



Corporate Services Department

Memorandum

TO: Krista Power, Director – Legislative Services & City Clerk **FILE:**

FROM: Kristyn Lovato-Day, Policy & Research Analyst
Corporate Services

DATE: 01/30/2026 (mm/dd/yyyy)

SUBJECT: Proposed 2026 Operating Budget Engagement Update

MEETING & DATE: City Council - 02/03/2026 (mm/dd/yyyy)

The Proposed 2026 Operating Budget was presented at the Special Committee of the Whole (Annual Operating Budget) meetings on January 26 and 28, 2026, and was made public on the City’s website on January 16, 2026, as part of the meeting agenda.

In previous years, in-person engagement was limited to a single Informal Q&A event, where staff from all Divisions were in attendance. During the Q&A for the 2025 Operating Budget, participation was lower than anticipated, with only 16 attendees. In response, Administration intentionally shifted its approach in 2025–2026 to include integration with Thunder Bay Talks and pop-up engagement opportunities, allowing residents to participate in settings they already frequent. Administration was available to answer questions and brought the Community Handbook and a dot voting activity to identify service priorities. While these pop-up engagements did not include representation from all Divisions, representatives from the Finance Division were able to engage directly with residents to discuss budget priorities and gather input.

At Thunder Bay Talks on October 22, 2025, 20 people participated in the dot voting to identify their top three priorities for municipal spending. On January 17, 2026, 37 people participated in voting at the Country Market. On January 25, 2026, 7 people participated in voting at the Winter Fundays at Marina Park.

Collectively, these efforts resulted in more than 60 in-person engagement touch points, representing an increase of approximately 300% over the prior year. Administration will continue to explore opportunities to hold additional pop-up engagements throughout the year at a broader range of community events to further improve reach and accessibility.

A survey was also distributed to gather public feedback, pursuant to Corporate Report 216-2025-Corporate Services-Finance – 2026 Budget Direction and Calendar, approved on August 11, 2025. The survey focused on ease of understanding budget content, and overall impression of the proposed budget. It was open for responses from noon on January 16, 2026, to midnight on January 29, 2026.

The survey received 140 responses on the Get Involved electronic platform, and two submitted on paper. The Get Involved platform expects an average response rate of one completed survey in every ten visits; the Proposed 2026 Operating Budget Survey had 342 visits and 140 submissions, for a rate of 4.1 surveys completed for every ten visits to the platform.

Administration increased advertising for 2026 - the survey and pop-up events were advertised at Thunder Bay Talks, as well as through the following avenues:

- A segment on The Minutes Podcast;
- With posters at all City facilities;
- Television, print, and radio media interviews;
- Radio and web ads;
- Webpage banner ads;
- Boosted social media posts and sponsored ads (combined, garnered over 57,000 views);
- Media release upon publication of the Operating Budget;
- Posted on the front page of the Get Involved platform; and
- On the City of Thunder Bay website – on the home page and the Budget page.

The 2026 survey saw an 80% increase in participation compared to the 2025 Operating Budget Survey, where 79 responses were received.

A new email address was also advertised as another point of contact this year. The new your.budget@thunderbay.ca email collected four comments and two sets of questions that Administration was able to answer. These emails have been summarized in Attachment A along with 70 comments collected from budget-related social media posts and ads.

It should be noted that the public engagement activities for 2026 were not random samples, and the samples collected are not large enough to be representative of the entire population of the City of Thunder Bay, therefore they are not considered statistically significant. However, the responses still provide valuable feedback from select residents. Administration will continue to explore opportunities to increase engagement with the public and gather feedback.

The attached report describes the public engagement activities for the Proposed 2026 Operating Budget and is being presented for information to assist in the Operating Budget discussions.

Attachments

Attachment A – Proposed 2026 Operating Budget Engagement Results



Proposed 2026 Operating Budget Engagement Results

Prepared by:

Kristyn Lovato-Day, Policy & Research Analyst

Corporate Services Department

January 30, 2026



Executive Summary

Beginning in October 2025, the Corporate Services Department conducted various public engagement activities to collect feedback about the Proposed 2026 Capital and Operating Budgets, including pop-up events and surveys.

Three pop-up events were held between October 2025 and January 2026, where members of Administration were available to answer questions, and collect information from the public on service priorities through a dot voting activity. Approximately 64 people participated in this activity, providing their opinion on spending priorities.

The Proposed 2026 Operating Budget survey was open to the public beginning January 17, 2026, and was distributed electronically through the City’s Get Involved engagement site and on paper. 142 responses were received. In this short survey, respondents were asked about their high-level opinions of the budget as proposed, and where they thought changes should be made.

