 Focus Sessions

1. Introduction and Methods

This report presents findings from two community engagement efforts conducted in 2026: a community survey and a series of focus sessions held in spring 2026. Together, these efforts gathered input from residents, business owners, visitors, and students about Fountain City's strengths, challenges, and priorities for the next three to five years.

Survey

The survey was distributed in early 2026 and received 128 responses. It was offered both online and on paper to reach residents who might not complete an online form; responses from both formats have been combined throughout this report. The survey covered what residents and visitors value most about Fountain City, ratings of current infrastructure conditions, priorities for near-term investment, quality-of-life concerns, attitudes toward attracting visitors, and demographics.

The respondent pool skews toward full-time residents (89 of 128), homeowners (67 of 85 who answered, 79%), and the 35–74 age range. Fewer than 8% of respondents were under 25. Six respondents were under 18. Some questions, including investment priorities, preferred improvements, and communication preferences, were included in the online version only and are noted where relevant.

Focus Sessions and Individual Interviews

Two group focus sessions were held in spring 2026. A morning community session engaged residents and business owners around walkability, natural asset access, and property conditions. A separate student session engaged teenagers about everyday life in Fountain City, where they go for recreation, what they would like to see change, and what would make them more likely to stay. In addition, a small number of individual interviews were conducted via Zoom for those who could not attend the larger in-person focus group sessions, which surfaced several findings noted throughout this report.

2. How This Report Builds on Prior Community Data

Fountain City has two prior rounds of community engagement: a 2021 Community Survey (58 respondents, covering comprehensive planning topics) and a 2021

Perception Survey (171 on-site visitor and resident surveys collected during summer 2021). While this report focuses on the 2026 data, the prior surveys provide useful context for assessing which issues are long-standing versus emerging.

What the Prior Data Showed

The 2021 surveys established several baseline findings. Road quality, property maintenance, and train noise were the most frequently cited frustrations in open-ended responses. Tourism and recreation along with downtown development ranked as the top two drivers of growth when residents were asked to prioritize. The 2021 Perception Survey found that visitors identified lack of amenities, a need for downtown beautification, and insufficient visitor information as primary weaknesses. Among residents surveyed in 2021, 24 of 30 supported new efforts to attract visitors.

What Is Confirmed by 2026

- Road and sidewalk quality is consistently rated as a problem across five years of community input.
- Property maintenance — vacant buildings, overgrown lots, and poorly maintained rentals — appears in open-ended responses in both 2021 and 2026.
- Train noise appears in every round, disproportionately in qualitative responses.
- The river, bluffs, and views are the top-ranked assets in every survey, yet access is consistently described as limited.
- Support for visitor attraction is broad and consistent across years and respondent groups.

What Is New in 2026

- Statistical group comparisons. For the first time, analysis identifies whether differences between retirees and employed residents — or between full-time residents and non-residents— are statistically meaningful rather than anecdotal.
- A youth voice. The student focus session and under-18 survey respondents together represent the most direct youth input this process has produced. Their feedback is specific, consistent, and distinct from what adult surveys have captured.
- The information gap. The morning focus session revealed that some of Fountain City's best assets — a beach near the sand piles, a bluff trail — are unknown even to locals. No prior survey surfaced this.
- Business communication as an operational problem. Poor construction detour messaging can eliminate small business sales for weeks — a near-term issue distinct from chronic infrastructure concerns.

3. What Respondents Value Most About Fountain City

Respondents were asked to select and rank their top three values. The table shows how many included each item in their top three and its average rank among those who selected it (1 = most important). (117 responded)

What Respondents Value	# Selected in Top 3	Avg. Rank (1=highest)
River, bluffs, and views	95 (81%)	1.56
Small-town feel / quiet	74 (63%)	2.19
Outdoor recreation (boating, fishing, trails)	44 (38%)	1.95
Local businesses and restaurants	45 (38%)	2.24
People / sense of community	30 (26%)	1.97
Historic downtown / buildings	31 (26%)	2.42
Community events	22 (19%)	2.27

The river, bluffs, and views were selected by 81% of respondents and ranked first on average — the single most dominant finding in this survey. Small-town feel and quiet are a consistent second. Together, these two define what residents most want to protect about Fountain City.

