



MBTA Communities & Reading: Survey Results

Town of Reading, Public Services & Planning

Survey Goal and Summary

Reading's Planning staff created a 10-question survey about multi-family housing as the first stage of Reading's MBTA Communities process. The primary goal of the survey was to receive actionable direction from residents as to the preferred types of multi-family housing for Reading. Compliance with the new MBTA Communities law will require Reading to make changes to our zoning. Given the importance of these changes, Planning staff wanted to have current and clear opinions from residents on housing. Since we as a Town get to choose how we comply, the survey asked general questions about which types of multi-family housing would be the best fit for Reading and what concerns residents may have. This report presents the results of the survey and staff's high-level takeaways.

The survey was open from June 6 until September 5, 2023 and was publicized on the Town website, Town social media, in the Town Manager Minute, by the Recreation Department, the Library, the Economic Development Director, the Senior Center Staff, to Boards and Committees both via email and at in person presentations, and in person at community events. We received 758 total responses.

Takeaways:

- Respondents prefer:
 - Multi-family buildings with fewer units like triplexes and fourplexes
 - Smaller buildings with fewer stories
 - More "house-like" architectural options
 - New multi-family units should be near public transit, commercial corridors, and walking distance to pedestrian amenities—respondents were generally more open to a variety of locations for smaller buildings than larger
 - Respondents highlighted traffic, open space, and changes to neighborhood character as their top concerns with new multi-family housing and would be more concerned about 5+ unit buildings than smaller buildings
 - Parking minimums do not have a consensus amongst respondents; the majority fell between 1 and 1.5 spaces per unit
 - The top co-benefits to incorporate into future development are pedestrian and transit improvements, sustainability / energy efficiency, greenspace, and affordability
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The survey asked the most important question about preferred types of multi-family housing twice, in two different ways. First, we asked respondents to rank 4 sizes of multi-family housing from best fit to least appropriate with accompanying sample images (Figures 1 & 3). Later, we asked which type of multi-family housing they would prefer to see built over the next 10-15 years as a “select all” question with no images (Figure 2). In both questions, mid-rise apartment buildings—the largest option—came in last place, with the least amount of support.

The most preferred type varies between the two questions. When asked without accompanying photos (Figure 2), Triplexes and Fourplexes came in the lead at 53% each, with Low-rise buildings not too far behind with 42% of respondents supporting. When asked to rank with photos (Figure 1), Fourplexes came in first, followed by Low-rise buildings, and then Triplexes. The differences between the answers to the two questions indicate that the form and height of the buildings does have an impact on their overall support and approval. That the Fourplex and Low-rise building (Figure 3) were higher-ranked than the 3-story Triplex image implies that the smaller forms of the buildings or the visual breaks in their design were more appealing.