Of note, the survey identified that the public’s understanding of the budget process has increased. The survey also highlighted the public’s opinion that the Agencies, Boards and Commissions (ABCs) should decrease their budgets to help with decreasing the tax levy.

The survey questions will be used in subsequent years to gauge how changes to the budget documents and process impact public opinion. It is important to note that this is difficult to measure without a representative sample, and any future comparison must be used with caution.

Method

Pop-Ups and Dot Voting

City Administration held pop-up booths at three local events during the course of the budget period: Thunder Bay Talks on October 22, 2025, the Country Market on January 17, 2026, and at Winter Fundays at Marina Park on January 25, 2026.

At these events, City staff were available to answer questions, and administered a dot voting exercise, where participants placed stickers on a poster board to represent their top three priority service areas.

Participants were offered up to three stickers: green for first priority, yellow for second priority, and red for third priority. A poster board listing service categories was set up for participants to place their dots on their first, second, and third priorities.

Not all participants chose to place three dots; some placed only one.



Photo taken at the January 25, 2026, pop-up

Participants may have attended all three events and would have had the opportunity to participate in more than one activity, therefore the participant counts for the dot voting do not represent a unique count of individuals.

Survey

In January 2026, the Finance Division of the Corporate Services Department distributed a survey for the Proposed 2026 Operating Budget using the City of Thunder Bay's Get Involved public engagement platform. Paper surveys were also made available in the Community Handbook, and at each of the Thunder Bay Public Library branches, the 55+ Centre, and City Hall. The survey was published at noon on January 16, 2026, and closed just before midnight on January 29, 2026.

The survey was announced with the Proposed 2026 Operating Budget at a media event, along with a media release. It was also advertised:

- In a segment on The Minutes Podcast;
- With posters at all City facilities;
- On the City Hall lobby screens;
- In television, print, and radio media interviews;
- In radio and web ads;
- With webpage banner ads;
- In boosted social media posts and sponsored ads (combined, these posts were viewed over 57,000 times);
- On the front page of the Get Involved platform; and
- On the City of Thunder Bay website –home page and Budget page.

The sample was not random and likely includes more people who are engaged with the City or have a particular interest in the budget (homeowners who pay property taxes).

Statistical Significance

Dot Voting

The study was not conducted as a random sample of the population, and there were opportunities for people to participate at multiple locations, therefore, the approximate count of 64 total participants is not a unique count of individuals.

This activity should be considered as a feedback mechanism and not a representation of the opinion of the greater population.

Survey

The study was not conducted as a random sample of the population, but as a self-directed survey and should be considered as a feedback mechanism and not a representation of the opinion of the greater population.

The survey received 142 responses from the public – 140 electronic and two paper surveys. As the sample is quite small, the results cannot be extrapolated to the entire population of the City of

Thunder Bay without a large margin of error and must be referred to as the opinions of the respondents of this survey.

