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# Executive summary: Preliminary results of a residential preference study for the Portland region



## Introduction

We all make choices when buying or renting a home. Some of the factors we weigh include price, proximity to work, size of the home, size of the yard, and the type of neighborhood. Understanding what’s important to residents of the metro area can inform local and regional policies, as well as public and private investment decisions.

In the spring of 2014, a partnership of public and private sector interests conducted an innovative residential preference study for the four-county Portland metropolitan area.<sup>1</sup> The study seeks to develop a better understanding of:

- Preferences for different housing, community, and location characteristics
- How factors such as income, number of household members, presence of kids, the age of the householder, and lifestyle relate to residential preferences

<sup>1</sup> Clackamas, Clark, Multnomah, and Washington counties

The project partners consider this a first effort at gaining a better understanding of a complex topic and intend to conduct this study periodically in the future to gauge whether and how preferences may be changing. This document summarizes the study's preliminary findings. The project partners have also identified possible topics for research and plan to continue investigating trends in the data. Additional detail about the partnership, survey methods, and survey results can be found in the full report.

## Survey design

This study seeks to go beyond typical opinion survey methods in order to gain a better understanding of how people make choices when faced with real-life tradeoffs. The survey presented respondents with two types of preference questions. In the first type, respondents were asked straightforward questions about their preferences. In the second type, respondents were asked with words and images to make tradeoffs like those they would consider when choosing where to live. For this tradeoffs section, respondents were asked to choose one of two housing situations that differed by housing type, commute time, house size, renting vs. owning, neighborhood type, and price. Repetition of those choices by thousands of respondents allows us to understand how important each of these factors is for people from different market segments.

This study used an online survey tool. To ensure that the study produced valid results, the survey was completed by a managed representative panel of 800 respondents (200 respondents for each of the four counties – Clackamas, Clark, Multnomah, and Washington). In order to collect enough data for in-depth statistical analysis, the survey was also distributed via e-mail advertisement, including to Metro's Opt In panel, resulting in an additional 5,700 responses (the "public engagement panel"). In total, more than 6,500 people responded to the survey. For both panels, the survey responses were weighted by respondent county, age, and tenure (whether they currently rent or own) to ensure that the sample was representative of the region's population distributions as described in the 2010 U.S. Census.<sup>2</sup> A comparison of survey responses from the managed panel and the public engagement panel indicates that the demographic profile is comparable enough that the full data set can be used for analysis, but that there are some differences that warrant additional study.

For any survey, the phrasing of questions and selection of images play a critical role in producing meaningful results. The project partners brought diverse perspectives to this study and sought to use words and images in the survey that clearly describe different housing and neighborhood types without introducing bias. Over the course of about six months, the project partners worked together to refine those words and images to describe the following housing and neighborhoods types for use in the survey. A description of these housing and neighborhood types can be found in the full report.

### Housing types

Three different housing types were described in the survey:

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<sup>2</sup> For example, before weighting, both panels under-represent renters and don't reflect the proportions of people living in each of the four counties. Weighting techniques such as these are standard practices used on any sample, including the U.S. Census.

- Single-family detached
- Single-family attached
- Condo or apartment

### Neighborhood types

Four different neighborhood types that illustrate a variety of activity and density levels were described in the survey:

- Urban central or downtown
- Urban neighborhood or town center
- Outer Portland or suburban
- Rural

Even with a deliberate effort to use clear text descriptions and images, people will understand these neighborhood types differently, perhaps more so than housing types. Additional work could be done to understand how differing interpretations may influence responses.

## **Preliminary results**

### **Overall, most respondents live in and prefer single-family detached homes<sup>3</sup>**

When asked simple questions about their preferences, most respondents live in and prefer single-family detached housing.

#### Single-family detached homes

65 percent of respondents currently live in a single-family detached home. 87 percent of the respondents living in a single-family detached home prefer this housing type. 80 percent of all respondents prefer this housing type.

#### Single-family attached homes

8 percent of respondents currently live in a single-family attached home. 11 percent of the respondents living in a single-family attached home prefer this housing type. 7 percent of all respondents prefer this housing type.

**Key takeaways:**  
*Most respondents live in a single-family detached home and this is the most preferred housing type, not just for those that live in this type of home, but also for respondents who currently live in single-family attached homes, condos and apartments.*

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<sup>3</sup> Results for this section are reported for the managed panel only. See the full report for a description of survey results from public engagement.

## Condos or apartments

28 percent of respondents currently live in a condo or apartment. 26 percent of the respondents living in a condo or apartment prefer this housing type. 13 percent of all respondents prefer this housing type.

## **Respondents typically live in their preferred neighborhood type<sup>4</sup>**

When asked simple questions about preferences, most respondents prefer their current neighborhood type. Since the majority of respondents live in the *outer Portland or suburban* neighborhood type, this is the most preferred neighborhood type overall. However, current residents of *outer Portland or suburban neighborhoods* report the lowest level of satisfaction with their current neighborhood type, followed by residents of *urban central or downtown* neighborhoods. Residents of *rural* neighborhoods, followed by *urban neighborhood or town center* residents are most satisfied with their current neighborhoods.