4. Current Conditions

Overall Direction

Respondents were asked whether Fountain City has gotten better, stayed about the same, or gotten worse over the last three to four years (111 responded):

Response	Count	Share
Gotten better	34	31%
Stayed about the same	61	55%
Gotten worse	16	14%

A majority see the city as stable. Among those who said "gotten worse," open-ended responses centered on property conditions, loss of amenities, and a perceived decline in community spirit.

Overall Satisfaction

Of the 85 respondents who answered this question:

Response	Count	Share
Satisfied	58	68%
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	20	24%
Dissatisfied	7	8%

Overall satisfaction is high, with an average rating of 3.48 out of 4.

Infrastructure Condition Ratings

Respondents rated seven infrastructure and amenity categories on a five-point scale (Excellent=5 through Very Poor=1). "Not familiar enough to rate" responses are excluded from averages.

Infrastructure Item	Good	Fair	Poor	Avg. Score	n
Signage and wayfinding	48	54	6	3.39	108
Parks and playgrounds	51	47	11	3.37	109
Downtown appearance	33	76	5	3.25	114
Streets and sidewalks downtown	31	64	14	3.16	109
Riverfront access	39	42	26	3.12	107
Parking	33	51	26	3.06	110
Trails / walking / bike routes	15	32	44	2.68	91

All items fall in the Fair-to-Good range. Trails and walking routes scored lowest — 48% of those who rated them chose Poor, and an additional 24 respondents said they were not familiar enough to rate, suggesting limited use. Riverfront access had the widest spread of opinions, with 26 Poor ratings alongside 39 Good ratings; full-time residents rate it significantly lower than non-residents (see Section 6). The 2026 morning focus session reinforced both findings: walkability and river access are described as the community's most tangible daily gaps.

Quality of Life Impacts

Respondents were asked how much specific issues currently affect their quality of life in Fountain City (counts reflect only those who answered each item):

Issue	A lot	Somewhat	Not much	Avg. Impact*	n
Property maintenance (yards, vacant buildings, weeds)	26	36	21	2.09	53
Lack of grocery store / shopping options	23	37	25	1.96	54
Traffic speed and noise	19	37	28	1.83	54
Lack of recreation for kids and teens	20	34	27	1.87	53
Street condition	16	42	24	1.82	44
Parking issues (boats, RVs, long-term parking)	13	31	39	1.52	54
Train noise	11	25	46	1.43	61

*Scale: 3=A lot, 2=Somewhat, 1=Not much, 0=Not at all.

Property maintenance is the top quality-of-life concern. Train noise scores lowest on this measure despite frequent mention in open-ended responses, likely because many residents have normalized to it, while those most affected express it strongly in qualitative comments.

5. Priorities for the Next Three to Five Years

Infrastructure and Investment Priorities

Respondents rated seven potential investment areas as High, Medium, Low, or Not a priority for the next three to five years.

Investment Area	High	Medium	Low	Avg. Score*
Repairing and resurfacing key streets	32	38	6	2.34
Creating or improving public riverfront space	32	33	10	2.29

Investment Area	High	Medium	Low	Avg. Score*
Beautification (trees, planters, lighting, art)	34	29	13	2.28
Trail connections (walking/biking routes)	31	29	15	2.21
Improving sidewalks and safer street crossings	24	43	9	2.20
Downtown facade improvements	25	40	11	2.18
Adding family recreation (playgrounds, splash pad)	25	26	24	2.01

*Scale: 3=High priority, 2=Medium priority, 1=Low priority, 0=Not a priority.

Street repair and riverfront space tied for the highest average priority score. Family recreation scored lowest and showed the most divided opinions; a split that tracks closely with respondent age and employment status (see Section 6).