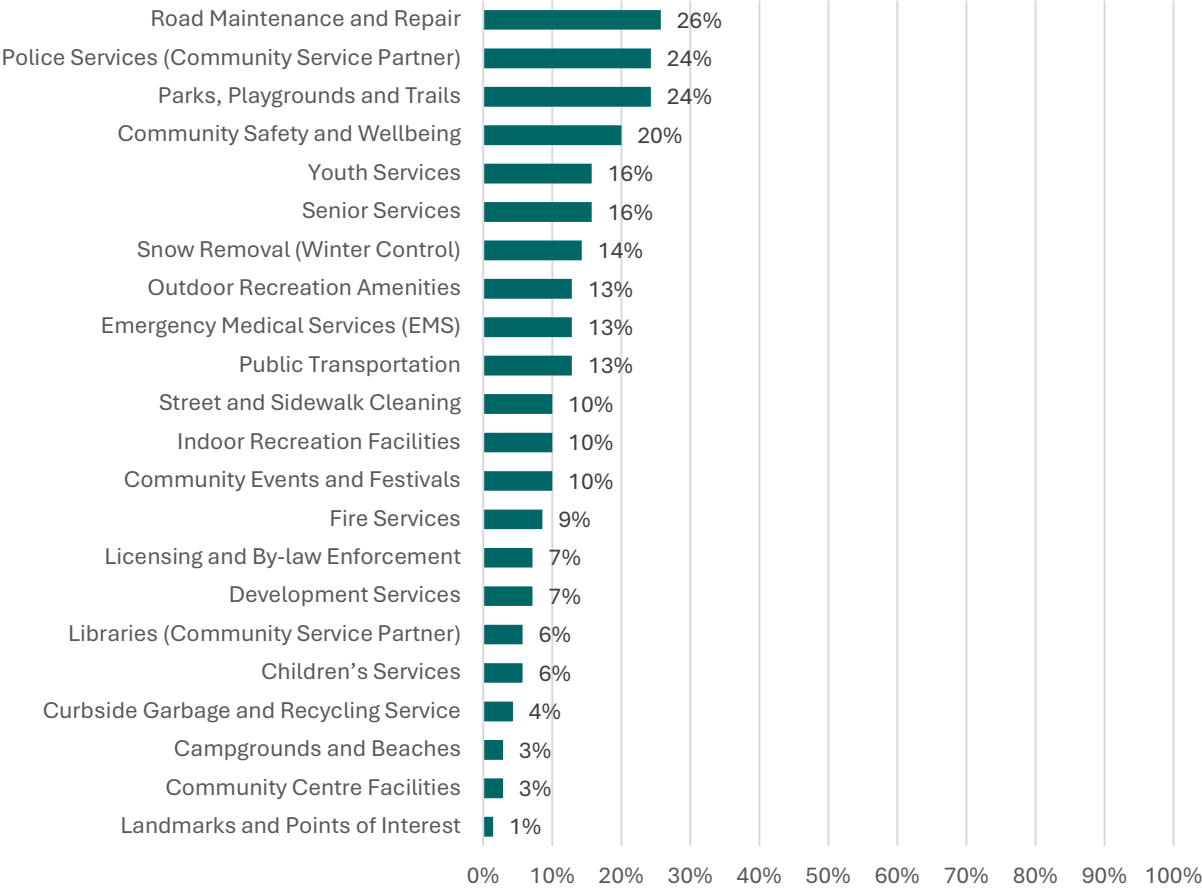
It should be noted that while not statistically significant, the feedback is still important to a transparent and thorough public budget process. Survey results in this situation should be treated as a sample and not a reflection of all opinions, and interpretation should be done with caution.

