



**Town of Arlington
Office of the Town Manager**

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Financial Communication Survey Results

Introduction: The Town is always reassessing how we can effectively communicate the Town's financial status and improve transparency. The Town puts a lot of effort into preparing budget information, financial plans, and reports. However, financial information is inherently challenging to disseminate because it can be complicated, dense, and time consuming to review.

As the Town begins preparations for another budget cycle, and as requests for budgetary information and transparency increases, the Town Manager's Office recently surveyed residents to help guide our decisions about format, content, and distribution of Town financial information and allocate resources accordingly.

Methodologies: The survey was advertised on the front page of the Public Annual Financial Report (PAFR), which was included as an insert in the Arlington Advocate (5,200 copies). That edition of the Advocate (10/25/2012) also included an article that referenced both the PAFR and survey. The survey was available online (Survey Monkey) and at Town Hall Offices, Senior Center, and libraries.

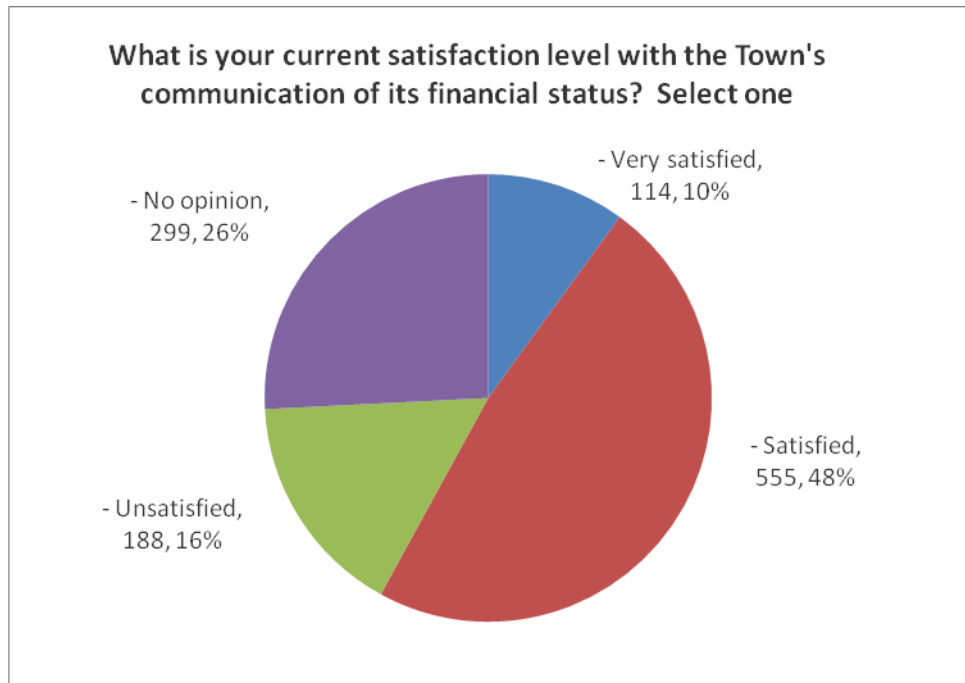
Five email alerts were sent. Four to Town of Arlington Notices (over 4.3K subscribers) and one to the Town Meeting members email distribution list. The number of surveys taken after each outreach is below.

Outreach Results

Date	Method	Responses	
10/25/2012	Advocate, Town of Arlington Notice	77	(11/8/2012)
11/9/2012	Town Meeting Member List	112	(11/13/2012)
11/13/2012	Town of Arlington Notice	463	(11/14/2012)
11/16/2012	Town of Arlington Notice	838	(11/26/2012)
11/26/2012	Town of Arlington Notice	1159	(11/28/2012)

Only three paper surveys, filled out from Town Hall Offices, were returned. The rest of the respondents came in via the online Survey.