Figure 1 – Question 1

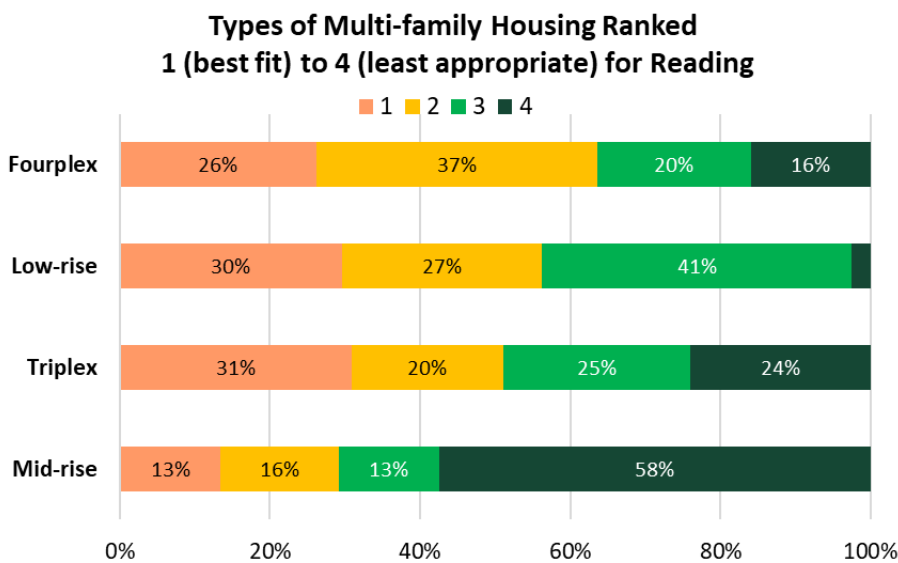


Figure 2 – Question 3

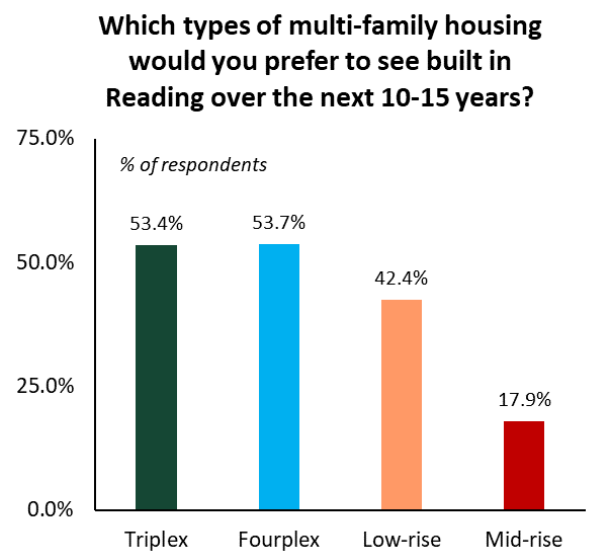
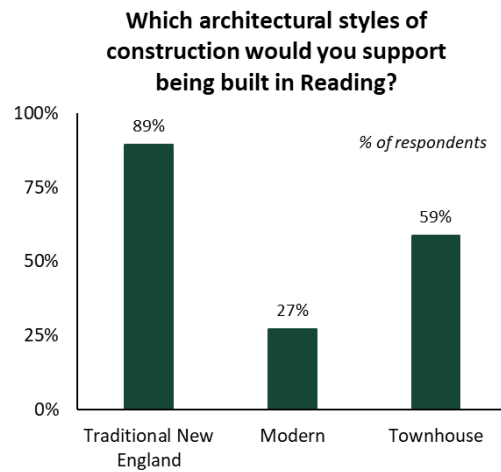


Figure 3 – Images from Question 1



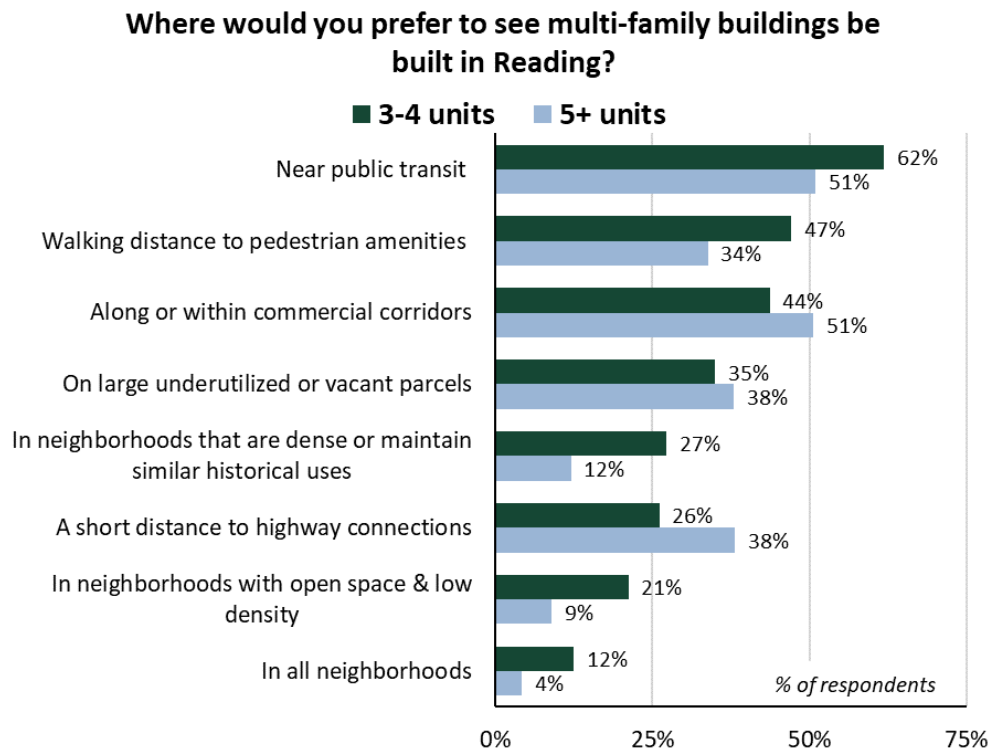
When asked directly about architectural form, respondents resoundingly prefer more traditional looking buildings than modern, with 89% supporting traditional New England architecture (Figure 4). However, even “modern” garnered support from more than a quarter of respondents with 27% and Townhouses achieved majority support at 59%.