Results

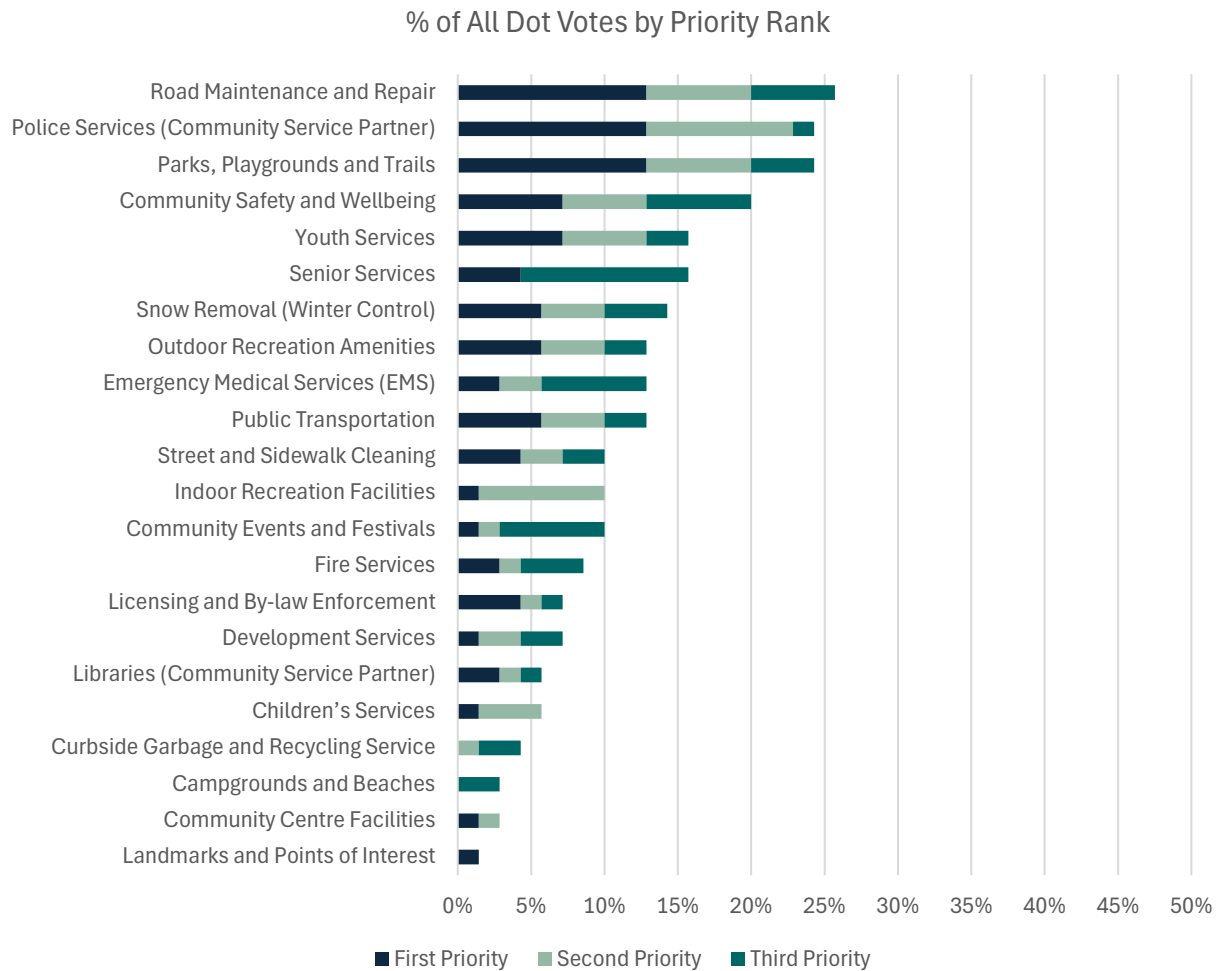
Dot Voting

Approximately 64 people participated in three different dot voting prioritization exercises. Participants were provided with a list of service categories and asked to place dots on their first, second, and third priorities. Road Maintenance and Repair was the service category with the most votes, with 26% of participants. Parks, Playgrounds, and Trails, and Police Services were second with 24% of participants each.

Service Categories by % of Respondents



When broken down by priority ranking, when all responses are rolled together, the top three priorities are Road Maintenance and Repair, Parks, Playgrounds and Trails, and Police Services each with 13% of the total first priority votes.



The top three priorities differed depending on the event attended:

Event	First Priority	Second Priority	Third Priority
Thunder Bay Talks October 22, 2025	Road Maintenance and Repair	Parks, Playgrounds and Trails	Licensing and By-law Enforcement/Snow Removal (Winter Control) (tie)
Country Market January 17, 2026	Police Services (Community Service Partner)	Road Maintenance and Repair	Parks, Playgrounds and Trails
Winter Fundays January 25, 2026	Community Safety and Wellbeing	Parks, Playgrounds and Trails	Road Maintenance and Repair

Road Maintenance and Repair and Parks, Playgrounds and Trails were in the top three for each event. It should be noted that the pop-up booths were intentionally distributed to different events in the community in order to gather feedback from a more diverse sample. People who attend

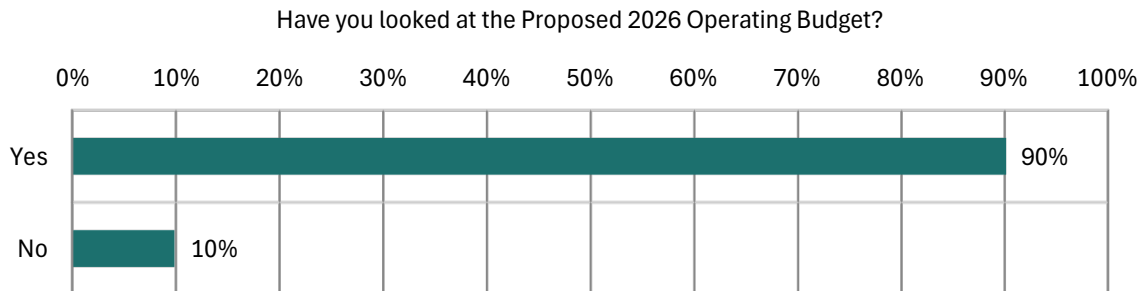
Thunder Bay Talks are likely more engaged in civic matters, while people at Winter Fundays may be families and residents looking for a free activity.

Administration will continue to explore opportunities to engage with more diverse population groups to follow trends in prioritization responses.

