



STILLWATER THRIVING PROJECT STILLWATER, OKLAHOMA

THRIVING CITIES LAB
INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDIES IN CULTURE



THRIVING CITIES LAB

1050
Forward



STILLWATER THRIVING PROJECT

STILLWATER, OKLAHOMA

THRIVING CITIES LAB
INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDIES IN CULTURE
UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

1050 FORWARD

Phase One Report
03.2026



TABLE OF CONTENTS

1 • STILLWATER THRIVING PROJECT PHASE ONE	4
1.1: Executive Summary	4
1.2: Overview of Project and Conceptual Framework	6
1.3: Stillwater Thriving Project Team	7
1.4: Acknowledgments	9
1.5: Thriving Cities Civic Endowment Framework	10
1.6: Stillwater Thriving Survey Word Cloud	11
1.7: Stillwater Overall Thriving Score	12
2 • FINDINGS BY ENDOWMENT	13
2.1: The True	13
2.2: The Beautiful	16
2.3: The Good, 1050 Forward Civic Challenge	19
2.4: The Just & Well-Ordered	24
2.5: The Prosperous	27
2.6: The Sustainable	30
3 • APPENDICES	33
Appendix 1: Civic Capacity	33
Appendix 2: Priorities and Obstacles	36
Appendix 3: Key Sources for this Report	38

1 • STILLWATER THRIVING PROJECT PHASE ONE

1.1: Executive Summary

The Stillwater Thriving Project (STP) is an initiative of the Thriving Cities Lab at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture at the University of Virginia in collaboration with 1050 Forward. The Thriving Cities Lab works from the Civic Endowment Framework and its six classical and contemporary “civic endowments,” an interpretive and analytical approach to well-being and contemporary community life developed through fifteen years of research and study in partnership with pilot cities and research sites across the country. The goal of our work is to foster new networks within a city and to provide themes, analysis, survey and quantitative data to foster conversations among a city’s formal and informal leaders, to mobilize new overlapping networks to take up the challenge of helping their city thrive.

KEY THEMES

Each endowment section in the report below includes survey ratings, quotations from open responses, and summary observations for further exploration within and across endowment groups. Listed here are major themes that emerged from our study:

A proud college town with high trust (Across the endowments): Community pride and civic trust are enormous advantages across all endowments and Stillwater scores highly in both. (See the civic capacity survey in Appendix 1 for details.) Of particular note, we found near universal appreciation for the role that Oklahoma State University plays in the ongoing life of Stillwater. Two related questions run through many of the responses: How can the Stillwater community benefit more from the presence of a major university within its city limits? And how can these benefits be extended to a larger share of the city’s residents?

Non-profit board leadership (The Good): Survey responses from a group with extensive non-profit board experience emphasized the importance of clearly and publicly-presented organizational leadership and evidence of impact in deciding whether they will join a non-profit board.

Greater collaboration in the non-profit community (The Good): The call for working together included the university and the city, but several leaders also noted the potential for more of Stillwater’s churches to support local non-profits whose missions align with the churches’ mandates to care for those in need in their community.

Housing affordability (The Prosperous and The Just & Well-Ordered): Until recently, Stillwater appeared on lists of affordable places to live. Along with most of the country, Stillwater's home prices and rents have risen quickly in the last few years, and community leaders in our sample were not aware of a coordinated response being formulated or executed at any level of government or in the private sector.

Ambivalence about growth (The Prosperous): We found divided opinion on the question of growth for Stillwater, with many community leaders advocating for specific kinds of growth—technology jobs, economic development that contributes to the tax base, increased opportunities for OSU graduates to stay in the community—and others lamenting the effects of what they see as a poorly managed expansion of the student rental market and lack of restaurant and entertainment options that do not target students.

Social Institutions (The True, The Good, and The Sustainable): The city is proud of its educational institutions and their students. Nevertheless, the community is marked by high rates of poverty, with accompanying social challenges that seem to fall disproportionately on grandparent caregivers and young families. There was an openness in conversations at the initial convening to a broader approach to understanding and addressing these needs.

Cultural Assets (The Beautiful and The Good): The Lot 34 project was mentioned frequently as a very encouraging example, with calls for more investment in public art and event meeting spaces. While the initiative was universally regarded as a success, a number of participants noted its long journey to completion and called for streamlined processes to expedite the next promising community development project.

University Town Common Features (Across the endowments): Our research highlighted challenges common to university communities: downward pressure on wages, upward pressure on rents, difficulty with city planning and zoning, potential for the presence of tens of thousands of students to include and to mask populations in need, perennial tax base fears, tendencies toward bimodality (highs and lows) in education levels and K–12 school performance as well as the distribution of income.

Collaboration and Shared Responsibility (Across the endowments): A strong desire for greater collaboration across all organizations and all aspects of the community was a remarkably consistent theme in the survey and convening results, presenting the leaders and citizens of Stillwater with a promising path forward.

PHASE ONE PROCESS

Stillwater was chosen as a national pilot city because of its work with the 1050 Forward project and the local leadership team they had already assembled. Thriving Cities Lab leaders introduced the Civic Endowment Framework at convenings in Stillwater on November 9, 2025, with more than 45 Stillwater leaders in attendance representing all six of the endowment areas. At these initial meetings, we asked participants to evaluate their city and their role in helping it thrive. This effort was organized by Stillwater's 1050 Forward Fellows, Bryan Larison (project liaison), Ruth Cavin, Michelle Nabors, and Denise Webber. We administered a civic capacity survey at our initial convenings and followed up with our "stakeholder survey," which received 33 responses. After the November convening, the Thriving Cities Lab undertook project research on Stillwater and its institutions and, when the survey was completed on December 31, analyzed the survey data with key findings included below. The data team during this period reviewed and compiled publicly accessible data and reports comparing Stillwater to similarly-sized small communities in Oklahoma and across the U.S.

The purpose of Phase One is to introduce the leaders of a community to the endowment framework and to establish a baseline for its thriving, to capture a sense of how the community sees and values its own categories of The True, The Good, The Beautiful, The Just & Well-Ordered, The Prosperous, and The Sustainable. Because the framework provides new language and new ways of bringing together the city's institutions and leaders, it enables unlikely connections and new opportunities for collaboration and the identification of overlapping interests. This Phase One Report focuses on the endowment of The Good, with particular emphasis on questions related to non-profit organizations and non-profit board leadership in Stillwater, before presenting information on the other five endowments. A key feature of our reporting model is the inclusion of the voices of leaders in Stillwater, so each endowment summary features quotations from selected open-ended survey responses, without attribution and lightly edited for clarity.

1.2: Overview of Project and Conceptual Framework

The Thriving Cities Lab is an extension of the thought and work of the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture at the University of Virginia, founded by cultural sociologist James Davison Hunter. The Stillwater Thriving Project (STP) builds upon the ambitious, interdisciplinary, multi-million-dollar research infrastructure of the Thriving Cities Lab, and benefits from its deep bank of research assets.

The basis of the Thriving Cities approach is a broadly humanistic and dynamic approach to civic life. We start from the premise that each city can be described in terms of an array of different but fundamental endowments—in this case, they are moral, intellectual, aesthetic, economic, political, and natural. These endowments include the three classical ideals—The Good, The True, and The Beautiful—to which we join three additional categories—The Prosperous, The Just & Well-Ordered, and The Sustainable. We call these six the "endowments" because, like financial endowments, they can grow over long periods of time and may be depleted by mismanagement or neglect.

To effect movement toward cultural change requires a small group of leaders from each of these endowments, working with a common vocabulary and shared goals. The groups most successful in effecting such changes are characterized by deep, cross-endowment collaboration, frequent discussion, and early-stage agreement on benchmarks and long-term goals. Leaders engaged in such collaborative initiatives reinforce complementary missions and benefit from overlapping concerns, solving mutually agreed upon civic problems together.

The Thriving Cities Lab brings together external data and historical sources with the wisdom and perspective of community stakeholders, inviting local leaders to evaluate the strengths and challenges of their city, to consider how the endowments interact, to identify new solutions to commonly understood problems, and to build new coalitions for human flourishing in the community.

Using this conceptual framework, this study engaged community leaders from all spheres of civic life to reflect on Stillwater's progress in each of these endowments and to contribute to a collective and holistic definition of community success. In so doing, these leaders could see their work and their city through a new lens, the first step in moving beyond the limitations of the status quo and creating together the conditions for their city to thrive in the future.

1.3: Stillwater Thriving Project Team

Dr. Ty Buckman (project lead) serves as Co-Director of the Thriving Cities Lab and Director and Senior Fellow of the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture. A former provost and professor of English, Buckman has served as a strategic planning consultant and accreditation peer reviewer at more than thirty colleges and universities across the U.S. He holds a PhD in English Literature from the University of Virginia.

Dr. Scott Roulier (project organizer) is Co-Director of the Thriving Cities Lab and a Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture at the University of Virginia. He is author of *Shaping American Democracy: Landscapes and Urban Design* and *Kantian Virtue at the Intersection of Politics and Nature: The Vale of Soul-Making*. Roulier received his PhD in Politics from the University of Virginia.

Sherese Chee Mook (project consultant) is Assistant Director of the Thriving Cities Lab. A multidisciplinary professional with a strong academic foundation, she has deep experience as a business consultant, corporate trainer and advisor to C-suite executives across multinational companies and financial institutions and brings a globally informed, systems-thinking approach to building thriving institutions and communities. Based in Brooklyn, New York, she is a MEXT and DFID scholar with multiple degrees, including a BA, MA, LLM and MBA.

Dr. Ed Hasecke (data team lead) is a political scientist in Washington, DC and the Dean and Executive Director of the Lutheran College Washington Consortium. He previously served as Professor of Political Science and Director of the Hagen Center for Civic and Urban Engagement at Wittenberg University in Springfield, Ohio, where he led the development of a community data repository and dashboard as a campus-city joint venture. He holds a PhD in Political Science from Ohio State University.

Dr. Brendan Connell (survey design) is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Lyon College. He is an expert on comparative political economy, and his research on migration and public opinion has appeared in multiple academic journals. He holds a PhD in Political Science from the University of Colorado at Boulder and an MA from American University.

Caroline Daniel (project manager) has had leadership roles in several social service agencies and non-profits in greater Atlanta, where she is also active on the boards of school, community, and church groups. She received her BA in Social Rehabilitation Services and Psychology from Assumption University.

Kristen Evangelista (project researcher) is a freelance writer and researcher based in New Jersey. She has a background in curation, arts administration, and grant writing, and received an MA in Curatorial Studies from Bard College.

