

The Morris Leatherman Company

Executive Summary 2021 City of Vadnais Heights

Methodology:

This study contains the results of a telephone survey of 400 randomly selected residents of the City of Vadnais Heights. Professional interviewers gathered all survey responses between October 26th and November 18th, 2021. The average interview took twenty-eight minutes. The non-response rate was 5.5%. In general, random samples such as this yield results projectable to the entire universe of adult Vadnais Heights residents within ± 5.0 percentage points in 95 out of 100 cases.

Residential Demographics:

Vadnais Heights is a mainly stable community, with dynamics provided by a relatively high percentage of “newcomers.” The median longevity of adult residents is 13.7 years, indicative of in-migration during the past five years. Nineteen percent report moving to the city during the past five years, while 13% have lived there for over three decades. The typical household in Vadnais Heights contains two adults and no children. Seventeen percent are wholly composed of senior citizens. Thirty-three percent of the homes have school-aged children or preschoolers in residence. Eighty-two percent own their present homes.

The average age of respondents is 46.6 years old. Thirty-five percent of the sample fall into the over 55 years age range, while 26% are less than 35 years old. Upscale White Collar job-holders — Professional-Technical and Owner-Manager professions — head 37% of the households. Blue Collar job-holders head 24%, while Clerical-Sales occupations head 17%. Retirees head 19% of the families in Vadnais Heights. Job locations span the Metropolitan Area: Saint Paul, at 26%; Vadnais Heights, at 18%; Minneapolis, at 16%; Roseville, at eight percent; and Maplewood, at five percent.

The typical household reports an annual income of over \$58,900.00. Eleven percent have yearly household incomes under \$35,000.00, while 29% report incomes above \$75,000.00. Eighty-five percent rate their household members’ financial, mental, and physical well-being as “excellent” or “good;” fifteen percent rate them collectively as “only fair” or “poor.”

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Using standard Census Bureau designations, sixty-seven percent of the sample identified as “White,” while 13% are “African-American.” Nine percent are “Asian-Pacific Islander,” and six percent are “Hispanic-Latinx.” Four percent identify as “Mixed/Biracial,” one percent are “Native American,” and one percent identify as “something else.”

Women outnumber men by one percent in the sample; one percent are non-binary. The precinct of residence of each respondent is: a high of 32% live in Precinct Three, while a low of 19% reside in Precinct One. Twenty-eight percent live in Precinct Two, and 22% reside in Precinct Four.

Life in the Neighborhood:

Sixty-six percent say they have contact with their neighbors either “daily” or “a few times a week.” Twenty-eight percent report the frequency is either “once a week” or “a few times a month.” Only seven percent say it is “once a month” or “less often.” Comparatively, neighborhood residents are highly connected. Eighty-five percent feel comfortable discussing neighborhood problems with their neighbors within the top decile of Metropolitan Area communities.

General Perceptions of the Community:

An almost unanimous 97% view Vadnais Heights as “very welcoming” or “somewhat welcoming;” a 57% majority see it as “very welcoming.” Only two percent dissent from this opinion. At least 86% rate the City of Vadnais Heights as “excellent” or “good” on four dimensions: “creating a welcoming community to residents of all backgrounds,” “treating all residents with respect,” “treating all residents fairly,” and “providing services to residents of all backgrounds.” “Only fair” and “poor” ratings range between three and ten percent. Thirty percent believe it should be a “high priority” for the City of Vadnais Heights to create a diverse, inclusive, and fair community. Fifty percent think it should be a “moderate priority,” while 18% see it as a “low priority” or “no priority at all.”

At 20%, “friendly people” is the critical attribute people like most about living in the community. “Safe” is crucial to 17%, and “small town feel” is mentioned by 16%. “Convenient location” is cited by eight percent, “open space/rural” is key to seven percent, and “clean/well maintained” follows at six percent. “Quiet and peaceful” follows at five percent.

The most severe issues facing Vadnais Heights are: “too much growth,” at 20%; “rising crime” and “condition of streets,” each at 12%; “high taxes,” at 11%, and the “pandemic,” at six percent. However, relatively high 16% are “city boosters,” who think no serious issues face the city. This level of boosterism is down 31% in five years but remains in the top quartile of Metropolitan Area suburban communities.