Figure 4 – Question 2



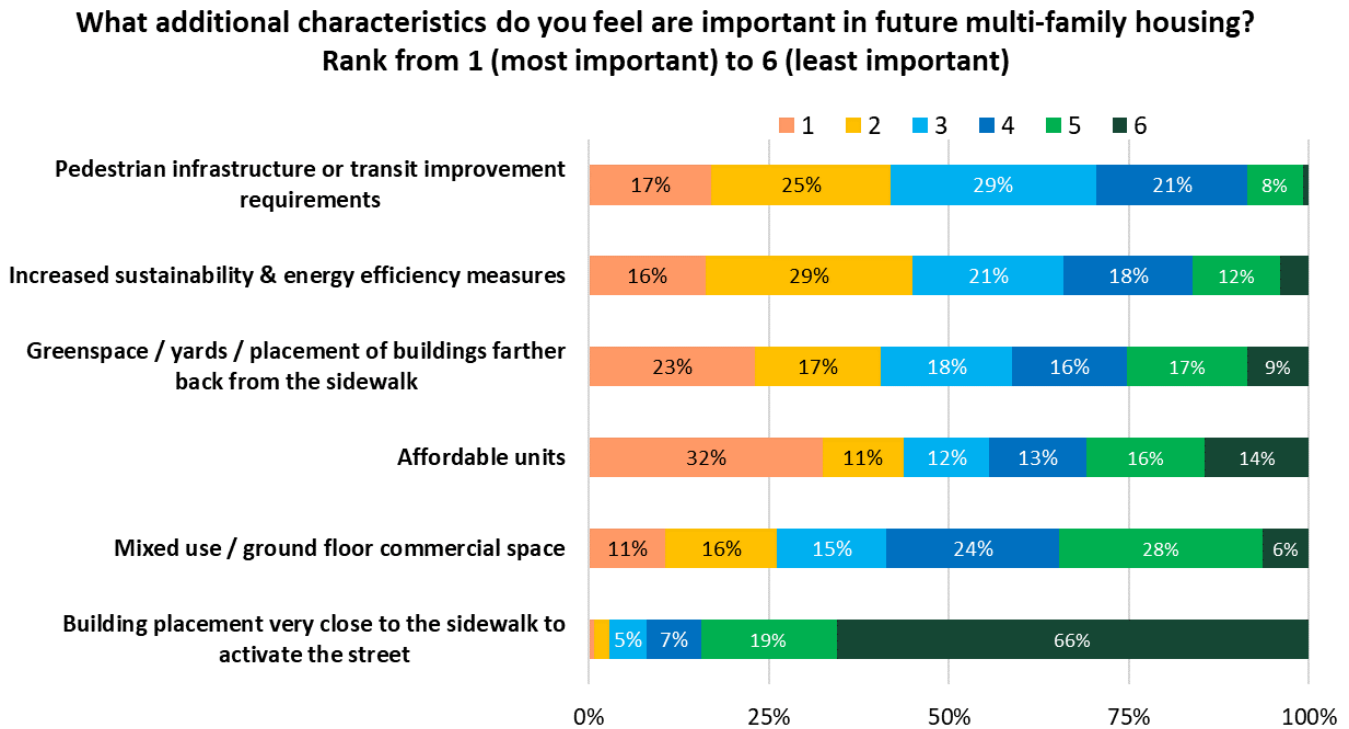
When asked where they would prefer to have 3-4 unit and 5+ unit buildings in Reading, the only answer that achieved majority support for both was “near public transit” (Figure 5). 47% indicated they would prefer to see Triplexes and Quads built within walking distance to pedestrian amenities, while 51% indicated 5+ unit buildings should be along or within commercial corridors. In general, respondents were more supportive of a variety of locations for smaller unit count buildings than larger.