Branner Graphic Design (production design) is a Charlottesville-based graphic design firm responsible for all Thriving Cities Lab branding and design, as well as the editing and production of all city-specific reports. Owner, Beth Branner Gore, holds a bachelor of fine arts degree with a concentration in graphic design from James Madison University.

Dr. Taylor Hafley (demographer) is the Applied Demographer at the University of Georgia's Carl Vinson Institute of Government. Taylor's demographic research and data analysis supports state agencies and local governments as a part of the Workforce and Economic Development Division. Among his projects, Taylor partners with the Governor's Office of Planning and Budget to produce county-state population projections. Hafley holds his PhD in Geography from the University of Georgia.

Fly Squirrel Films (film partners) principals Miriam McSpadden and Brian Beckman are multiple Emmy award-winning filmmakers based in Durham, North Carolina. Their boutique film production company's many national clients include PBS, ESPN, NBC, and Peacock. Their full-length documentary three years in the making chronicling the heroic quest of an MLS survivor to complete marathons in all fifty states, *Go On, Be Brave*, won awards on the national festival circuit in 2024. McSpadden holds a degree in television production from Pepperdine University and Beckman has a BS in biology from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

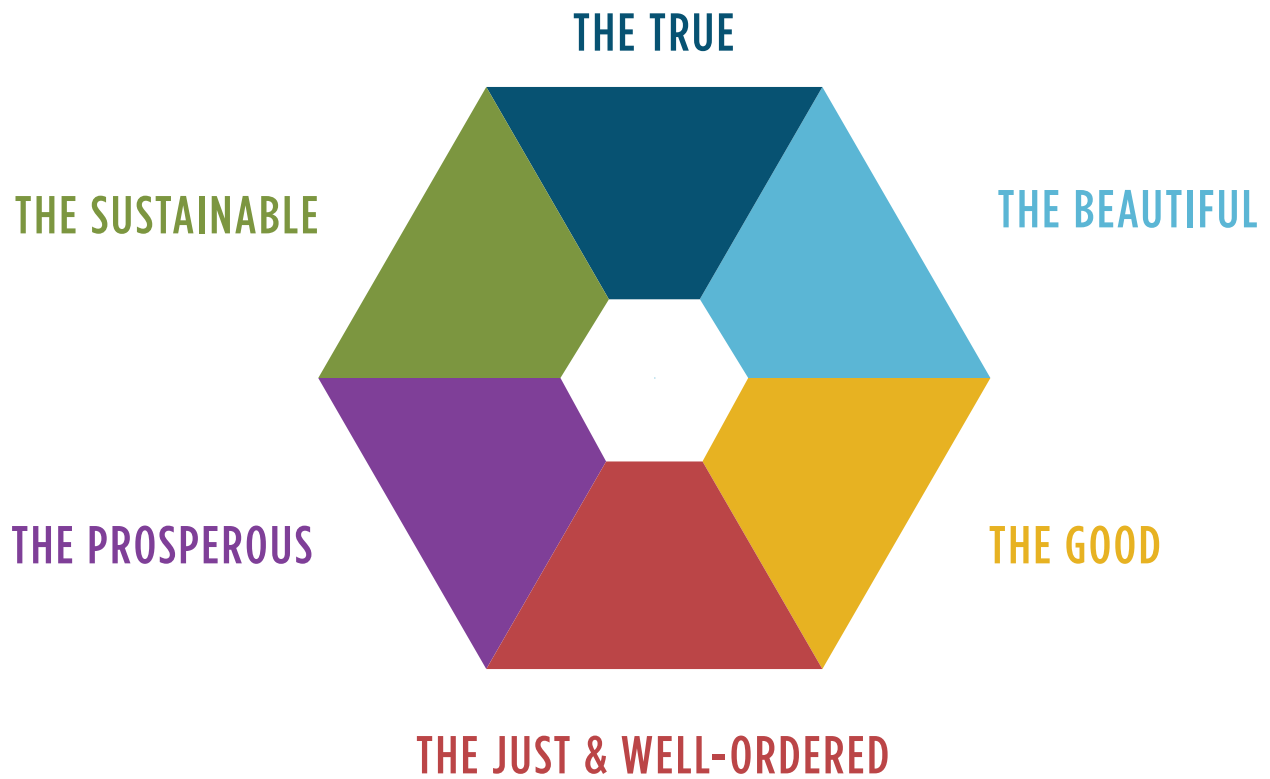
1.4: Acknowledgments

The Thriving Cities Lab would like to thank Oklahoma-based non-profit 1050 Forward, under the leadership of Consulting Director Joy Hofmeister and Assistant Director Brigitte Zorn, as well as Daniel Stid for convening the event at which we met Joy and Brigitte. The project could not have been undertaken without generous financial support from the George Kaiser Family Foundation and the William & Flora Hewlett Foundation, and the contributions of fellows and staff of the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture at the University of Virginia, under the leadership of Executive Director James Davison Hunter.

Our work in Stillwater was facilitated by 1050 Forward Fellows Bryan Larison (project liaison), Ruth Cavin, Michelle Nabors, and Denise Webber. We are also grateful for the many Stillwater community members who joined endowment group discussions and completed surveys.

We also would like to thank the dozens of partners who worked closely with us in our two previous pilot cities, in Gainesville, Florida and Cave City, Arkansas. The research that led to the founding of the Thriving Cities Lab was conducted by sociologists James Davison Hunter and Joshua J. Yates at the University of Virginia. (See their co-edited volume, *Thrift and Thriving in America: Capitalism and Moral Order from the Puritans to the Present* (Oxford UP, 2011).

1.5: Thriving Cities Civic Endowment Framework



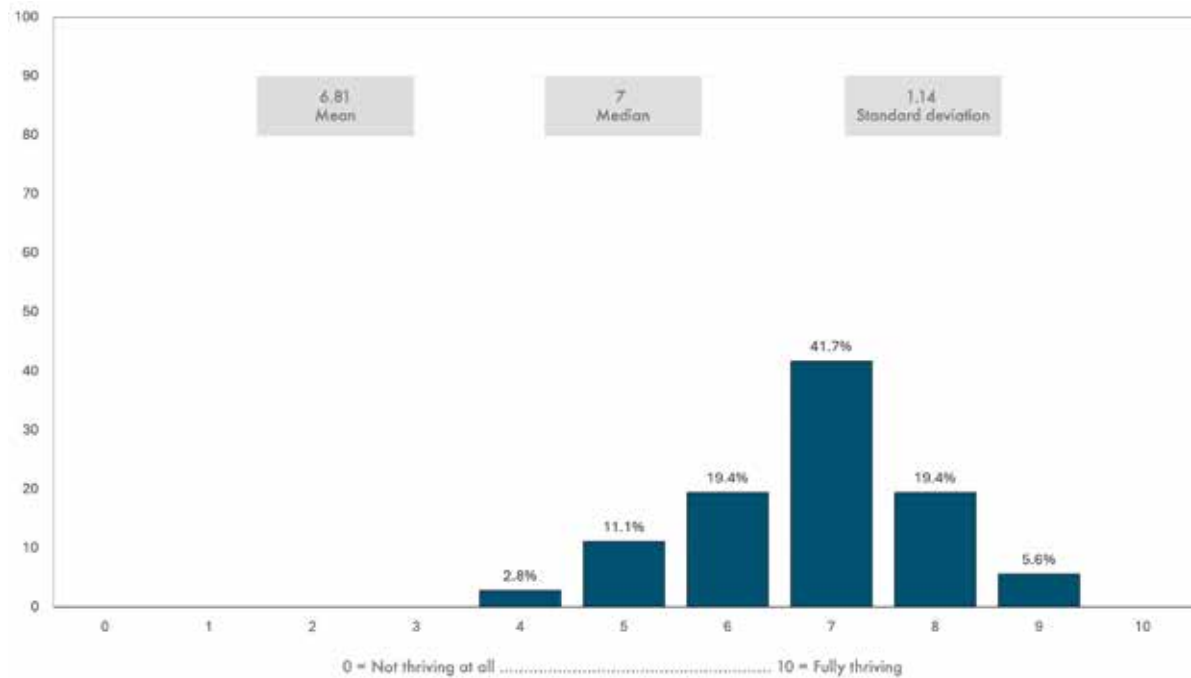
1.6: Stillwater Thriving Survey Word Cloud

According to community leaders, what would thriving look like in Stillwater?



1.7: Stillwater Overall Thriving Score

With the characteristics of thriving in mind, how would you evaluate Stillwater at present?
6.8 on a ten-point scale



2 • FINDINGS BY ENDOWMENT



THE TRUE

2.1: The True—The realm of human knowledge and learning (e.g., schools, media, libraries)

The True: Voices from Stillwater

“Stillwater is fortunate to be an education mecca, where our public school systems rank high on a national average, there is access to alternative education, career readiness and more.”

•

“Stillwater is truly an ‘education community.’ With Stillwater Public Schools, Meridian Tech, Career Tech, NOC, OSU, really, just wow! All are engaged and visible in the community. This is why we came here and this is why we have stayed for decades.”

•

“The schools take credit for the success of students whose parents have advanced degrees. For someone paying attention, we see what is broken, no one talks about it because no one wants to start a conversation that can’t be reasonably addressed.”

•

“If Stillwater could only work together to keep more OSU students here after graduation it would be a huge benefit.”

•

“I think the political environment does not help Oklahoma with teacher retention or compensation. People we educate in the universities that could fulfill that need leave. This also effects other businesses such as the hospital with need for skilled professional nurses. They end up leaving as well.”