Improvements That Would Benefit Both Residents and Visitors

Respondents selected up to three improvements they felt would benefit both residents and visitors. Counts reflect individual item mentions.

Improvement	# of Mentions
Downtown events (markets, music, festivals)	63
Riverfront park space or viewing areas	56
Small retail shops	53
Trail and bike route connections	36
More dining options	26
Historic or cultural attractions	24
Better signage and wayfinding	7

Downtown events, riverfront space, and small retail each received more than 50 mentions and align closely with what the 2021 Perception Survey identified as missing from a visitor perspective.

Preferred Communication Channels

Respondents ranked preferred ways for the City to share important information (lower average rank = more preferred):

Channel	Avg. Rank
Facebook / social media	2.82
City website	2.91
Email newsletter	2.97
Text alerts	4.08
Mailed letters / postcards	4.79
Notices with utility bills	5.36
Flyers at local businesses / library / City Hall	6.33
Local newspaper or radio	6.94

Digital channels are strongly preferred over traditional methods. Given that younger residents are underrepresented in the survey sample, the preference for social media and text alerts is likely even stronger in the broader community.

6. What Differs by Group

The overall survey numbers tell a broadly unified story, but some meaningful differences emerged between groups. Statistical tests were used to determine which differences are large enough to be reliable rather than random variation.

Retirees vs. Working-Age Residents

Retired respondents (n=25) were compared to employed and self-employed respondents (n=63). Six statistically significant differences were found.

Variable	Retired Avg.	Employed Avg.	p-value
Downtown appearance (condition rating; 1-5)	3.44	3.16	.029
Streets and sidewalks (condition rating; 1-5)	3.46	3.08	.015
Riverfront access (condition rating; 1-5)	3.50	3.07	.015

Variable	Retired Avg.	Employed Avg.	p-value
Trails / walking routes (condition rating; 1-5)	3.00	2.53	.017
Lack of kid/teen recreation (quality-of-life impact; 0-3 scale)	1.00	2.06	.006
"City should focus on residents first" (agreement; 1-5)	3.29	3.57	.047

Retirees rated current infrastructure conditions higher across the board. The largest gap was on the impact of lacking recreation for kids and teens: working-age residents feel this much more acutely (average score of 2.06 vs. 1.00 for retirees). Both groups were equally satisfied overall and equally supportive of attracting visitors.

Full-Time Residents vs. Non-Residents

Full-time residents (n=89) were compared to non-residents (n=28) — a group that includes regular visitors, workers, property owners, and business owners. Two significant differences were found. The non-resident group is relatively small; results should be interpreted directionally.

Variable	Residents Avg.	Non-Residents Avg.	p-value
Riverfront access (condition rating; 1-5 scale)	3.04	3.42	.033
Priority: Improving sidewalks and street crossings (0–3 scale)	2.25	1.71	.033

Full-time residents rate riverfront access significantly lower than non-residents — consistent with people who interact with it regularly feeling its limitations more acutely. Residents also prioritize sidewalk improvements more highly, reflecting daily use. Both groups held nearly identical views on visitor attraction; neither was significantly more concerned about tourism affecting the town's character.

7. Focus Session Findings

Morning Community Session

Walkability and connectivity

Participants described sidewalks, trail connections, and the ability to move between different parts of town as a fundamental gap — one that affects seniors, families with young children, and visitors on foot alike.

“If you're going to get seniors walking around, it's important.”

A related finding came from individual interviews conducted alongside the focus sessions:

“There is nowhere to sit in the business district. No benches, no public seating of any kind.”

For older residents and visitors on foot, the absence of seating limits how long people can comfortably spend time downtown and how likely they are to step into nearby businesses.

Nature is the top asset, but access feels limited

The river, bluffs, night sky, and wildlife were praised throughout the session. But participants described access as hard to find, not publicly advertised, or simply absent.

“We're sandwiched between this beautiful river and the beautiful bluffs, but there's no way to access either of them.”