Figure 5 – Questions 4 & 5



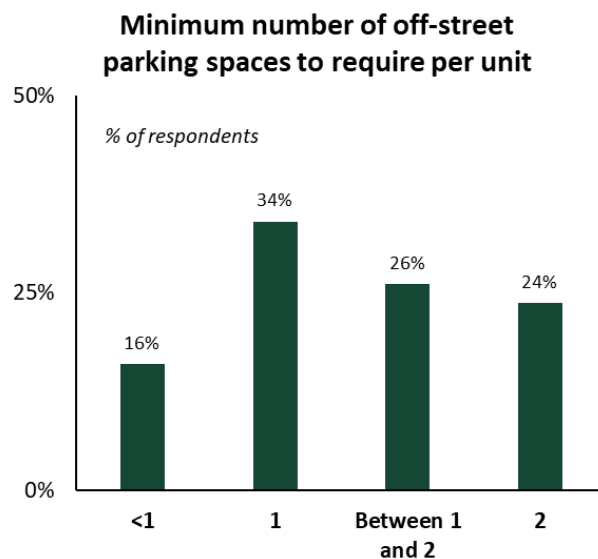
When asked about additional characteristics to consider in new multi-family housing, there was a range of opinions (Figure 6). Respondents decisively did not care for building placement close to the street, a typical feature of mid-rise developments. Amongst the higher-ranking options “pedestrian infrastructure and transit improvement requirements” and “increased sustainability & energy efficiency measures” were on top, with “greenspace” close behind. Though affordable housing received the most #1 rankings, it came in fourth overall in importance.

Figure 6 – Question 6



Respondent opinions were also split on the appropriate number of minimum off-street parking spaces to require per unit. “1” came in as the top choice, with 34% of respondents selecting it.