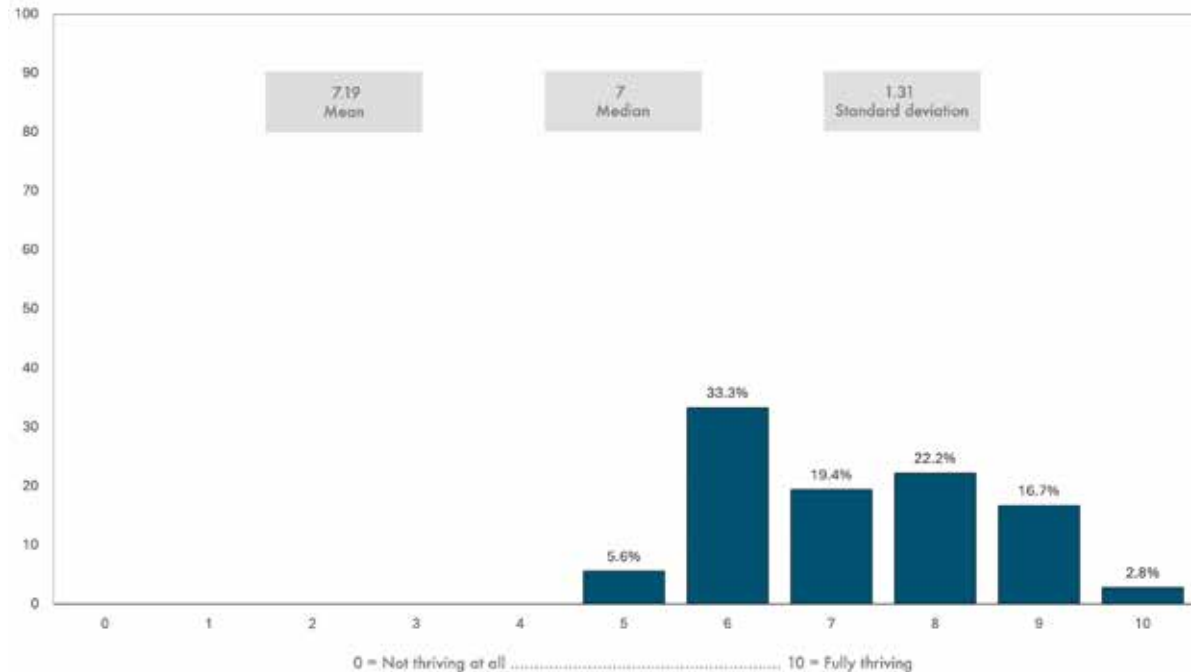
•

“A partnership with the High School to create internships with local businesses could help guide students to career choices earlier and provide much needed employees for the community.”

Community Survey Results

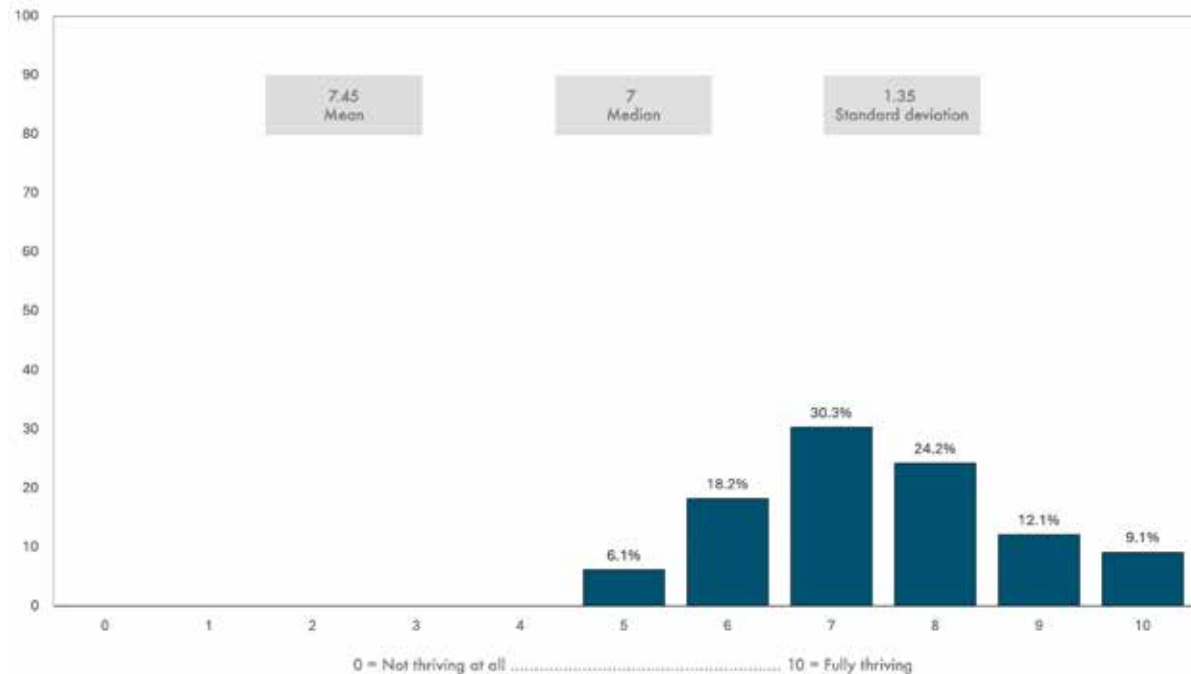
**Thinking only about the endowment of *The True*,
how would you evaluate Stillwater's level of thriving?**

7.2 on a ten-point scale



**Thinking only about the endowment of *The True*,
how would you describe the effectiveness of the local schools?**

7.5 on a ten-point scale



Analysis

Human knowledge and learning, the scope of the endowment of The True in the Thriving Cities framework, remain central to Stillwater's identity and self-perception. The university features largely in this discussion, of course, but the local schools also received high marks from the leaders who took the survey. As was the case throughout our study, participants called for greater collaboration and communication between the city and the university, with some proposing partnerships between and across types of schools. It is worth noting that some respondents stated that they feel like their needs and concerns are overshadowed by the community's inordinate focus on OSU. Leaders in The True could explore an education summit to bring together key actors—willing to participate with other student-serving institutions. In these cases, representatives of each organization or category must be very carefully chosen to bring those with genuine interest in conversation and collaboration to the table.



THE BEAUTIFUL

2.2: The Beautiful—The realm of creativity, aesthetics, and design (e.g., art, architecture and urban design)

The Beautiful: Voices from Stillwater

“Enhance the beauty of our community to follow the example of the beautiful OSU campus.”

•

“We need more art throughout the city.”

•

“We are getting better at more collaborative efforts around this in our community.
Block 34 is an example of this but...man...it took a LONG time to get there.”

•

“I’m seeing a growth in arts and beautification in Stillwater, with our mural projects and different art scenes. I feel we have opportunities to do more for beautification through updated city code and enforcement in our neighborhoods.”

•

“We are on the right path towards being a community that takes pride in place.
If only we could maximize the talent and expertise to accelerate our progress.
This requires the local government and OSU to become enablers rather than gate keepers.
Quicker paths to ‘Yes’ and longer paths to ‘No.’”

•

“We have a great theatre scene, but could greatly benefit from more arts partnerships and collaborations.”

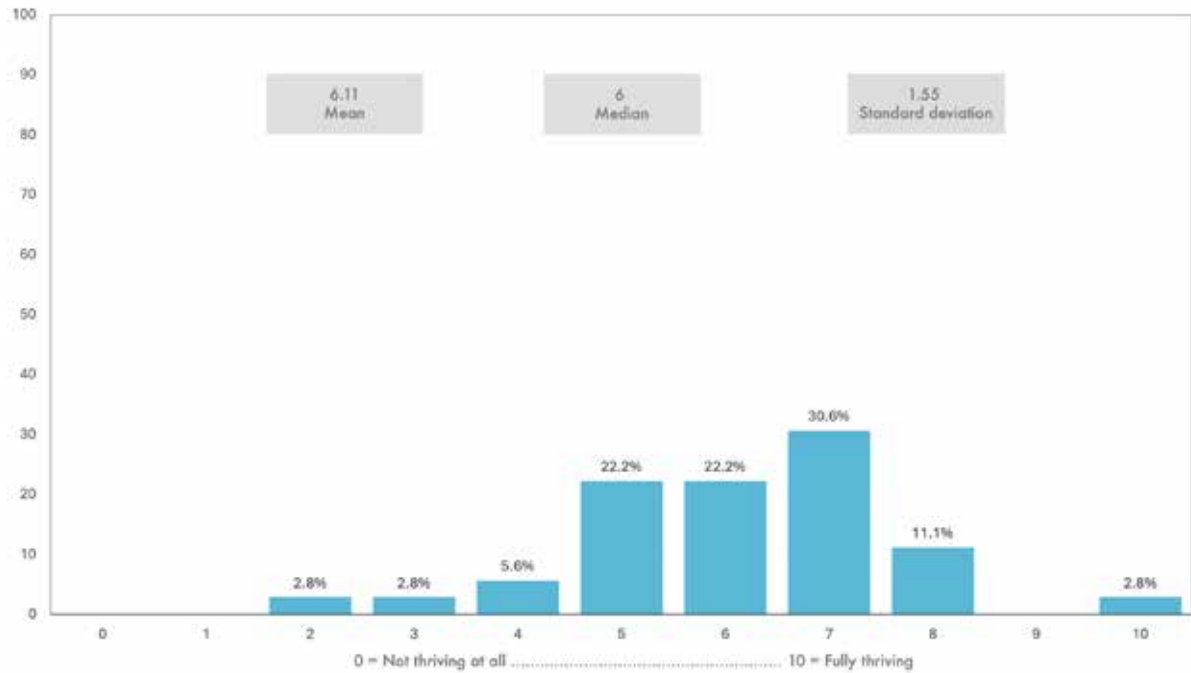
•

“On the plus side, we are extremely fortunate in the area of the arts with the McKnight Center, OSU’s theater and music school presentations, etc. We could do considerably better with respect to city planning, but it won’t be easy.”