A solid 93% rate the quality of life as either “excellent” or “good,” but the 38% rating it as “excellent” is well above the median for suburbs within the Metropolitan Area. Residents seem satisfied, enthusiastically so, with their lives in the city. Eighty-nine percent of the sample report the strength of community identity and sense of neighborliness in the City of Vadnais Heights is “excellent” or “good.” This percentage ranks among the top quartile for Metropolitan Area suburban communities. All in all, a very high 89% believe things in Vadnais Heights are generally headed in the right direction; only six percent see the community as off on the wrong track. “Rate of growth” and “rising crime” appear to be the top two concerns of the small percentage of dissenters.

Development Issues:

Seventy percent, down 15% in five years, think development across the city is well-planned for the future; only four percent disagree, but 21% report it well-planned only “sometimes.” “Too much housing” and “lack of retail opportunities” are the major complaints about development planning.

Majorities think the city currently has the correct number of higher-cost housing, senior housing, parks and open spaces, trails and bikeways, entertainment opportunities, sit-down restaurants, and fast-food restaurants. However, two types of development are viewed by significant minorities as insufficient: starter homes for young families, at 43%, and affordable housing, by 41%. Judgments are split on the availability of two types of developments: apartments and condominiums/townhomes.

Eighty-eight percent think the City of Vadnais Heights has enough retail and service establishments. Only twelve percent see them as insufficient, pointing to specifically “sit-down restaurants” and “high-end retail” as well as “general variety of retail shopping” as missing elements.

Residents support the city providing financial incentives to attract specific types of development by a decisive margin of 73%-22%, reflecting no change in the five years between studies.

Home Improvements and Remodeling:

Eighty percent of the city’s residents own their present residences. Fifty percent of homeowners remodeled or made improvements in the past five years. Most are “bathroom,” “fence and deck,” “kitchen improvements,” “windows,” “floors,” or “finished basement.” The majority of homeowners undertaking no improvements report there was “no need,” but 29% did “not have enough money.”

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Thirty-seven percent of homeowners report awareness of residential reinvestment grants offered periodically by Ramsey County or some communities using Federal COVID relief funds. By a 79%-15% majority, homeowners would support the City of Vadnais Heights offering this type of program.

Sixty-three percent are committed to staying in Vadnais Heights if they were going to move from their current home for upgrading; in fact, 37% are “very committed” to do so. Similarly, 63% are committed to staying in the city if they would move from their current home for downsizing; thirty-eight percent are “very committed.” Two-thirds of these respondents are “not concerned” about the lack of a particular type of housing impacting their ability to stay.

If their neighborhood were going to get a new trail, fifty-five percent would support constructing a trail alongside their home, while 40% would oppose it. Decision-makers need to consider that only nine percent “strongly support” this new path while 22% “strongly oppose” it. The over two-to-one difference in intensity suggests a potential public pushback could occur.

Tax Climate:

In judging the share of the property tax designated for the City of Vadnais Heights, only 14% cannot answer the question. The typical respondent thinks the city share of the property tax is 21.9%, but 13% place the share at over 30%. While 37%, down 17% in five years, report their city property taxes as “very high” or “somewhat high” in comparison with nearby suburban communities, 49% rate them as “about average,” and seven percent, as either “somewhat low” or “very low.” The overall tax climate is “borderline benign.”

City Service Evaluations:

Eighty-four percent of the residents, a decrease of 11% in five years, view city services as either an “excellent” or a “good” value for the property taxes paid; sixteen percent rate the value as “only fair” or “poor.” When evaluating specific city services, the mean approval rating among those holding opinions is 85.6%, a solidly high rating, even though a decrease of 5.3% since the last survey. Among those having views, over 95% rate three services as “excellent” or “good:” emergency medical or ambulance service, fire protection, and trail maintenance. Similarly, between 90% and 94% rate three services: police protection, park maintenance, and building inspection. Between 80% and 89% of the residents with opinions award positive ratings to city code enforcement, recycling, trash pick-up, animal control, and snow plowing and ice control. Between 70% and 79% post positive evaluations of storm drainage and flood control, city drinking water, and street lighting. Only one city service is rated lower, city street repair and maintenance, at 67%. Residents give only one city service a satisfaction score below 70%, indicating pressing remedial work.