Current Satisfaction Level with Financial Communication



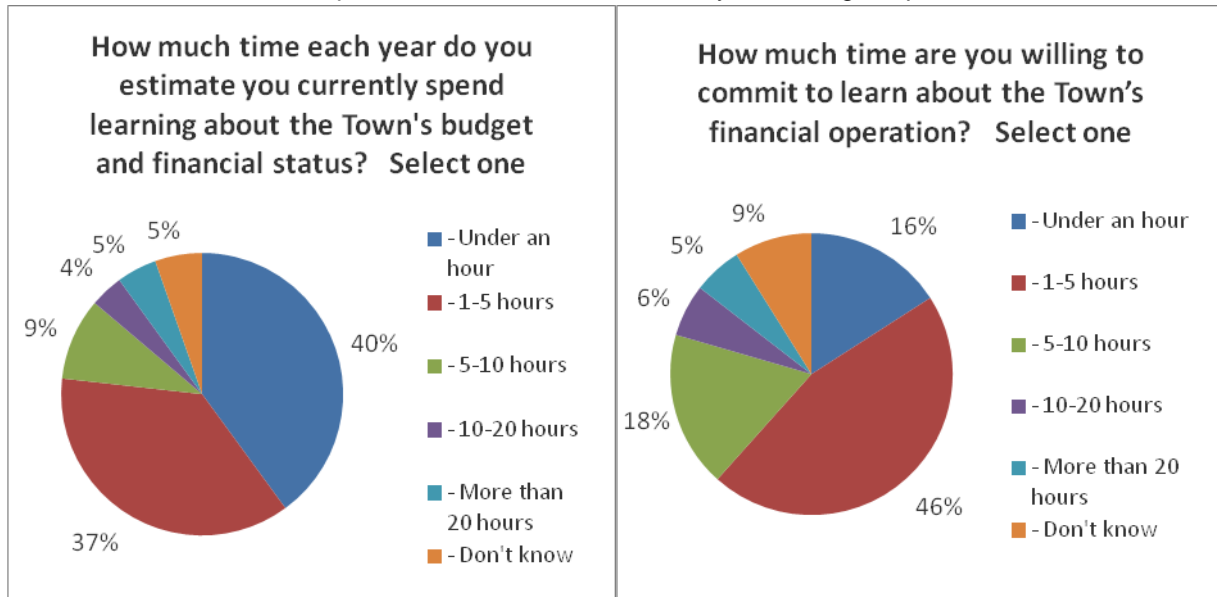
1,159 Respondents

- 58% Satisfied/Very Satisfied
- 16% Unsatisfied
- 26% No Opinion

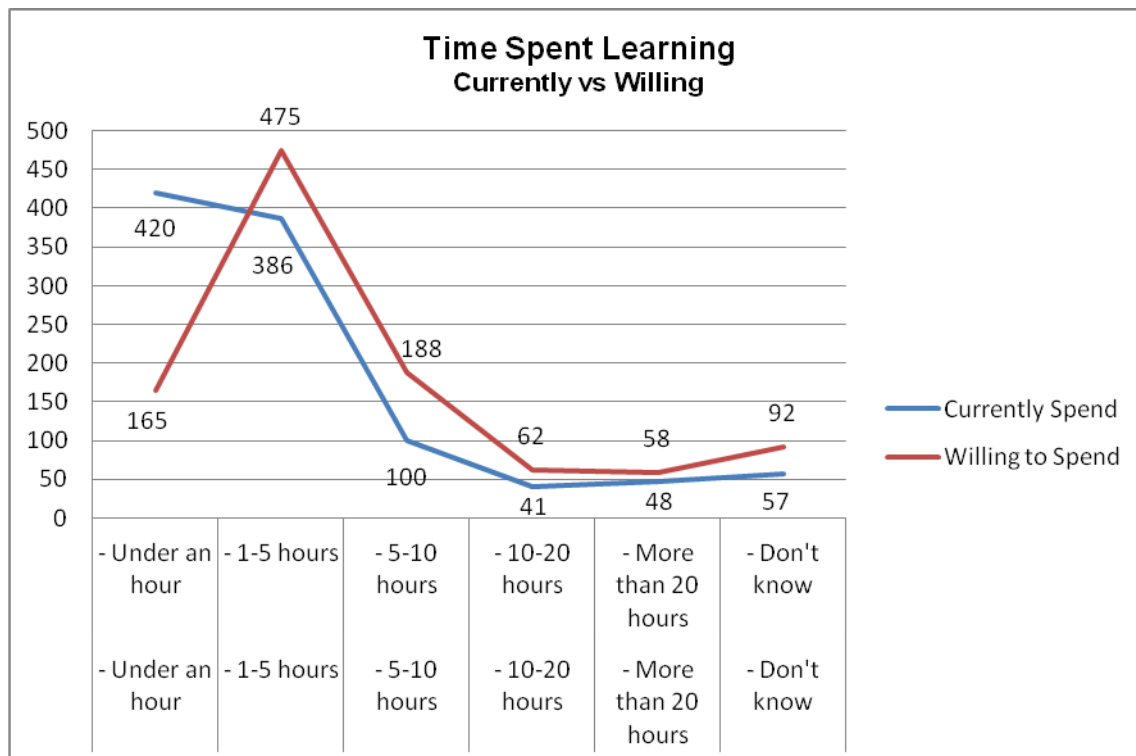
Overall satisfaction with the Town's communication of its financial status found 58% of respondents were satisfied to very satisfied, 16% were unsatisfied, and 26% had no opinion. Based on the feedback in the last, open-ended question, which included some dissatisfaction in some financial decisions the Town has made, it is unclear if the dissatisfaction here was financial decisions or the communication of financial information. In either case, the Town should strive to improve. It is important to note that 26% of residents had no opinion. Clearly this tells us that we have a challenge, and opportunity, to engage those residents in understanding the Town's financial status. The following questions help us understand how much time residents are willing to spend learning about financial information and how best they would like to consume that information.