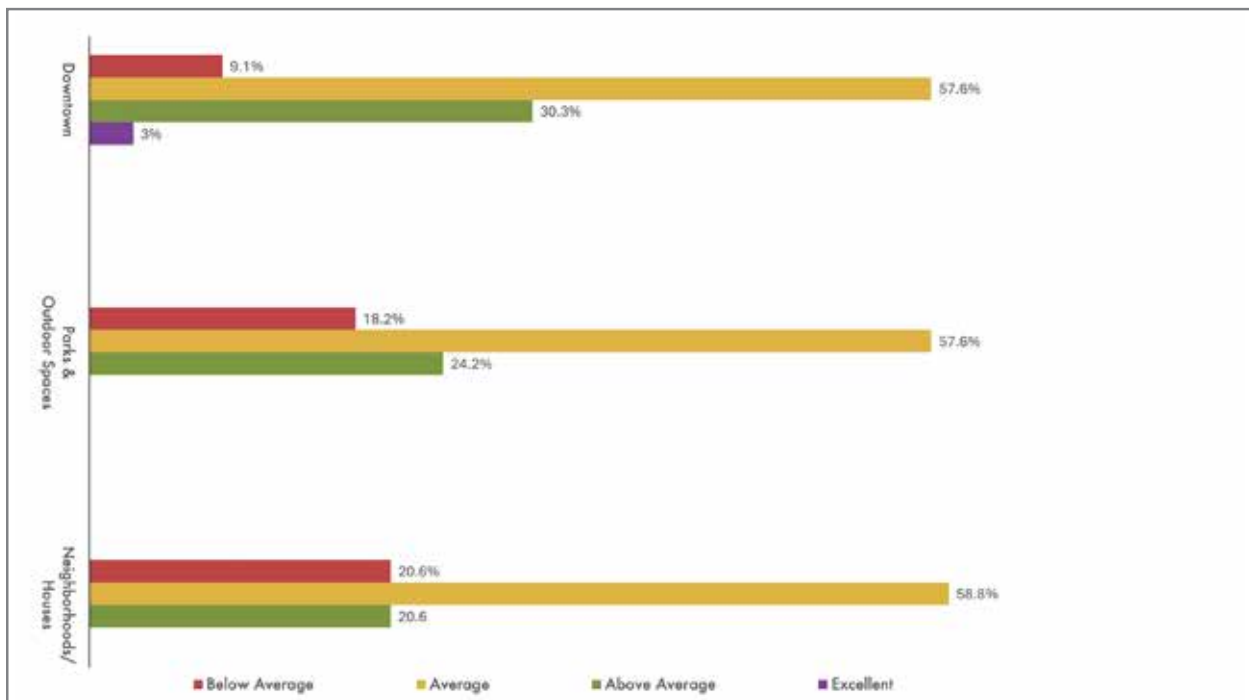
Community Survey Results

Thinking only about *The Beautiful*, how would you evaluate Stillwater's level of thriving?

6.1 on a ten-point scale



Thinking only about the endowment of *The Beautiful*,
how would you evaluate the following aspects of Stillwater?



Analysis

With the endowment of The Beautiful, middling survey scores and the preponderance of comments point to an area for greater focus in the community. The general thriving score for this endowment is the lowest among the six endowments. Individual questions about parks and outdoor spaces and then neighborhoods and downtown also registered strong support for describing the public aesthetics as average. As some of the quotations from the open-ended survey responses attest, there were allusions to improved zoning rules and more stringent enforcement, as well as a call to address the challenge of student rental properties to historic or merely non-transient neighborhoods. Support for more public art represents an obvious area for collaboration with the university, in addition to the more difficult conversations about a student rental market that involves, in addition to on-campus university housing decisions, the actions of private landlords over which the university exercises little direct authority. Neighborhood-level organizing and conversations, perhaps organized or catalyzed by leaders in the endowment of The Beautiful, could help bridge the gap between concerned citizens and university leaders.



THE GOOD

2.3: The Good—The realm of social mores and ethics (e.g., service and religious organizations)

1050 FORWARD CIVIC CHALLENGE FOCUS AREA: NON-PROFIT BOARD LEADERSHIP

What would inspire you to serve on a non-profit board?

“I want to serve on non-profit boards that are mission driven, meet a specific community need, are well-led, and reputable.”



“Well-trained board members who understand their responsibilities and are committed to serving well. Reasonable term limits would be a consideration, too.”



“Joining a team where I can lend my expertise and experience to help shoulder the load. The organization doesn’t have to be thriving but it would help if they had a clear path to solutions.”



“Knowing that there would be less going around in circles theorizing and more making definite, evidence-based plans and executing them.”

What would hold you back from agreeing to serve on a non-profit board?

“If they cannot identify what the expectations are for board members, or what the organization plans to accomplish or focus on for 3 years, it’s typically not a good fit for me.”

•

“Continual theorizing and duplicating other entities.”

•

“Poor communication within the organization.”

•

“I would want to see all of the financials.”

•

“Financial insecurity, lack of leadership, unclear mission.”

Additional comments:

“Stillwater has many, many service and religious organizations. We really need a way to know each other, connect, and collaborate. I do think this would bring Stillwater close to exceptional.”

•

“Could be a lot more secular non-profits being supported by religious funds.”

•

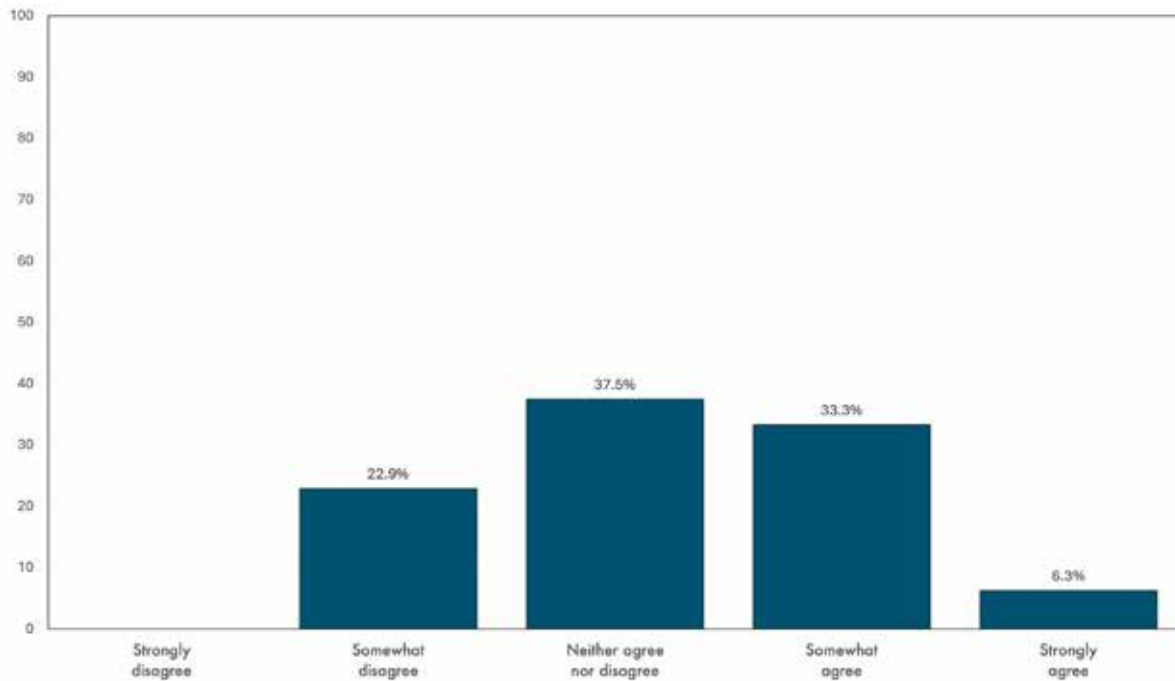
“So many strong organizations, but I wonder if some that are doing similar work could combine their efforts so we don’t have so many different organizations?”

•

“I suspect this may be the case with other university towns, but I believe the non-profits in Stillwater compete heavily for local donations with OSU and their fundraising initiatives. They also compete for board leadership. OSU has a bigger megaphone and communications arm; they tend to overshadow the non-profit needs in Stillwater.”

Civic Capacity Statement

“The community has a good process in place to recruit and develop leaders.”



Analysis

NON-PROFIT BOARD LEADERSHIP (FOCUS AREA)

Stillwater’s 1050 Forward Fellows identified declining participation on non-profit boards in their community as their 100 Day Civic Challenge. Their goals were twofold: to fill board seats and to improve board governance so that more social service organizations are well-led and sustained. In Fall 2025, they organized an initiative to equip non-profit board leaders with the knowledge and tools for effective board governance: “BoardReady” was sponsored by Stillwater Medical Center, BancFirst and United Way of Payne County and provided a facilitated three-hour training and non-profit networking event in November, 2025 with 33 attendees. Surveys indicated a very positive response to a successful event. An online resource to connect potential board members with non-profits was launched the next month and plans are in place for the Stillwater Chamber of Commerce to host the next BoardReady training in November, 2026.

In our surveys and in conversations at the Stillwater convening, non-profits that have clearly delineated roles for organizational leadership, including specific expectations and directions for the board, effective financial processes, as well as well-defined goals and a way to measure progress where appropriate, would be most appealing to well-qualified board members.

The Good: Voices from Stillwater

“Most of Stillwater’s social communities are fairly siloed and are difficult to break into.”



“Full inclusion of the economically and socially left out—
plenty of charity to those but I’m not sure how much real love and community there is.”



“Poverty in Stillwater is hard to see—but it is here and it affects so many areas of our community.
From kids, to a growing homeless population, to families feeling forced to shoplift formula,
diapers and food—they are struggling.”



“We need collaborative programs to help families out of poverty,
including affordable and available housing.”



“I do believe Stillwater could amp up its volunteer base and service-learning initiatives,
especially involving retired adults and youth.”

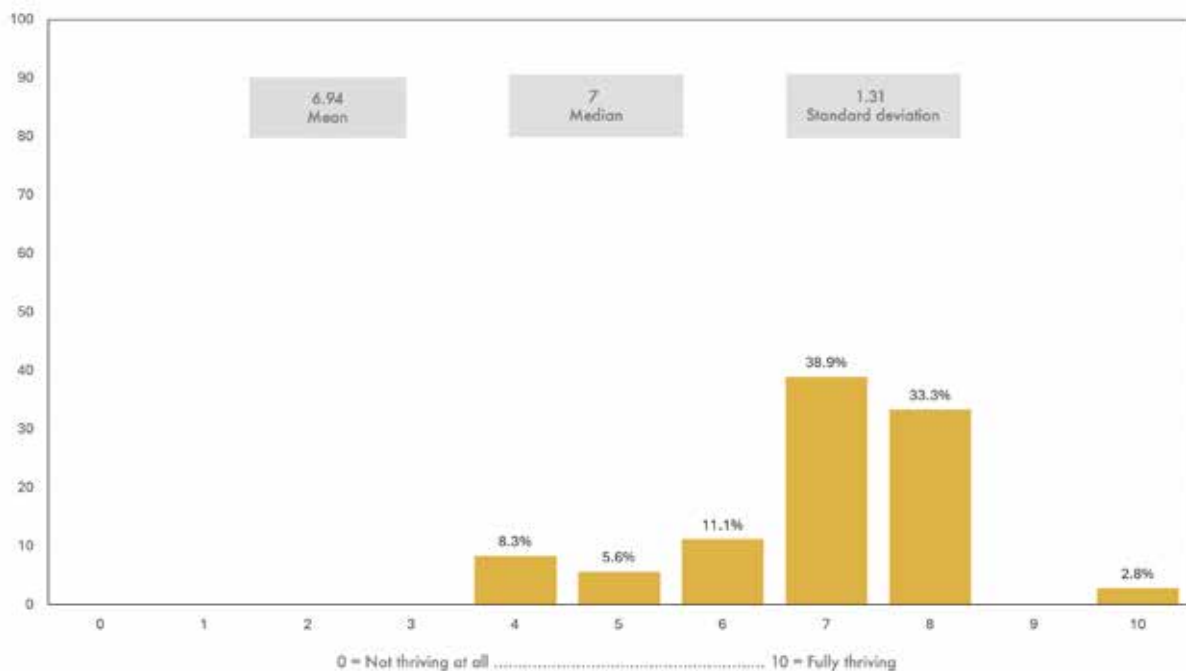


“Stillwater non-profits have a significant amount of duplicated efforts.”