Neighborhood Issues:

Ninety-five percent see the city as “about right” in its enforcement of city nuisance codes such as animal control, garbage disposal, junk cars, messy yards, and noise. Only four percent think the city is “not tough enough.”

Ninety-six percent of all respondents rate the overall general appearance of their neighborhood as either “excellent” or “good;” a tiny four percent are more critical.

In rating the toughness of city nuisance code enforcement – weeds and tall grass on residential properties, animal control, junk cars, messy yards, noise, storage of garbage and recycling bins, storage of recreational vehicles on residential properties, and storage of boats on residential properties – majorities ranging between 63% and 82% rate their enforcement as “about right.” Percentages ranging between six percent and 27% see the enforcement of each city code as “not tough enough,” while between five and 10% view code enforcement as “too tough.” The lax enforcement of two city codes, in particular, upset at least one-fourth of the respondents: animal control and noise. By a 60%-34% margin, residents favor a more active approach by the city to enforce residential property codes.

In rating the amount of police patrolling in their neighborhood, 73%, down 20% in five years, think it is “about the right amount;” twenty percent see it as “not enough,” and six percent rate it as “too much.” Fifty-four percent think traffic speeding in their neighborhood is a “serious” problem. Only 19%, though, rate it as “very serious.”

By a 66%-31% majority, respondents support lowering the speed limit on neighborhood streets to 20 miles per hour; twenty-one percent “strongly support” this change.

Public Safety Issues and Services:

Ninety-six percent of the sample report they have an overall feeling of safety in Vadnais Heights. Eighty-six percent feel safe being out and about alone at night in their neighborhood. Fourteen percent disagree and point to “generalized feelings of not being safe anywhere,” “age and health,” “general increase in crime,” “lack of streetlights,” and “increases in specific types of violent crime.” Ninety-five percent report they feel safe using city parks and trails; a meager three percent disagree.

Forty-seven percent feel that crime in Vadnais Heights has “remained about the same” during the past few years. Twenty-four percent feel it has “increased,” and 24% feel it has “decreased.”

Sixteen percent, down 12% in five years, consider “traffic speeding” the most serious public safety concern in Vadnais Heights. “Reckless driving or DUI” are ranked second, at 12%. “Carjackings,” “property theft,” and “drugs” tie in third place, at seven percent each. Six percent

point to “COVID-19 or the pandemic.” Twelve percent think the city has “no major public safety concerns,” while nine percent are “unsure.”

Respondents were read four descriptions about police service in Vadnais Heights and asked to rate the accuracy of each: service-oriented, excellence, trustworthy, and professional. Total agreement of the accuracy of each ranged between very high 93% and 98%; in fact, percentages rating the attribute “very accurate” were majorities between 54% and 62%. Respondents thinking the description was “not accurate” were minuscule, ranging between two and four percent.

Park and Recreational Facilities:

Before this study, only 51% were “aware” the City of Vadnais Heights has 14 city parks; forty-nine percent were “unaware.” Household usage of the city’s current park and recreational facilities vary markedly. Over 70% of household members visited or used “park shelter buildings and restrooms,” “trails,” “nature areas and trails within parks,” and “picnic areas.” Recreational was the primary use of trails. Sixty-two percent report household members visited or used “playground equipment.” Between 40% and 50% of Vadnais Heights households visited “tennis courts,” “baseball/softball fields,” “outdoor ice skating rinks and warming houses,” or “soccer fields.” Between 25% and 39% of city households visited or used “outdoor basketball courts,” “ice skating path,” or “pickleball courts.” Positive ratings by visitors and users having opinions of each facility range between 88% and 100%. The highest-rated facilities, above 95% positive, are “baseball/softball fields,” “picnic areas,” “nature areas and trails within parks,” “pickleball courts,” and “trails.” The relatively lowest-rated facilities, but still at 88% or 89% positive each, are “soccer fields,” “park shelter buildings and restrooms,” and “playground equipment.”