- 11 percent of respondents currently live in an *urban central or downtown* neighborhood. 55 percent of the respondents living in this neighborhood type prefer this neighborhood type. 13 percent of all respondents prefer this neighborhood type.
- 25 percent of respondents currently live in an *urban neighborhood or town center*. 62 percent of the respondents living in this neighborhood type prefer this neighborhood type. 27 percent of all respondents prefer this neighborhood type.
- 56 percent of respondents live in an *outer Portland or suburban* neighborhood type. 51 percent of the respondents living in this neighborhood type prefer this neighborhood type. 34 percent of all respondents prefer this neighborhood type.
- 8 percent of respondents live in a *rural* neighborhood. 70 percent of the respondents living in this neighborhood type prefer this neighborhood type. 26 percent of all respondents prefer this neighborhood type.

### **Key takeaways:**

*Most respondents identified their neighborhood type as outer Portland or suburban and about half of those residents prefer this neighborhood type. Though a smaller share of respondents lives in urban central or downtown neighborhood types, about half of them prefer that neighborhood type.*

### **Key takeaways:**

*Current residents of rural neighborhoods, which account for 8 percent of respondents, are most satisfied with their neighborhood.*

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<sup>4</sup> Results for this section are reported for the managed panel only. See the full report for a description of survey results from public engagement.

### **Controlling for other factors such as commute time and price, people are most likely to choose their current neighborhood type**

This survey went beyond typical questions about preferences to collect information about how various factors affect housing choices. The next section of the survey presented respondents with multiple housing option choice sets where factors such as price, commute time, housing type, neighborhood type, size of residence, and tenure (own vs. rent) varied. All 6,500 plus survey responses (weighted to match Census distributions) are used for reporting the results of these choice sets. The larger number of responses makes it possible to conduct more complex analysis.

To understand the importance of neighborhood type when people make housing choices, statistical analyses were conducted on the response data. Those analyses held all other factors such as price, commute time, and housing type constant. If respondents could pay the same price, have the same type of housing, same commute distance, etc. but in different neighborhood types, they are most likely to choose the neighborhood type that they currently live in. However, in no case is there a majority of respondents that would be likely to choose their current neighborhood type. Residents of *urban central or downtown* neighborhoods have the highest likelihood of choosing their current neighborhood type (44 percent probability) and residents of *outer Portland or suburban neighborhoods* have the lowest likelihood (31 percent probability). Controlling for other factors, residents of the *urban central or downtown* neighborhood type have a secondary likelihood (32 percent) that they will choose an *urban neighborhood or town center*. As a secondary choice, respondents living in *urban neighborhood or town center* locations were split on whether to choose more or less urban neighborhoods. As a secondary choice, those living in *outer Portland or suburban* neighborhoods were twice as likely to choose more urban as opposed to rural neighborhood types.

**Key takeaways:**  
*All other things being equal, people are most likely (though not a majority) to choose to live in their current neighborhood type. As a secondary choice, respondents living in urban neighborhood or town center locations are split on whether to choose more or less urban neighborhoods. As a secondary choice, those living in outer Portland or suburban neighborhoods are twice as likely to choose more urban as opposed to more rural neighborhood types.*

### **Controlling for other factors, the importance of owning vs. renting varies by neighborhood choice**

Respondents that choose *urban central or downtown* neighborhoods are more likely to prefer renting their home. Respondents that choose *rural* neighborhoods are more likely to prefer owning their home. These preferences are less clear for respondents that choose the other two neighborhood types, *urban neighborhood or town center* and *outer Portland or suburban* neighborhoods.

## Some people's neighborhood choices change when they are asked to consider other factors

Though people are generally satisfied with their current housing and neighborhood types, some make different choices when they consider other factors. To understand how respondents make tradeoffs regarding neighborhoods, statistical techniques were used to test a series of "what if" scenarios. These "what if" scenarios are not intended to be policy recommendations. They are used for illustrative purposes only to help understand how people make housing choices. Different "what if" scenario assumptions would produce different results.

### What if housing prices increase?

Some people may change their neighborhood choices if housing prices go up by one-third in their current neighborhood type. Current residents of the *outer Portland or suburban* neighborhood type are most sensitive to increased housing prices; 11 percent would choose different neighborhood types under this scenario. Of these suburban respondents that shift neighborhood choices based on price, the most common response is to shift to more urban neighborhoods, but a portion would also switch to a *rural* neighborhood (3 percent shift to *urban central or downtown*, 5 percent to *urban neighborhood or town center*, and 3 percent to *rural*).