Community Survey Results

**Thinking only about the endowment of *The Good*,
how would you evaluate Stillwater’s level of thriving?**

6.9 on a ten-point scale



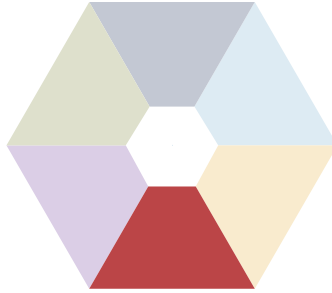
Analysis

The leaders involved in our study had high expectations for their community, calling upon their fellow citizens to not only assist with the material needs of their neighbors but to do so in a way that made them feel welcomed and loved.

COLLABORATION

A consistent theme through the surveys and conversations concerned greater opportunities for connection and collaboration. This was especially true in the area of The Good in general terms, with specific mention of the benefits of religious institutions working together and, crucially, supporting efforts by other non-profits to meet goals that they shared. The shadow created by this perceived lack of coordination was duplication of efforts. The question of whether Stillwater does in fact have multiple non-profits trying to meet the same need or provide the same services is beyond the scope of our study. However, that this is a perception held by some members of the community suggests that more effective communication is in order.

In conversations at the convening, participants in the discussion noted the uneven nature of the funding and resources available to meet the needs of the community, sometimes leaving the greatest priorities comparatively under-resourced. A survey or audit of the needs of the community could be compared to the alignment and deployment of non-profit resources—funding and staff time—might provide greater insight into this dynamic. A more direct approach might be to convene the leaders in the endowment of The Good and ask non-profit leaders to speak candidly with each other about possible resource misalignment and strategize together how to make donors and institutional funders more aware of the full range of community needs. At these convenings, leaders in The Good could also discuss how to better communicate opportunities to serve with their organizations. The participation of college students in the institutions that comprise The Good was not specifically addressed but seems to be an important area of collaboration between the university and the real world city it calls home. This would also be an area for further exploration.



THE JUST & WELL-ORDERED

2.4: The Just & Well-Ordered—The realm of political and civic life (e.g., city planning, local government, law enforcement)

The Just & Well-Ordered: Voices from Stillwater

“Civic engagement at the national and even state level is disappointing. As a nation, we are polarized. Stillwater is somewhat better but not immune to these factors. There are many citizens that are aware, engaged, and even volunteering. There can always be more done here. Leadership Stillwater is a program that has had a positive impact.”

•

“The city leadership is phenomenal. The judicial side of things needs to be evaluated.”

•

“We have had a lot of unfortunate national media attention related to the lack of judicial oversight and failure to fulfill moral and ethical responsibilities at the county level, which reflects poorly on our entire community.”

•

“The town and the university have faced challenges in recent years working together and leadership turnover is a big part of the story.”

•

“Stillwater is beginning to recognize and deal with its economically diverse community.”

•

“The roads and infrastructure need to be improved. Not just repaired over and over again. Fix them right, spend money to make it sustainable.”

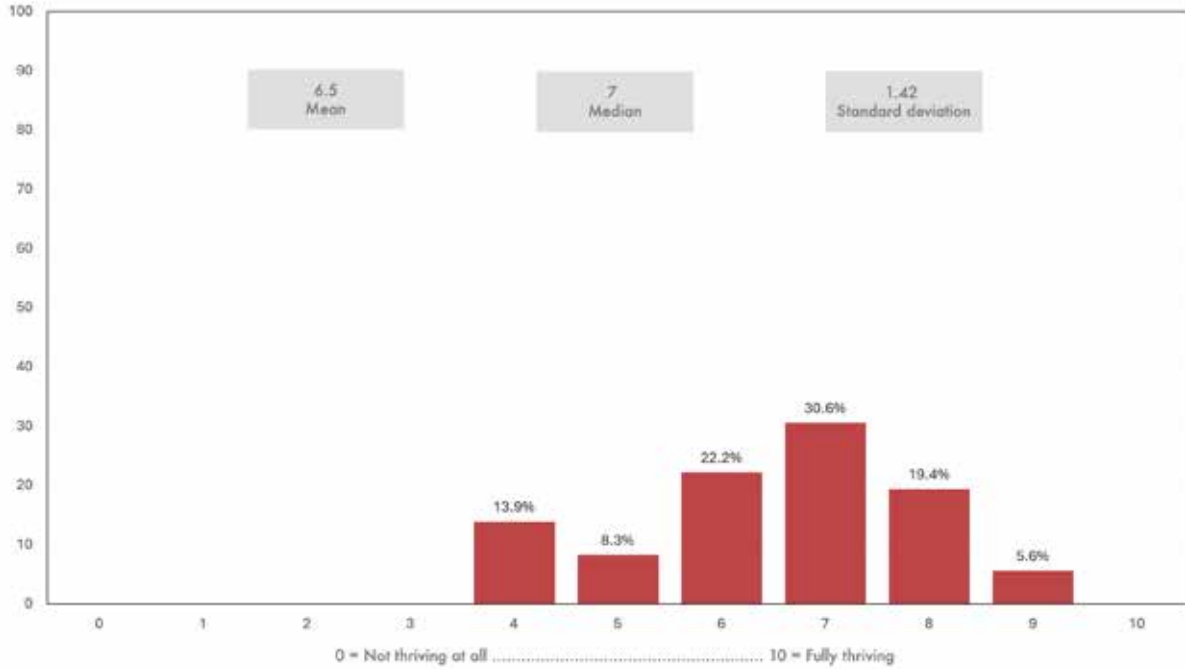
•

“More sidewalks and better crosswalks. Oklahoma does not seem to understand how crosswalks work. This is a safety issue for our children and all community members.”

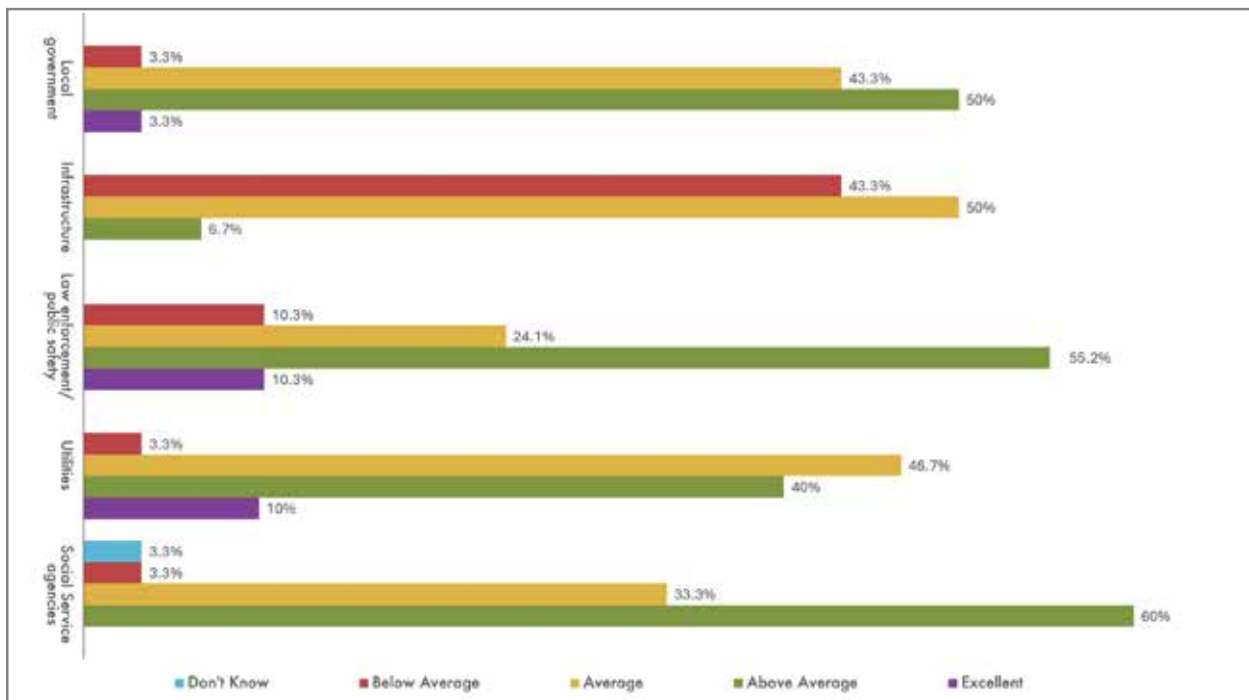
Community Survey Results

Thinking only about the endowment of *The Just & Well-Ordered*,
how would you evaluate Stillwater's level of thriving?

6.5 on a ten-point scale



Thinking only about the endowment of *The Just & Well-Ordered*,
how would you evaluate the following aspects of Stillwater?



Analysis

Stillwater's participating leaders had a lot to say about political and civic life in their city. We found broad support for local political leaders, with decreasing confidence in elected leaders at the county and statewide levels. (Responses, as indicated by the representative survey sample above, referenced recent controversy regarding a district attorney.) The Civic Capacity Survey results included in the appendix to this report provide other perspectives on some of the broad questions explored here, but the key themes seem to be the need for continuity of leadership and unrealized potential for strong leaders to do more good for the city.

CITY SERVICES

The responses to the individual survey questions speak for themselves, as the city's social services, law enforcement, and utilities all receive unusually high scores. These results are in keeping with the high level of optimism that appears in the Civic Capacity Survey and a general belief in the ability of the city to successfully address its challenges. The outlier is the area of 'infrastructure,' which could suggest systemic underinvestment in maintaining and upgrading or modernizing the city's physical assets.



THE PROSPEROUS

2.5: The Prosperous—The realm of economic life (e.g., business development and meaningful work)

The Prosperous: Voices from Stillwater

“We have not capitalized on the talent and creativity coming out of OSU or Meridian’s Incubator to retain skilled professionals in our community. We’re having a hard time recruiting engineers back to Stillwater, with housing being a barrier.”