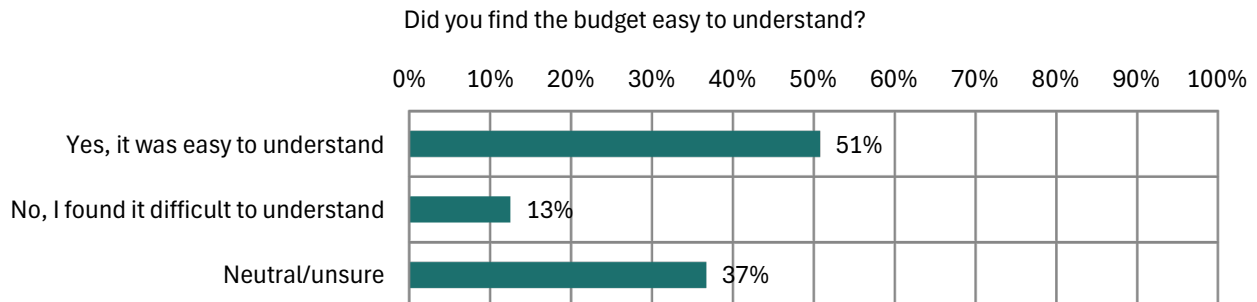
Survey

Questions Regarding Ease of Understanding

Respondents were provided a link to the Proposed 2026 Operating Budget and the Community Handbook summary at the beginning of the survey. The survey began with a mandatory question asking if they had an opportunity to review it. 90% of respondents answered that they did review the budget.



If a respondent chose yes to the first question, a supplemental question was provided, asking if they found the budget easy to understand. Of the people who were provided this question, 51% answered positively, that it was easy to understand, with 37% neutral/don't know, and 13% stating it is difficult to understand.



This reflects an increase in understanding from 2025, where 16% stated it was too complicated, and 49% of respondents thought it was easy to understand.

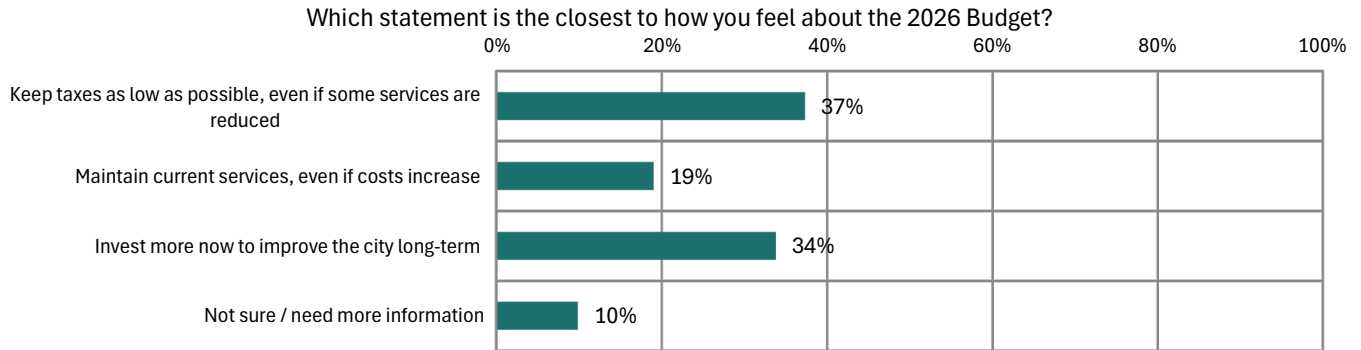
If the respondent said that it was difficult to understand, a short answer question asked what would make it easier. 13 respondents provided feedback or suggestions in response to this question.

- 31% said it should be simpler (4 people).
- 15% requested more summaries (2 people).
- 15% responded that it should be shorter (2 people).

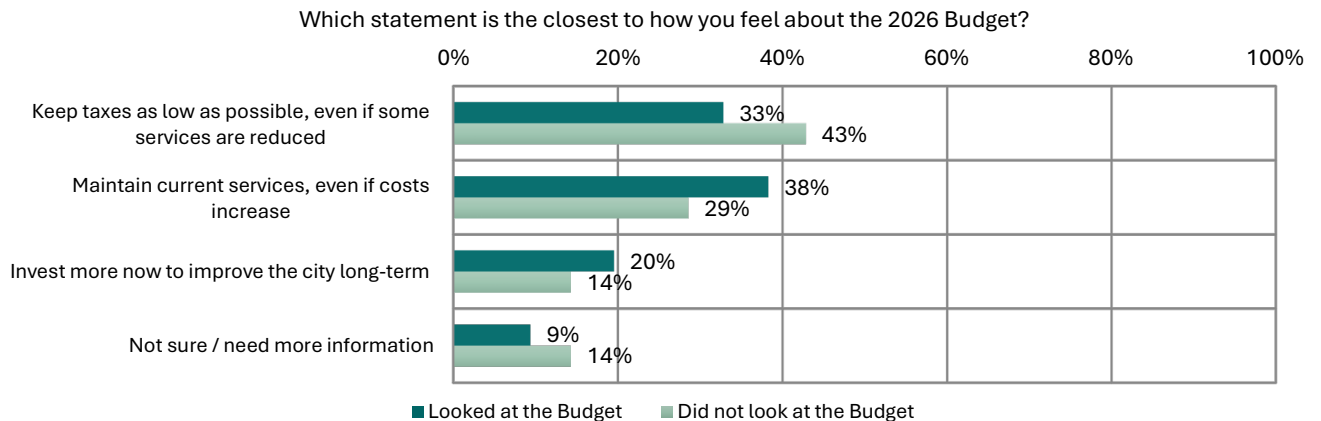
- 15% wanted to return to the detailed tables (2 people).
- 15% asked for detailed explanations and definitions for programs and services (2 people).
- 8% requested interactive graphs and tables (1 person).