Hidden assets and the information gap

Some of Fountain City's best features — a beach near the sand piles, a bluff trail near the sourdough hut, local delivery services — are unknown even to longtime residents. Three different participants said “that's something I wasn't aware of” when these came up. Part of what looks like an amenity gap is actually a communication gap that could be addressed at low cost through better maps, signage, and a simple visitor guide.

Small-business viability depends on communication

Business owners described how poor communication during road construction or detours can wipe out sales for two to three weeks. This is not a long-term infrastructure issue; it is something the City can address now by establishing a basic protocol for notifying businesses before work begins.

“That following Wednesday, nothing, for two or three weeks. We finally found out what happened.”

Property conditions: fix it up, don't just tear it down

Participants are frustrated with eyesores and vacant properties, but the preferred solution is attracting the right tenants to renovated spaces, not demolition.

“It's not necessarily about tearing down and replacing it; it's about attracting the right business to take over the lease in that position.”

Student Focus Session

Teenagers have almost nowhere to go

The only place students consistently named as somewhere they actually spend time was the corner store because it has Wi-Fi and isn't a bar or restaurant. For anything else (i.e., skating, kayaking, hiking, shopping, gyms, festivals) they leave town for Winona, La Crosse, Buffalo City, or Alma.

*"There's not a lot to do other than walking around or going to the corner store."
"If friends come from out of town... we usually go to Winona or La Crosse."*

The river is the community's best asset — and teenagers can't get to it

Students love the river. They also described it as effectively off-limits without a boat. They specifically asked for a public beach they can reach on foot, and pointed to the Cove near Buffalo City as exactly the kind of place they would use. The survey data backs this up: the six under-18 respondents rated riverfront access as Poor in nine of ten cases.

"A lot of people wouldn't have access to a boat to go to a beach. People just drive along the river until they find an open beach."

The softball complex needs work

Students spent significant time lamenting the state of the softball complex: deteriorating dugouts, a removed batting cage, no shade, poor maintenance. They compared it directly and unfavorably to facilities in Buffalo City and Cochrane.

"Compared to Buffalo City and Cochrane fields... I didn't really want to play at the Fountain City field."

Small investments could make a real difference

Students were not asking for major projects. They named a skate park, a dog park, a boardwalk, a batting cage, improved softball facilities, a public beach, and small retail destinations as the kinds of things that would give people a reason to stay in town.

"If there were more little shops, I feel like people would stay."

8. What Respondents Said They'd Change

Survey respondents were asked what one thing they would change about public space in Fountain City in the next three to five years. The most common themes, in order of frequency:

- Restore or create a community swimming pool or splash pad — mentioned more than any other single item, by respondents of all ages
- Improve river access: expanded boat landing, a public beach, more docks, wheelchair-accessible amenities
- Extend or improve bike and walking trails
- Improve the park and ball field: better facilities, more shade, updated seating, general maintenance
- More businesses downtown: restaurants, retail, a coffee shop
- Fix the roads
- Reopen the library

The pool came up more than anything else. It appeared across age groups, in the focus sessions, in 2021 open-ends, and in the student session. It has been a consistent community ask for years.

9. Who Responded

		Count	Share
Gender	Female	40	56%
	Male	32	44%
Age	Under 18	6	6%
	18–24	3	3%
	25–34	7	7%
	35–44	23	22%
	45–54	18	17%
	55–64	16	15%
	65–74	14	13%
	75 or older	15	14%
Employment*	Employed full-time	48	52%
	Retired	25	27%
	Self-employed	11	12%
	Other	8	9%
Residence	Full-time resident	89	70%

		Count	Share
	Visitor / part-time / other	39	30%
Housing	Homeowner	67	79%
	Renter	6	7%
	Live with family	9	11%

**Employment data from online respondents only.*

Not every respondent answered every question, which is why some totals above do not add up to 128.

The survey skews toward middle-aged and older homeowners — a typical pattern for community planning surveys. Respondents under 25 make up fewer than 10% of the sample. This is why the student focus session matters: it is the only place in this process where young people spoke directly, and their input should be weighted accordingly.