### What if ownership of single-family detached homes is more limited?

Some people may choose a different neighborhood type if they are unable to own a single-family detached home in their current neighborhood type. Current residents of *rural* neighborhoods place the most importance on owning a single-family detached home and there is a 27 percent probability that they will shift to a more urban neighborhood type to accommodate that housing preference. On the other hand, current residents of *urban central or downtown* neighborhoods place the least importance on owning a single-family detached home; most would rather choose a different housing type than

#### **Key takeaways:**

*People are most likely to choose their current neighborhood type regardless of tradeoffs in price, commute time, square footage, and ownership.*

#### **Additional context:**

*Relatively small percentages of the region's population represent large numbers of people. Seemingly minor shifts in housing or neighborhood choices can thus have a large impact on housing demand and traffic. For perspective, there are likely to be about 820,000 households inside the urban growth boundary in 2035. Just five percent of that is 41,000 households.*

#### **Key takeaways:**

*Residents of rural neighborhoods feel strongly about owning a single-family detached home. Over a quarter of them would choose a more urban neighborhood type if that was their only option to own a single-family detached home.*

leave their current neighborhood type. 6 percent would choose a different neighborhood type.

#### What if commute times increase?

Some people may choose a different type of neighborhood if commute times go up by ten minutes in their current neighborhood type.<sup>5</sup> Current residents of the *urban neighborhood or town center* type are most sensitive to commute times. 7 percent of *urban neighborhood or town center* respondents would shift neighborhood choices based on increased commute time.

3 percent would choose an *urban central or downtown* neighborhood, 2 percent would choose an *outer Portland or suburban* neighborhood, and 1 percent would choose a *rural* neighborhood.<sup>6</sup> Current residents of *rural* neighborhoods are least sensitive to increased commute times, with 3 percent shifting their neighborhood choice when faced with increased commute time.

**Key takeaways:**  
*Most respondents don't change their neighborhood preference when faced with longer commutes.*

#### What if residences are smaller?

Some people may choose a different neighborhood type if the size of residences in their current neighborhood type decrease by 500 square feet.<sup>7</sup> Current residents of the *urban central or downtown* neighborhood type are most sensitive to decreases in residence size. Making up the 12 percent of urban central respondents that shift neighborhood choices based on decreased home size, 7 percent choose an *urban neighborhood or town center*, 4 percent choose an *outer Portland or suburb*, and 2 percent would choose a *rural* neighborhood.<sup>8</sup>

#### **Other factors that people consider when deciding where to live<sup>9</sup>**

In addition to asking respondents to weigh potential tradeoffs, the survey also included traditional opinion polling to address other factors that may influence residential choices, but that are not possible to quantify to present as tradeoffs. Safety of neighborhoods and public school quality are two such factors that were addressed with more traditional survey techniques.

#### **Respondents say that housing price, safety of the neighborhood, and characteristics of the house, in that order, are the most important factors when choosing a home.**

- 44 percent rank housing price as their top influencer when choosing a home.

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<sup>5</sup> That increase is about a third of the average commute time.

<sup>6</sup> Numbers don't add up to 7 percent because of rounding.

<sup>7</sup> This would represent a decrease by about a third of average residence size.

<sup>8</sup> Numbers don't add up to 12 percent because of rounding.

<sup>9</sup> Results for this section are reported for the managed panel only. See the full report for a description of survey results from public engagement.

- Safety of the neighborhood (19 percent choose this as their top priority) and characteristics of the house (19 percent) are the next most influential factors.
- Quality of public schools was the number one influencer for just 3 percent of respondents and was ranked in the top three by 11 percent.

**A majority of respondents prefer neighborhoods with a moderate amount of foot and vehicle traffic.**

- 55 percent prefer moderate foot and vehicle traffic during the day with some activities within a 15 minute walk.
- Those living in Multnomah County were twice as likely to desire "heavy foot and vehicle traffic" than those in Clackamas, Clark, and Washington counties.

**Key takeaways:**  
*Most respondents want to live in neighborhoods where they can enjoy activities such as shopping and entertainment within a 15 minute walk*

**The largest share of respondents, though not a majority, prefer a medium-sized yard.**

- 32 percent of respondents prefer a medium sized yard separating their home from a neighbor.
- Owners are more likely than renters to prefer a medium sized or large yard.
- Renters are more likely than owners to prefer no yard or little private outdoor space.

**Next steps**

This study provides initial insight into the complex topic of how people decide where to live. Together, we hope this work can inform public and private sector efforts, such as the upcoming regional growth management decision, to provide the diversity of housing and neighborhood choices that people desire. The project partners hope to improve upon and update this study to understand how preferences may change over time. The project partners have identified several topics that warrant additional research:

- Even with text descriptions and images, people may have different perceptions about what is meant by the various housing and neighborhood types. How might this affect survey responses? How might we improve the survey instrument?
- Every survey sample has limitations in its ability to represent the full population. This study attempts to account for that by weighting for housing tenure, age, and county of residence of the respondents. However, as with any sample, there are some variables that cannot be validated (for example, how to balance residents of different neighborhood types when there is no objective way to define neighborhood types).
- This study relies on different respondent sources. Are there significant differences in how respondents from the different panels make choices?
- What are the best methods for incorporating these survey results into forecast models?
- This study represents a snapshot of preferences today. How might they change in the future?