If neighborhood trails and sidewalks were connected, 65% report they are at least “somewhat more likely” to walk or bicycle to where they needed to go. Using standard market projection techniques, 25% of city households would increase their use of the trails-sidewalks system. By a solid 80%-16% majority, residents also would support tax dollars toward the expansion and connection of trails and sidewalks in the city. Even though 39% would support no property tax increase for this purpose, the typical resident would support a tax increase of \$1.80 per month, or \$21.60 per year.

Sixty-six percent report household members visited the Vadnais Lake/Sucker Lake Regional Park. Among household visitors, 26% report they do so “frequently,” 53% visit “occasionally,” and 21% do so “rarely.”

Thirty percent, a 13% increase in five years, report household members used city recreational programs. Among program users, 52% participated in “youth sports,” 26% participated in “adult sports,” and 15% used “fitness offerings.” The primary reasons for not participating in city recreational programs include “lack of interest,” “lack of time,” and “age/health.”

Residents were asked about their support or opposition to seven potential improvements or expansions to the Park and Recreation System requiring some financing. By an 87%-11% split, residents favor the addition of trails and sidewalks, and by an 86%-15% division, residents support general park improvements, such as picnic shelters and landscaping. An 80%-17% majority support the upgrading of playground equipment. By a 75%-20% majority, residents support building a children's splash pad; similarly, by a 71%-27% split, respondents support upgrading athletic fields. A 62%-33% majority endorses the development of a skate park for skateboarding, BMX biking, and rollerblading. A similar 61%-36% majority supports expanding the number of athletic fields in the community. Planners should be aware of opposition levels above 25%. Their addition to a park bond referendum package can significantly impact its support at the polls; in other words, selecting these types of bond components should be carefully chosen to ensure activist support and add to the balance of the package across the community.

By a 75%-19% majority, residents support a property tax increase to fund their favored improvements or expansions. Among supporters, the typical "yes" voter would agree to a \$6.50 per month property tax increase, or \$78.00 per year. Decision-makers need to bear in mind that the 26% combined opposition and uncertain voters are not included in determining this tax increase level. Only 20% of opponents would change their minds if funding cuts to other city programs or services were used to fund their supported improvements or expansions.

Local Environment and Sustainability Issues:

Respondents were initially informed about current City efforts on local environment and sustainability efforts. They were then read a list of nine additional opportunities to work on. All but two of the opportunities were rated either "very important" or "somewhat important" by a majority of interviewees. These exceptions are installing electric vehicle charging stations and expanding mass transit options. Priorities for City action should be determined by the percent rating the opportunity as "very important." At 48%, energy conservation leads the list, followed by water conservation at 47%. Thirty-nine percent similarly rate reducing waste, 35% feel the same about climate change, and 34% rate improving stormwater management as "very important." Twenty percent each rate installing electric vehicle charging stations and creating a climate action plan as "very important," followed closely by improving the fuel efficiency of city vehicles at 18%. Only 13% rate expanded mass transit options as "very important." Among the 93% rating at least one of these potential opportunities as "very important" or "somewhat important," 76% would be "willing" to see a property tax increase to fund the city's work on these issues. In comparison, 20% would be "unwilling."

Evaluations of City Government and City Staff:

A very high 85% feel Vadnais Heights residents have an adequate opportunity for input into the decision-making process; only nine percent disagree, citing "policy makers do not listen to us"

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and “no opportunities provided.”

Fifty-five percent, down 12% since the last survey, know either “a great deal” or “a fair amount” about the work of the Mayor and City Council. Respondents give the Mayor and Council a job approval rating of 89% and a disapproval rating of seven percent. The over twelve-to-one approval-to-disapproval rating of the Mayor and City Council is among the top quartile of Metropolitan Area suburbs.

Citizen empowerment is at a high level. A below-average number of residents — 12% — feel they could not if they want to do so. Most communities score between twenty-five percent and thirty percent on this query.

Thirty-five percent report they had at least some first-hand contact with Vadnais Heights City Staff. Residents award the City Staff a job approval rating of 85% and a disapproval rating of 12%. Both the absolute level of approval and the seven-to-one ratio of approval-to-disapproval are above the Metropolitan Area suburban norm. The 35% of residents reporting first-hand contact with the staff is at the suburban standard.