Questions Regarding Budget Content

Respondents were asked to choose a statement that was the closest to how they felt about the budget. 37% of respondents chose “keep taxes as low as possible, even if some services are reduced,” while 34% chose “invest more now to improve the city long-term.”



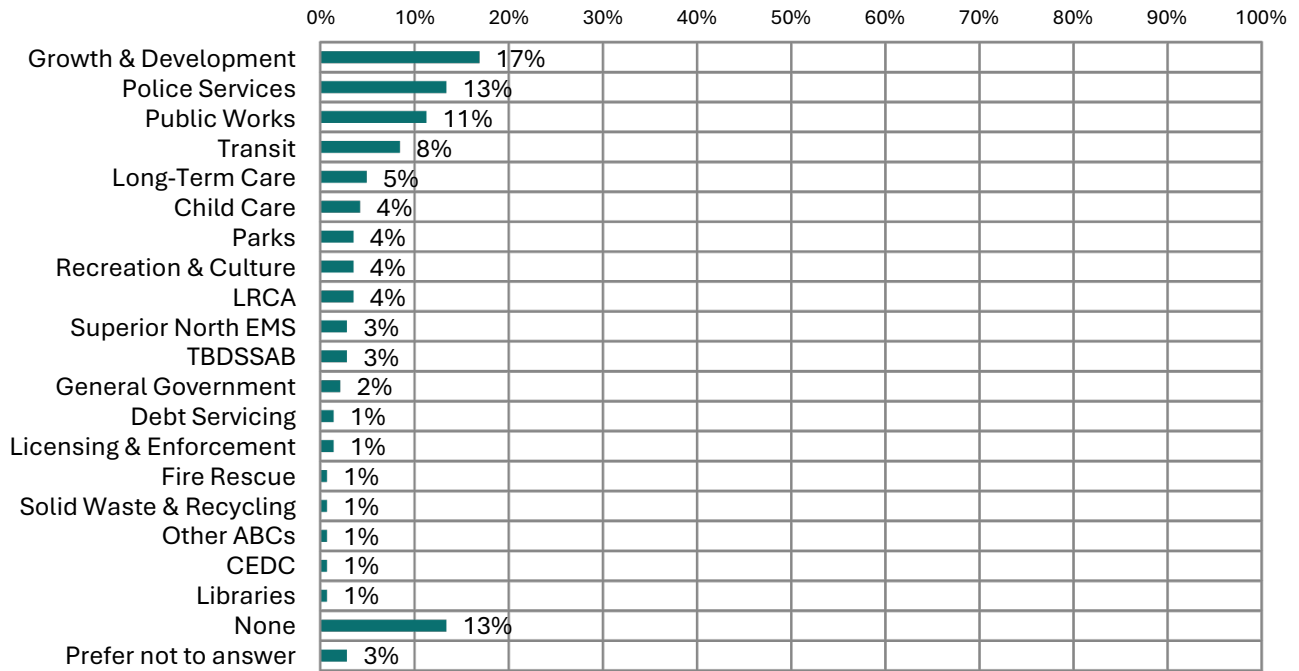
When isolating for respondents who did not look at the budget document, 43% chose “invest more now to improve the city long-term,” and 29% wanted to keep taxes as low as possible, even if some services are reduced.



Respondents were asked to choose one thing they would like the City to spend more money on. 17% of respondents chose Growth & Development. The responses are outlined in the graph below.