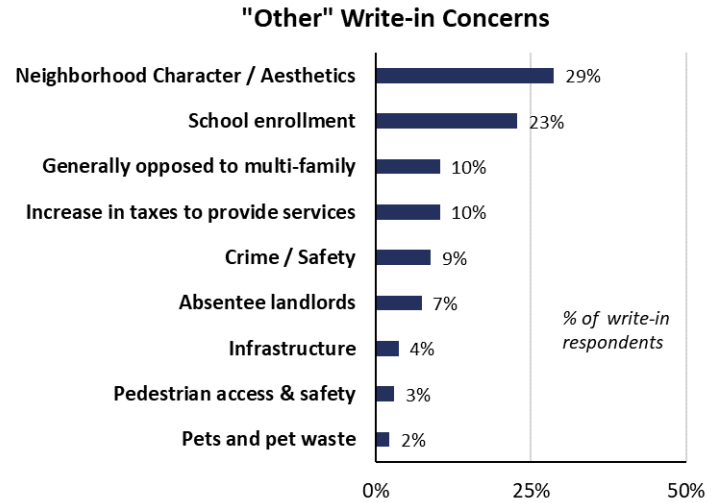
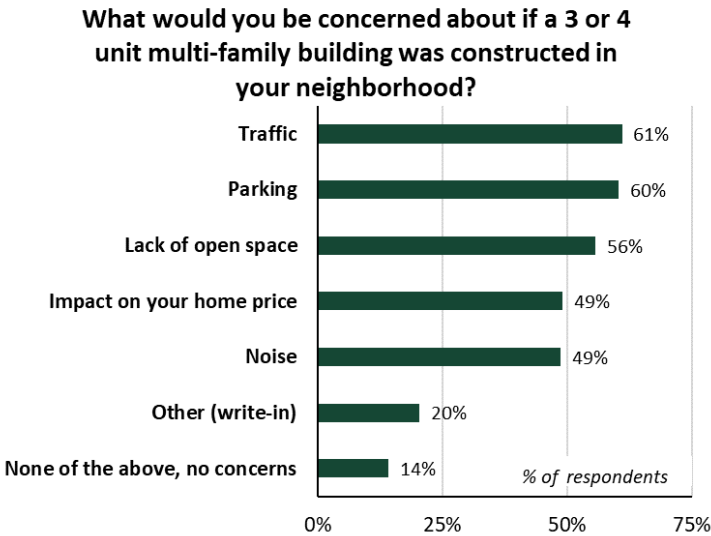
Figure 7 – Question 7



When asked about their concerns if a new small multi-family building was built in their neighborhood, respondents selected traffic and parking as their top two concerns (Figure 8). Lack of open space rounded out their top three. The top write-in concerns were changes to the neighborhood character and aesthetics and increases to school enrollment.

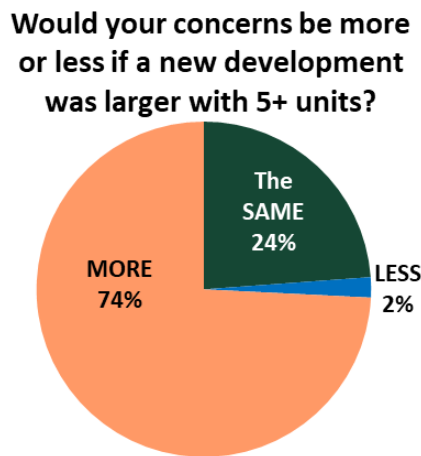
Figure 8 – Question 8

Figure 9 – Write-in Concerns Question 8



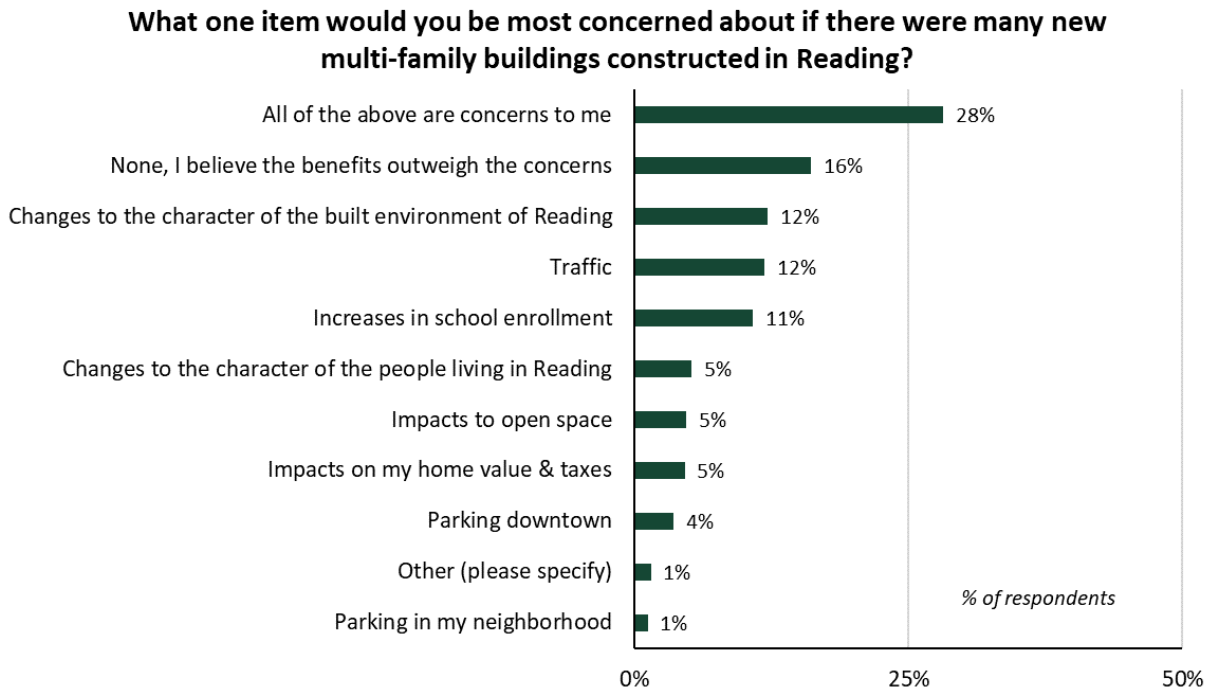
74% of respondents stated they would be more concerned if a development in their neighborhood was a larger 5+ unit building than a smaller 3-4 unit building (Figure 10).