Forty-nine percent visited or contacted Vadnais Heights City Hall during the past year; ten percent did so in person, 19% reached City Hall online, and 20% contacted City Hall by telephone. Six Departments account for 86% of the contacts: “utility billing,” at 31%; “license and permits,” at 16%; “general information,” at 12%; “public works,” at 10%; “parks and recreation,” at nine percent; and “administration,” at eight percent. On each of three customer service dimensions, positive evaluations exceed the standard level denoting high-quality service in the public sector of 80%. Eighty-three percent rate “waiting time for a staff member to assist them” as either “excellent” or “good;” eighty-eight percent similarly rate “courtesy of City Staff;” and 93% rate the “ease of obtaining the service they needed” as either “excellent” or “good.”

Fifty-nine percent report accessing any services provided by the city online. Among online service users, 92% rate the experience as “excellent” or “good;” only eight percent are more critical. Non-users of online services have four primary reasons for not using them: “no need,” at 44%; “not interested,” at 21%; “no internet connection,” at 17%; and “do not use online services,” at eight percent.

Ninety-one percent have never been unable to do business at Vadnais Height’s City Hall during the work week’s current operating hours. Only six percent wanted to do business after 4:30 PM, while only four percent wanted to before 8:00 AM. Seventy-nine percent see closing City Hall on Friday during the Summer as a good idea, while 12% think it is not. Among those thinking a Friday closing is a bad idea, almost three-quarters would still oppose it even if City Hall opened earlier on Monday through Thursday during the Summer.

Commuting and Transit Needs:

Thirteen percent regularly use public transit; ten percent regularly use the bus, two percent use Metro Mobility, and one percent regularly use Park and Ride. Among non-users, eight percent would be more likely to use public transit if additional public transit options were available in Vadnais Heights.

Twenty-one percent use the Metro Transit Park and Ride lot in front of the Walmart parking lot. Residents not using the park and ride lot have several reasons for not doing so: forty-four percent “prefer to drive;” 22% report it is “not needed;” and 12% “need a car.”

Sixty-nine percent are aware of individual public transportation options, such as Metro Mobility or New Trax; in fact, 12% report members of their households used these types of services.

Community Events:

During the past two years, 48%, down 11% in the five years between studies, report members of their households participated in a community event. Among participants, 98% rated the event as “excellent” or “good.” Suggestions for further improvement include more extended events and better food.

Communication Channels:

A high 78% rate their current level of knowledge about Vadnais Heights City Government and its activities as either “very informed” or “somewhat informed.” Twenty-two percent report their level as “not too informed” or “not at all informed.”

In choosing their primary source of information about the City of Vadnais Heights, 37% post the “City newsletter.” The “City website” is next at 19%, followed by the “Saint Paul Pioneer Press,” at 13%. Eight percent point to “City mailings,” and six percent each mention “e-mail,” “word-of-mouth,” or “social media.” Five percent rely upon the “local newspaper.” Preferred sources of information generally follow the same pattern. Thirty-seven percent list the “City newsletter,” followed by the “City website,” at 22%, and “e-mail,” at 11%. Nine percent prefer “City mailings,” seven percent opt for “social media,” six percent prefer the “Saint Paul Pioneer Press,” and five percent opt for the “local newspaper.”

The “Vadnais Heights News,” the City quarterly newsletter, has a reach of 86% as a source of information about the City government and its activities. The weekly “News and Views” column in the “Vadnais Heights Press” reaches 68%, down 13% in five years. The reach of the City of Vadnais Heights website is 62%. Articles in “The Vadnais Heights Press” reach 61%, down 18% in five years. Fifty-seven percent, down 13% in five years, view the quarterly “Utility Bulletin”

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as at least a minor source of information about the city. The reach of the daily newspapers as a source of local news is 47%. The reach of “neighborhood or community social media, such as Facebook” is 32%. Thirty percent feel the same way about the “City’s Facebook page,” while 17% similarly rate the “City’s Twitter account.” “City Council Meeting telecasts or City programs on Cable Channel 16” rank last at 16% reach, less than half of the previous result five years ago. Nine percent, themselves, added “word-of-mouth” to the list of information sources.