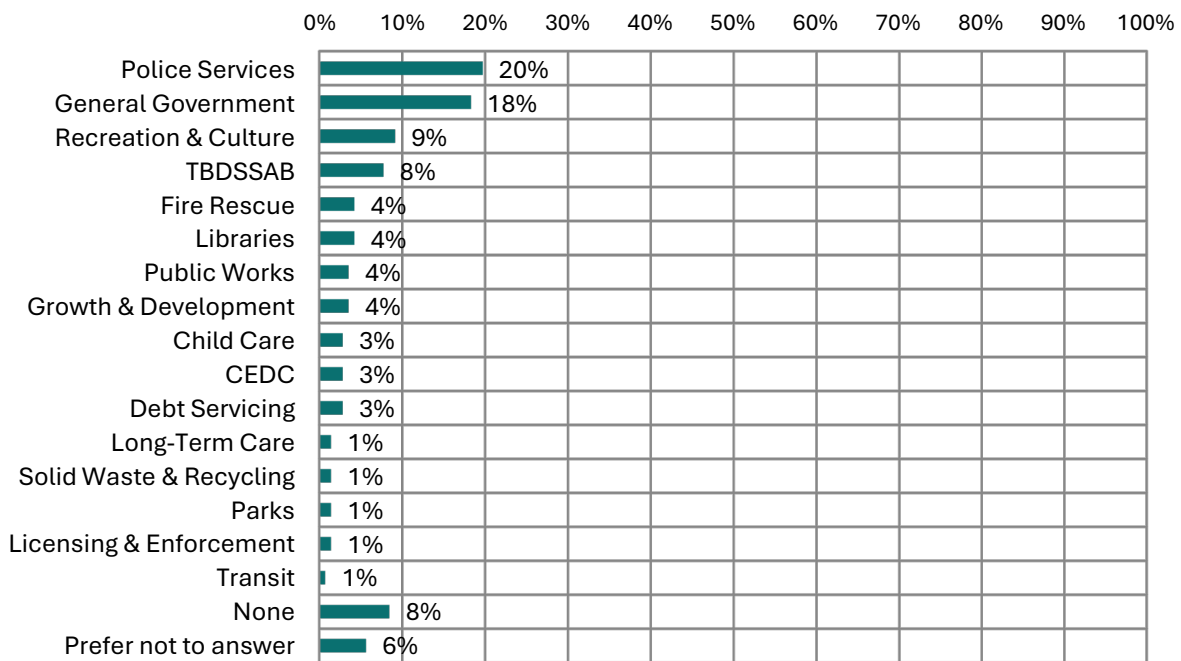
It is noted that Transit has decreased as a top priority for more funding (8% in 2026 compared to 23% in 2025) and has been replaced with Police. These trends remain the same between those who looked at the budget document and those who did not.

What is one thing you would like the City to spend more on?

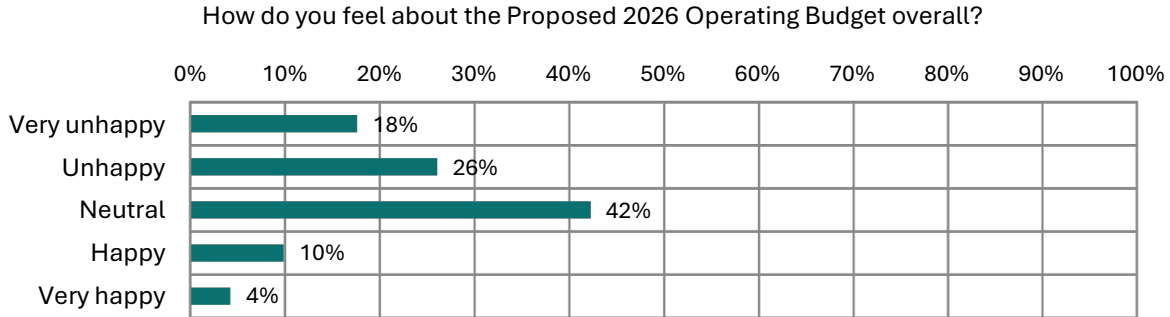


When asked for one thing they would like the City to spend less money on, the majority of respondents chose Police Services (20%, or 28 responses). This is stable from 2025, where 27 people (35% of respondents) reported wanting less money spent on Police Services. These trends remain the same between those who looked at the budget document and those who did not.