Figure 10 – Question 9



When asked which one item they would be most concerned about, the two top responses were for “all of the above” at 28% of respondents and “none, I believe the benefits outweigh the concerns” at 16% of respondents (Figure 11 next page). From staff’s perspective this indicates that there are both strong anti-development and strong pro-housing views here in Reading. Though parking came out as a top concern when respondents were allowed to select multiple choices above, “parking in my neighborhood” actually came in last when asked to select only one concern.

Figure 11 – Question 10



Lastly, the survey underscored that there are large generational differences in views on multi-family housing. Younger generations tend to be much more in favor of building additional housing as they are the ones most impacted by high prices as they struggle to enter homeownership and are active in the rental market. Respondents ages 18-34 had the largest percentage indicating that the benefits of multi-family housing outweigh the concerns while those 65+ had the smallest percentage of any group (Figure 12). The reverse is true for “all of the above are concerns” with the 65+ age group having the largest percentage of respondents in that group, while the 18-34 age group had the least. A majority of those respondents ages 18-34 supported Triplexes, Fourplexes, and Low-rise apartment buildings being built in Reading—there was no other age group with majority support for all three.

Figure 12 – Age Comparison

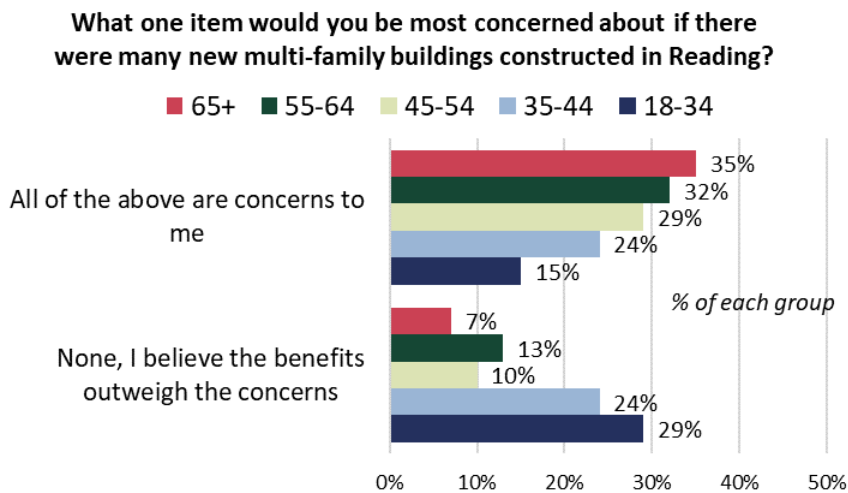


Figure 13