Thirty-nine percent of the respondents subscribe to cable television, 27% to internet streaming, and six percent to satellite television. Twenty percent of city households have more than one of these options, while eight percent have none. Eighty-eight percent of the homes in the community have access to the Internet. Among those online households, 67% accessed the City of Vadnais Heights’s website, a 21% increase in five years. Website visitors primarily sought general information, utility billing, parks and recreation programs, and City events. A comparatively large 89% rate the ease of navigating the website as either “excellent” or “good.”

Fifty percent are aware the city has an e-subscription list for residents to receive important information; twenty percent subscribe. Fifty-one percent report awareness of the town offering City Meetings on demand on the City’s website; twelve percent have viewed a meeting there. While 31% are at least “somewhat likely” to watch a City Council Meeting on the City’s website, standard market projection suggests about nine percent would do so.

Sixty-two percent of the households in Vadnais Heights use Facebook, while forty percent use YouTube. Twenty-nine percent currently use Twitter, followed by 27% using NextDoor. Twenty-three percent are Instagram users, while 22% are TikTok users. The likelihood of using each social media source for obtaining information about the City of Vadnais Heights varies significantly. The possibility of using Facebook, Twitter, or NextDoor for getting this type of information ranges between 74% and 79% of current users. The likelihood percentages for YouTube and Instagram are, respectively, 50% and 48%. TikTok users post the lowest likelihood rate at 41%.

Ninety-eight percent of respondents use a cell phone. A high 81% rate cell phone service coverage in the city as “excellent” or “good;” eighteen percent rate it lower. Thirty-eight percent report they would sign up to receive text messages about news and important information from the City of Vadnais Heights.

Overall, a comparatively high 85% rate the city’s job in communicating with residents as either “excellent” or “good,” while 14% rate it as “only fair” or “poor.” This positive rating is easily within the top quartile of Metropolitan Area suburban communities.

Conclusions:

Overall, Vadnais Heights citizens remain very content with their community. The key issues

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facing decision-makers changed during the past five years: rapid growth rate, rising crime, condition of streets, and high taxes. Boosters -- residents who think the community is facing no serious issues dropped from 47% to 16%, from one of the highest levels in the Metropolitan Area to ranking in the top quartile of suburban communities. Secondly, development needs -- mainly focusing on starter homes for young families and affordable housing, defined by the Metropolitan Council as a single-family home costing less than \$293,000 -- rank highly. In addition, residents would still like to see more dining establishments, especially sit-down restaurants.

There is an emerging consensus about future programs and projects. A substantial majority supports a more proactive approach for the enforcement of residential property codes. A three-to-one majority favors the city offering a program with funding available for homeowners to remodel or make home improvements. Another three-to-one majority supports the city offering financial incentives to attract specific types of needed development. A two-to-one majority favors lowering the speed limits on neighborhood streets to 20 miles per hour. Almost 80% support closing City Hall on Fridays during the Summer.

A park and recreation bond referendum package will likely pass on election day. Only two elements would need to be considered carefully for their tax cost impact: expanding the number of athletic fields in the community and the development of a skate park. These two projects should be no more than 30% of the total cost. In communications efforts, the rationale and purpose of each will need to be set early in the campaign. The most popular items -- expansion of trails and sidewalks, upgrading of playground equipment, and general park improvements -- should be distributed throughout the community to ensure no neighborhood feels neglected. The initial support level for passage of the bonding proposal, 75%-19%, allows discretion about the tax increase. Still, every effort should be made to stay below \$100.00 for the median-valued home in the city.

Residents of Vadnais Heights post uniformly high ratings on the city's connectivity within neighborhoods, welcoming new residents, receptivity to diversity, and resiliency. More telling, majorities of residents are committed to staying in the community if they were moving from their current homes to upgrade or downsize. Unlike many suburban communities, police services do not even generate mild hostility; when high crime rates in the Metropolitan Area are troubling, residents are nearly unanimous in describing the police as service-oriented and professional.

In general, residents view the city enterprise very strongly. City services are very well-regarded. City government and staff are rated exceptionally positive. Residents deem their quality of life highly and have few reservations about the transition from a small-town feel to a dynamic suburban community. Connection is a key-value, together with a sense of shared history. While the nature of challenges has changed in the last few years, residents are very optimistic the community heads in the right direction.