•

“We need to find innovative, high-paying, tech job opportunities to keep graduating students in Stillwater.”

•

“Retaining and expanding existing businesses should be a priority. Ensuring adequate and quality infrastructure is necessary for continued growth. Again, great momentum, let’s maintain it.”

•

“Focus on collaborative business development and support for small businesses that help our town to thrive. Higher sales and sales tax then goes on to help everyone!”

•

“I think the different leaders in our community are finally at a point where we are working together and collaborating in ways that allow growth and prosperity. We just have to keep that momentum.”

•

“We need consistency among local business development entities, like the Chamber, Meridian and OSU. It seems we reinvent the wheel every time there is a change in leadership.”

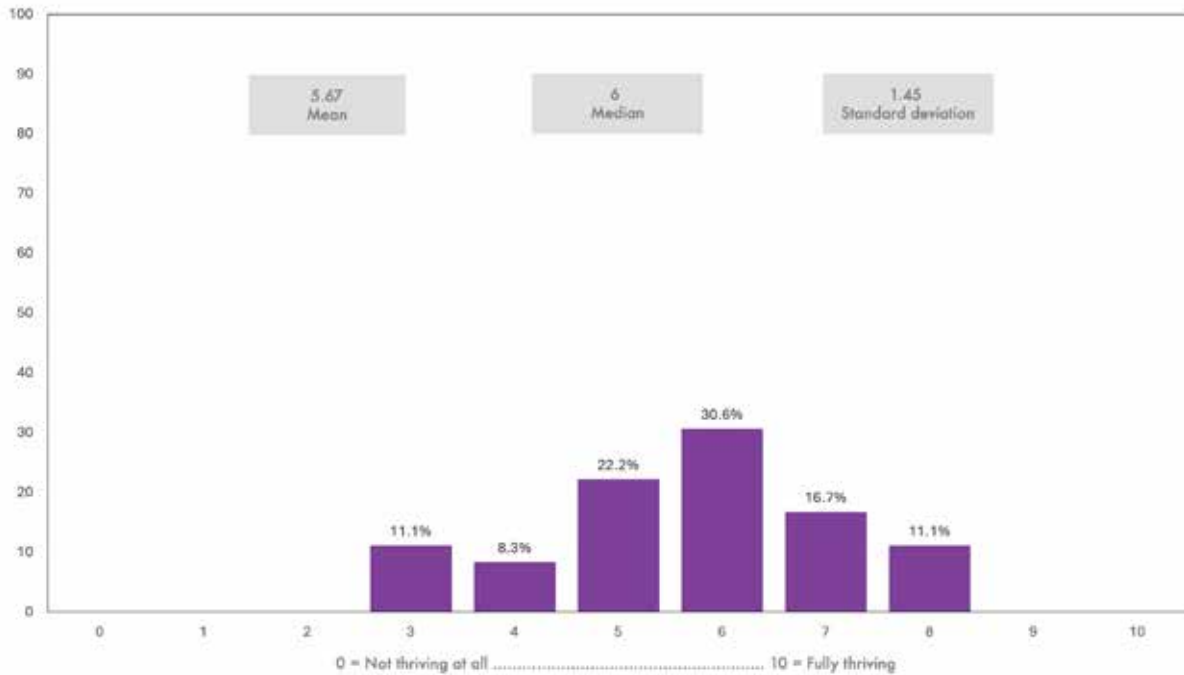
•

“We have a bifurcated society and there are more people living here that are barely making it than what appears to be the case. Without the grandeur of the university buildings this is a fairly impoverished village.”

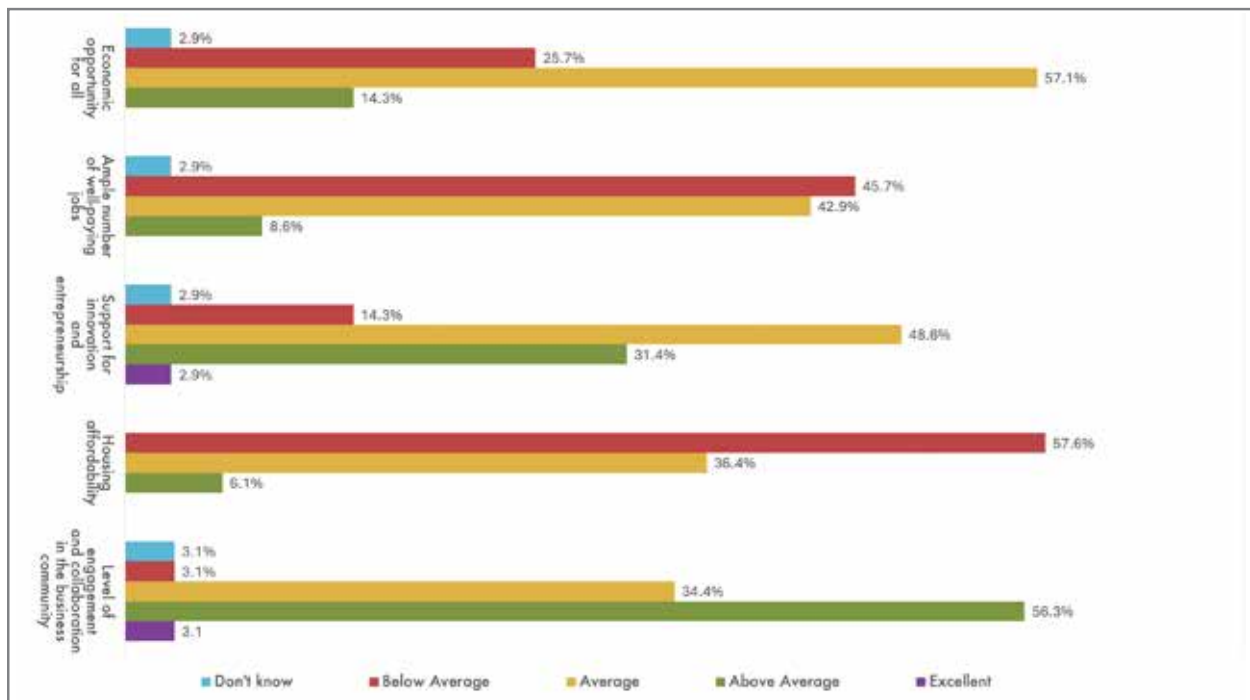
Community Survey Results

**Thinking only about the endowment of *The Prosperous*,
how would you evaluate Stillwater's level of thriving?**

5.7 on a ten-point scale



**Thinking only about the endowment of *The Prosperous*,
how would you evaluate the following aspects of Stillwater?**



Analysis

This is another endowment in which survey responses and conversations at the convening indicated strong optimism and frequent references to Stillwater's momentum. (It is important to note that the high marks given to the business community for engagement and collaboration did not result directly from the members of the endowment of The Prosperous at the convening, but appeared in the broader community leaders survey that followed.) The distribution of economic opportunity was not rated as highly, and innovation and entrepreneurship were slightly better. Dragging down the averages was housing affordability, with 58% of survey respondents rating this key area of civic life below average.

Comments on the survey and with stakeholders suggested that leadership turnover at key institutions and continuity in general could be limiting progress. On the evidence the Thriving Cities Lab was able to gather and review, leaders in the endowment of The Prosperous seem to have the capacity and the energy to offer help in improving the other endowments necessary for their city to thrive.



THE SUSTAINABLE

2.6: The Sustainable—The realm of natural and physical health (e.g. health and wellness organizations, parks and the environment)

The Sustainable: Voices from Stillwater

“On the whole, we are probably well above average for cities our size with respect to quantity and quality of health care providers. Although we have an above average number of parks, they are not particularly well-equipped. We do not have the numbers of youth sports fields that we should have.”



“Natural parks are a draw and good for mental/physical health. I think more resources to sustain the natural beauty and maintain trails would be great.”



“There is an ongoing discussion about parks. Do we maintain the ones we have? Do we need more? Block 34 is a great addition and is an example of a public-private partnership and individual generosity. Roads and bike trails are not so good. The rails to trails effort may address this. I think this area could use more focus and attention.”



“Our healthcare system and resources are stronger than our natural resources.”



“We could use more parks, more spaces for recreation, more fields for organized sports.”



“The city struggles in the shadow of the university to gather the resources we need to offer what you would expect us to already have.”

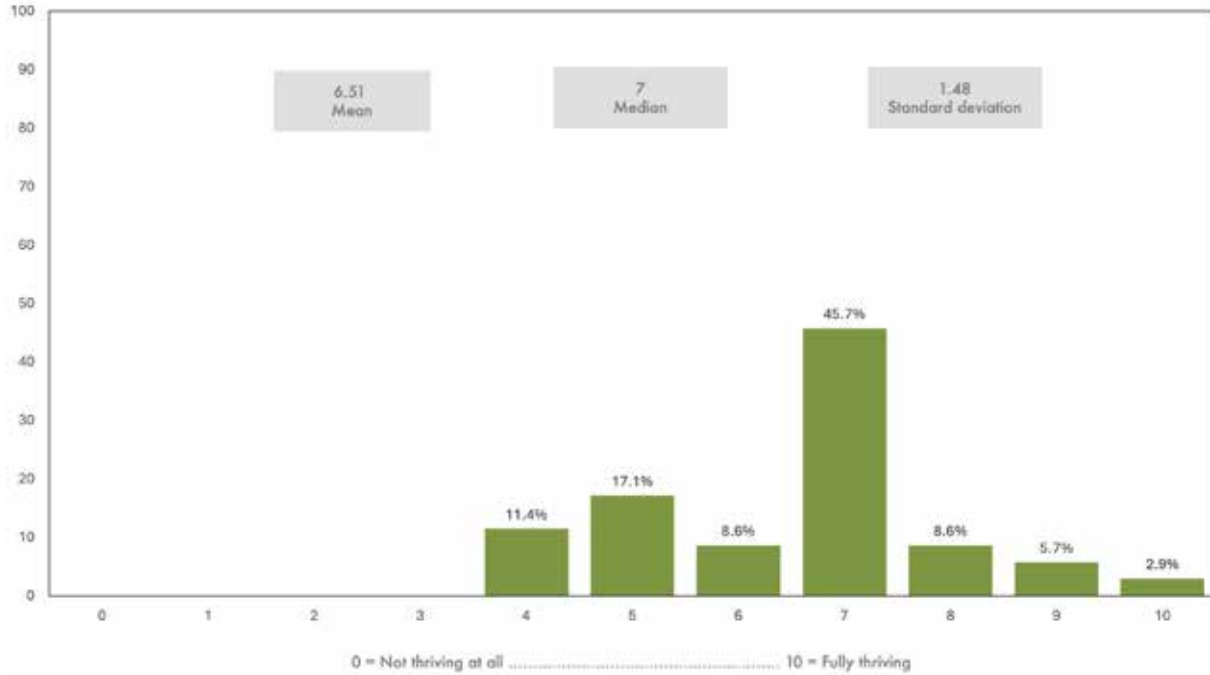


“More focus needs to be on outdoor play, decreasing screen use among children. There needs to be ample and affordable outdoor and active spaces (climbing centers, bikes, swimming pools).”