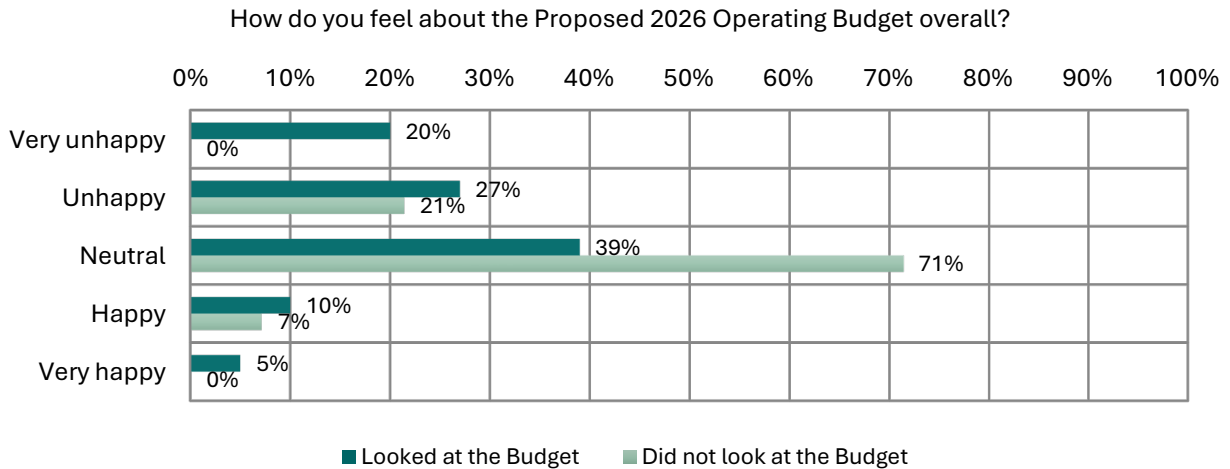
What is one thing you would like the City to spend less on?



When asked how participants felt overall about the Proposed 2026 Operating Budget, the majority of responses were negative (44%). 14% of responses were positive, while 42% were neutral. This represents a shift in opinion to neutral from 2025, as 57% of responses were negative, and 25% were positive last year.



The majority of respondents who did not read the budget document reported feeling neutral about the overall Proposed 2026 Operating Budget (71%), and had less extreme opinions about the content, as no respondents reported feeling very happy or very unhappy about the proposed budget.



Comments

There was an opportunity to provide a free text comment at the end of the survey. 94 comments were left (66% of respondents). Major themes to survey comments received include:

- 28% of comments mentioned that taxes are too high or that the 2.6% target was the highest they were expecting the tax rate to rise (26 people).
- 19% of comments said that the police increase is too high (18 people).
- 13% of comments provided possible options for efficiencies/reductions (12 people). Of these, half mentioned general government as a suggestion for reductions.
- 11% of comments mentioned wanting more funding for specific services (10 people). Of these, half mentioned more support for Transit.
- 9% of comments provided compliments for the budget (8 people).

- 9% of comments noted the there is a need for increased funding for social service interventions to homelessness and substance use in the community (8 people).
- 9% of comments wanted the ABCs to find more efficiencies in their budgets (8 people).
- 6% of comments noted that they would like to see an increase in services and opportunities for youth and young families (6 people).
- 5% of comments were against providing additional funding to projects that are not viable on their own (5 people).
- 4% of comments requested more investment to bring businesses to Thunder Bay (4 people).
- Two respondents wanted to see more plans to increase active transportation.
- One respondent requested plebiscites for large projects.
- One respondent suggested a flat rate for taxes rather than using MPAC assessments.

Residents also provided feedback through email, telephone, and social media. Major themes found in the 74 comments received include:

- 23% mentioned wanting to improve the state of roads.
- 19% noted the there is a need for increased funding for social service interventions to homelessness and substance use in the community.
- 11% mentioned that taxes are too high or that the 2.6% target was the highest they were expecting the tax rate to rise.
- 9% suggested reductions in general government and administration.
- 9% suggested that the SNEMS is low compared to the other emergency services.
- 9% requested increases and increased support for Transit
- 8% requested that funds be focused on upkeeping the infrastructure and services in place, and not new.

Other comments included mentioning the Police budget is too high, requesting increased snow removal, and a request to plant more trees. It should be noted that the individuals who submitted email and social media comments may be the same people who submitted surveys.

Conclusion

The results of the Proposed 2026 Operating Budget survey identified that the changes to the budget documentation over the last two years have increased public understanding of the City's budget process.

The survey highlighted the respondents' opinion that the ABCs should look for efficiencies to decrease their budgets. It also noted that the public would like to see work on roads, and changes to Transit services.

Some of the survey questions will be used in subsequent years to gauge how changes to the budget documents and process impact public opinion. It is important to note that this is difficult to measure without a representative sample, and any future comparison must be used with caution.