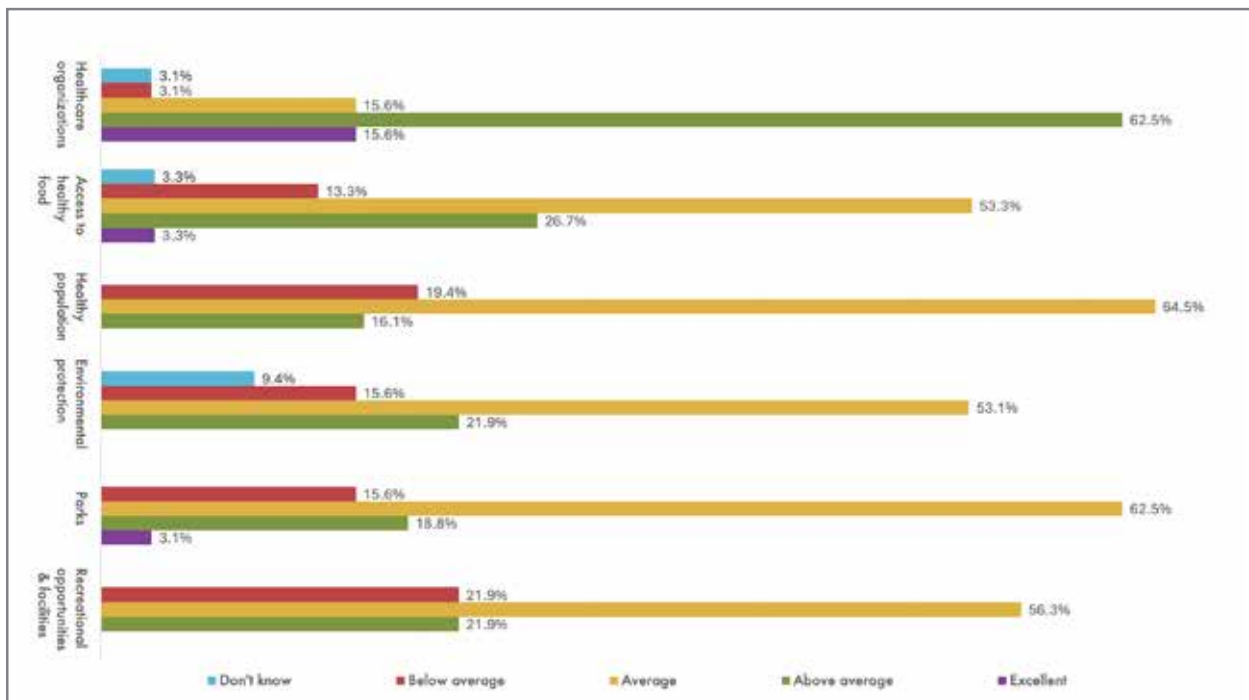
Community Survey Results

Thinking only about the endowment of *The Sustainable*,
how would you evaluate Stillwater's level of thriving?

6.5 on a ten-point scale



Thinking only about the endowment of *The Sustainable*,
how would you evaluate the following aspects of Stillwater?



Analysis

The endowment of The Sustainable combines natural and physical health, recognizing the fundamental linkage between the physical environment in which we live out our lives and the bodily health or challenges to health that result. Stillwater's leaders provide much higher ratings to the availability and excellence of healthcare in their community than to the city's management and presentation of its physical environment. Recreational opportunities, the city's parks, access to healthy food, protection of the local environment, and the general health of the population all received strong scores in the average range. By contrast, the city's healthcare organizations were decisively rated above average. Because Oklahoma State University's medical school is based in Tulsa, these results are not boosted as they are in some university towns by proximity to a prominent medical school.

3 • APPENDICES

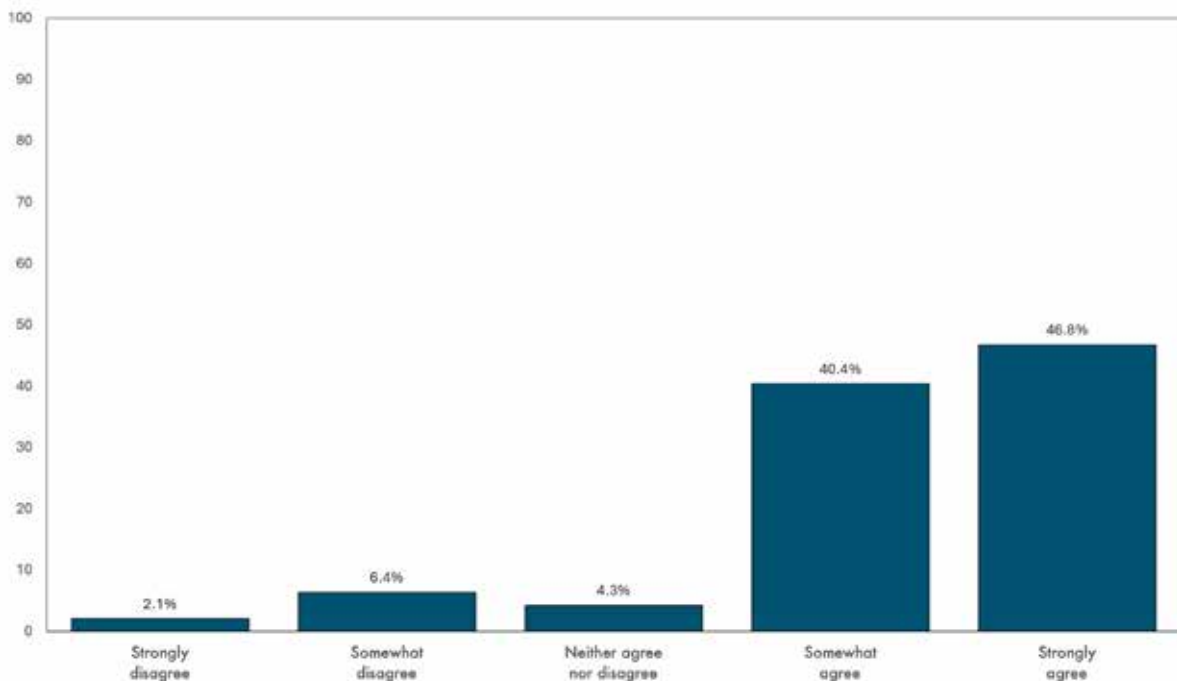
Appendix 1: Civic Capacity

Civic Capacity is a concept that describes a community's ability to identify problems and to rally its human and material resources to address them. Our short civic capacity survey asks questions about key indicators of civic capacity. This survey was administered to individuals who participated in the Civic Endowment group convening in Stillwater in November. The answers to that instrument provide further context for understanding the community.

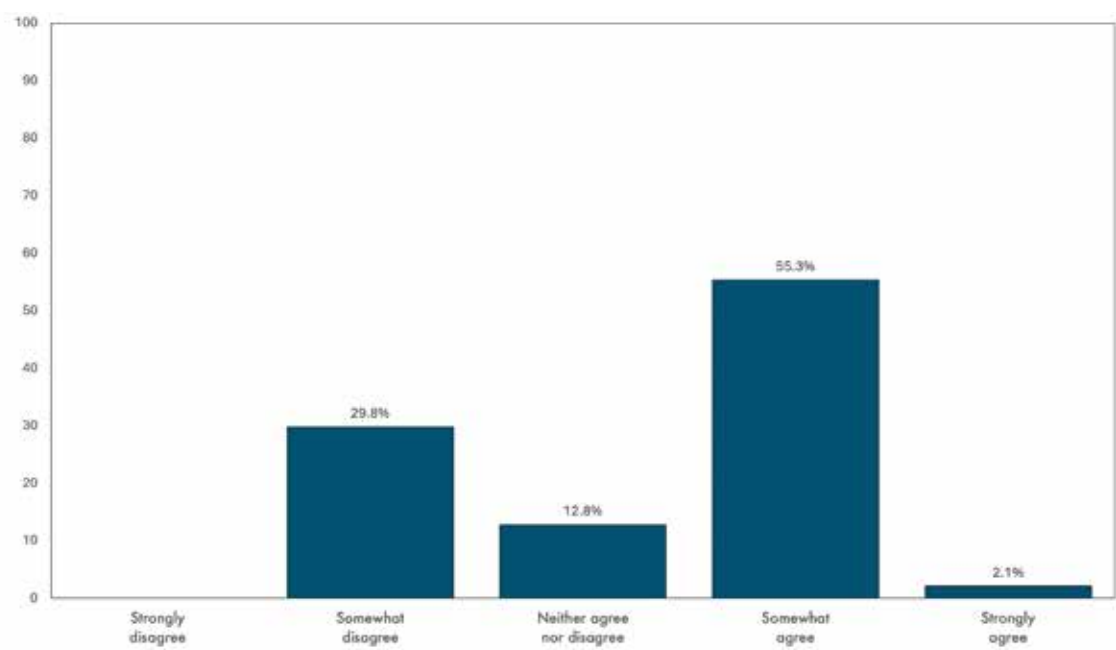
Stillwater's civic capacity survey results reward further consideration. The bimodal distribution on the questions of 'broadly distributed leadership' and 'the community is able to easily adapt and change course,' for example, suggests opportunities for self-reflection by Stillwater's current leaders. However, it was the extraordinary response to the statement, "The community displays a hopeful attitude about the future," that became a key interpretive insight for the Lab's understanding of Stillwater. To have more than 87% of a sample of city leaders strongly or somewhat agree with this statement in our time stands out from the other results as a supremely promising data point for Stillwater. Data Team Lead Dr. Ed Hasecke made the point that most cities would trade a great deal to have a hope score that high, because it makes just about everything that the city has to do that much easier. Such civic hope is not easily achieved and once lost, is not easily regained.

Civic Capacity Questions

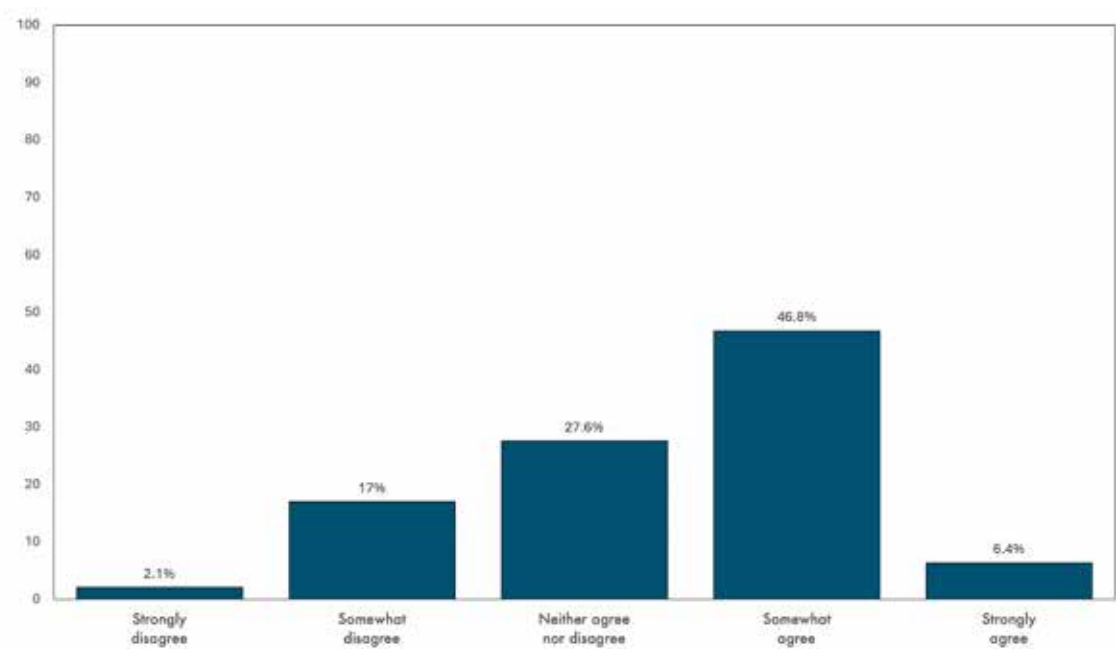
"This community displays a hopeful attitude about the future."



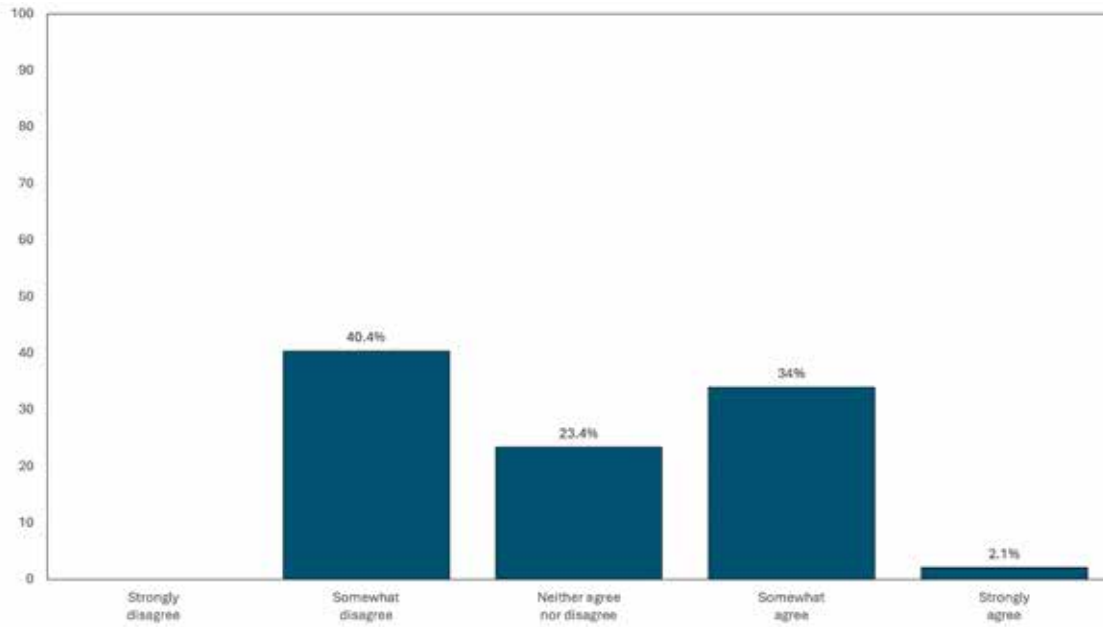
“Leadership is broadly distributed—not concentrated in the hands of just a few individuals.”



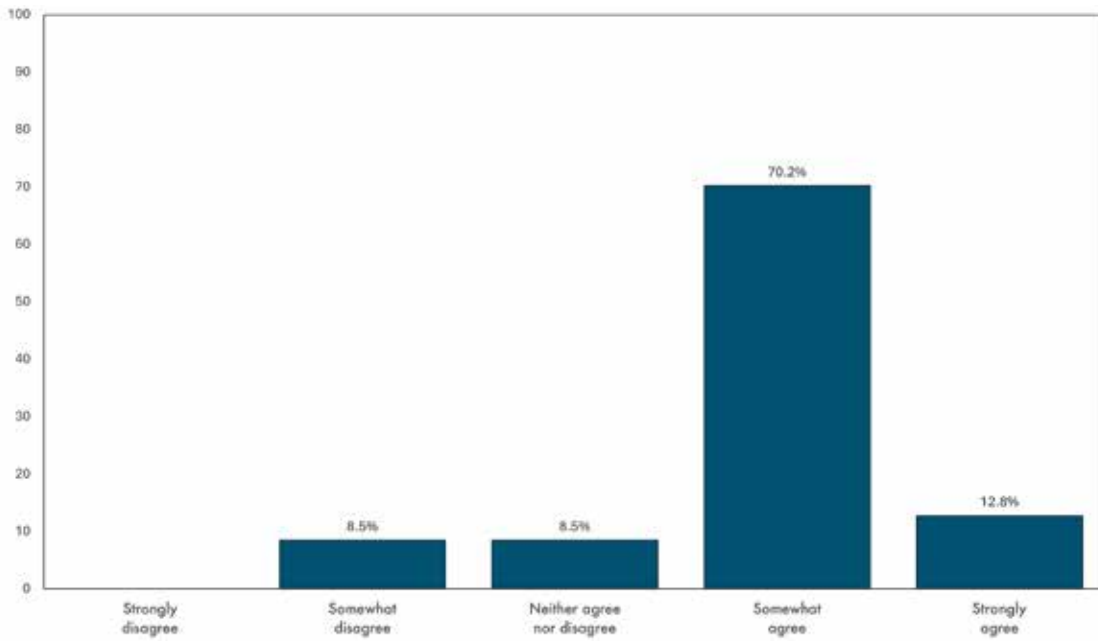
“Citizens are willing to compromise for the greater good.”



**“When some policy or program is not working,
the community is able to easily adapt and change course.”**



“Leaders do not ignore difficult problems but rather are willing to address them.”



Appendix 2: Priorities and Obstacles

Are there any obstacles to helping Stillwater thrive that you wish could be removed?

“We need more people to step up. The same people are often asked over and over again to serve which leads to burn out. I think there are a lot of people that would serve the city in a variety of ways if only they were asked.”

•

“We need a bigger tax base. The top three employers (OSU, SPS, and Stillwater Medical) don’t pay local/property taxes.”

•

“A closer connection between the university and the community.”

•

“The disconnect between our city and our county. We need stronger partnership and relationship to grow as a whole, not compete with our neighbors.”

•

“One of our strengths is not being a bedroom community of Tulsa or Oklahoma City. We have our own identity and it’s hard to explain that to someone who doesn’t already live here and know. If we want Stillwater to thrive as is, then we need to tell the story of Stillwater better internally to our own citizens. If we want to grow, then we need to tell our story better externally. I suspect the best version of Stillwater is a balance of the two: thrive internally and grow a little.”

•

“Too much interest in growth, not enough interest in history or neighborhoods.”

•

“National trends (economic, political, media) drown out voices and efforts at the community level. We are seeing some growth here, but a vibrant and active news media covering local events and government is very important. More coverage of local government, non-profit, educational, etc. events and decisions leads to more civic engagement. Stillwater is not as bad-off as smaller communities, but this is an issue that leads to more political division.”

If you could focus on one priority, initiative, or project to move Stillwater towards a fully thriving community, what would that be?

“Affordable and high-quality childcare; people will not accept jobs here if they do not have this.”



“Developing more gathering spaces for people to relax and enjoy all kinds of activities: art, health, music, theater, joy.”



“Centralize communication across the city, county, OSU, and beyond. We have so much that is special about our city/county but far too often our citizens are just not aware.”



“Stillwater would benefit immensely from a long-term funding mechanism for economic development, which touches everything from education, to workforce, industry, and retail development, to generating sales taxes that fuel our city.”



“Focus on collaborative business development and support for small businesses.”



“We need a multi-faceted talent-to-industry initiative that aims to keep graduates in Stillwater. As part of this, could there be a better built-environment that better connects the OSU campus to downtown. When you are in school at OSU, it’s easy to be in an OSU bubble. When you are living in Stillwater as a private citizen, it is easy to be outside the OSU bubble. How can we better connect the two?”



“New businesses—jobs, housing, tax base, all contributing to improved education, infrastructure, quality of life, sustainability.”



“We have a unique blend of talent and education in this thriving university town. We need to harness the skillsets we already have in order to elevate our community.”

Appendix 3: Key Sources for this Report

American Community Survey

Area Health Resource File/American Medical Association

Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System

Colorado State University Civic Capacity Index

Comprehensive Housing Affordability Strategy (CHAS) data

Easy Access to State and County Juvenile Court Case Counts

Mapping Medicare Disparities Tool

National Center for Health Statistics—Natality and Mortality Files

National Civic League Civic Index

USDA Food Environment Atlas;

Map the Meal Gap from Feeding America

U.S. Census Data





STILLWATER THRIVING PROJECT





IAS | Institute for
C Advanced Studies
in Culture

ASCF



University of Virginia
Watson Manor
3 University Circle
Charlottesville, VA 22903

iasculture.org