Time spent learning about Town Finances

Two survey questions asked respondents to think about how much time they currently spend learning about the Town's financial operation and how much time they are willing to spend.



The chart below compares how respondents' answers changed as they thought about the question. Overall the results show a willingness, and perhaps desire, to spend more time learning about the Town's financial reporting and operations.



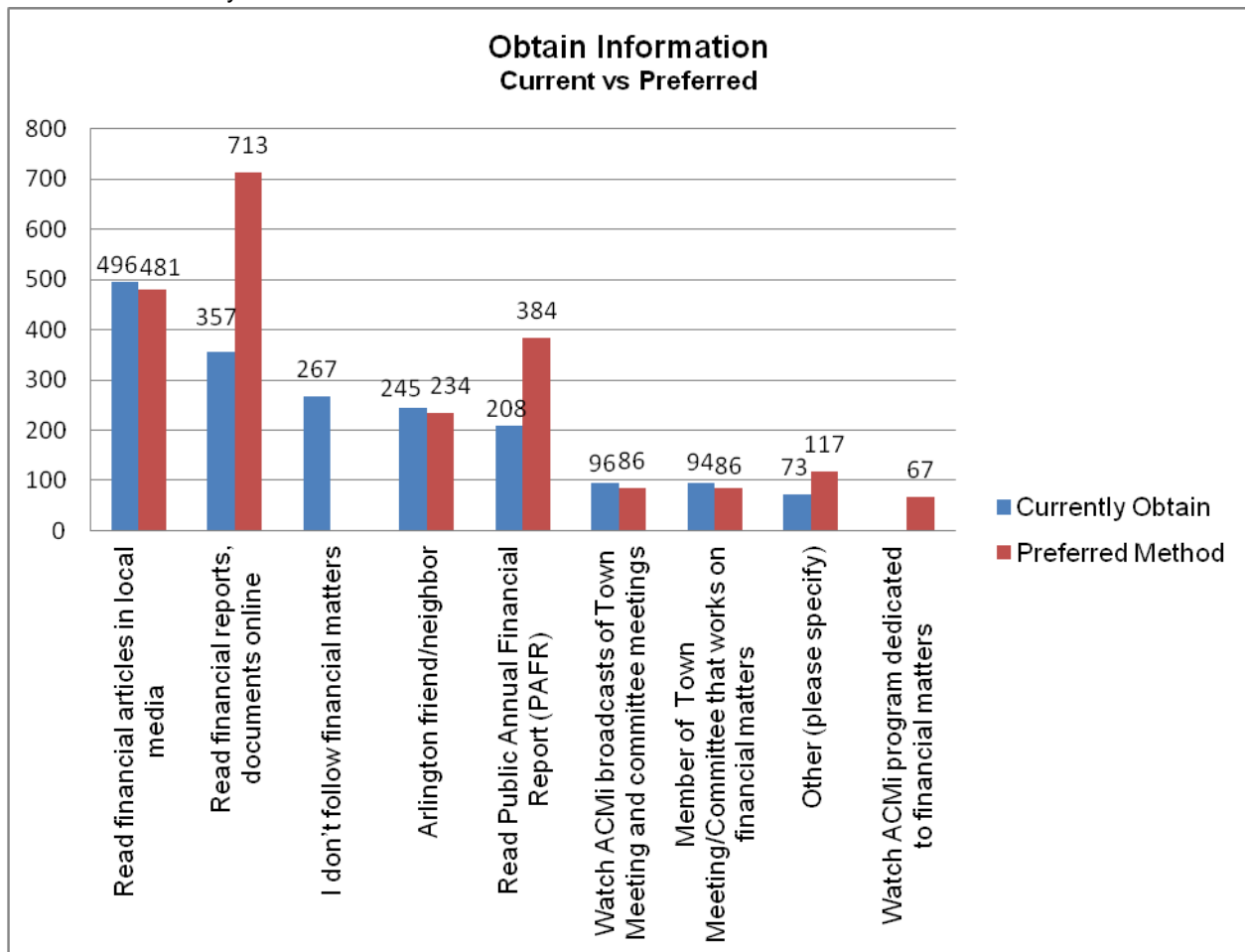
1,052 "Currently" Respondents

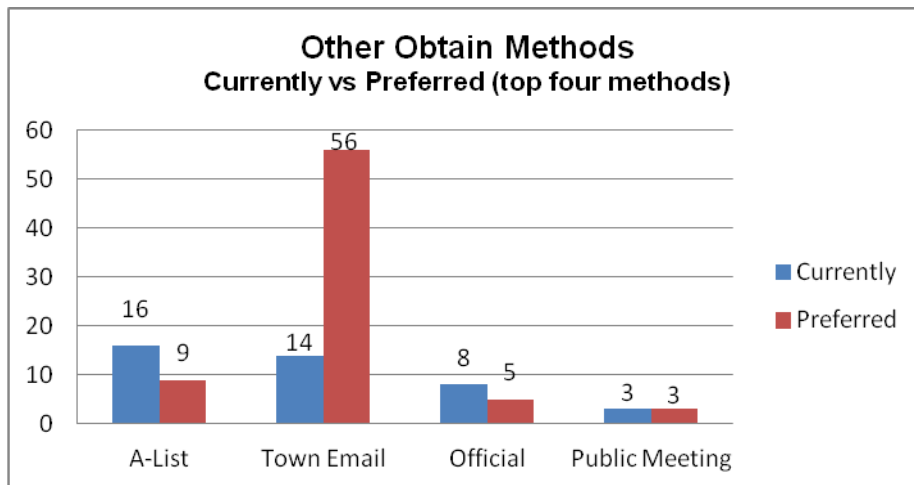
1,040 "Willing" Respondents

How Respondents Obtain Information

Two survey questions asked respondents to tell us how they currently obtain financial information and how they prefer to obtain it.

The chart below compares respondents' answers. Currently residents predominantly receive this information through local media, but are willing to obtain it online. They also show a preference for the shorter-form report (PAFR). There was only a slight decrease in obtaining information via local media. The jump in reading documents online may be those respondents who are willing to learn more about Town finances or those who are just learning that these documents exist online. It should be acknowledged that these respondents took the survey online and are comfortable using this method, but the spike in online readership does provide a preference, and willingness, from respondents to receive information this way.





Obtain Info Respondents

- Currently, 1,066
- Preferred Method, 986

Other Methods

- Currently, 73
- Preferred, 92

Looking at “other” methods respondents mentioned, Town Emails (Town of Arlington Notices) were preferred far over the Arlington List (resident operated email distribution list), speaking to a Town Official, and attending a public meeting. This illustrates that respondents prefer the direct connection and convenience that Town of Arlington Notices provide.

One question we hoped this survey would help us answer is: “Should the Town produce financial programming on ACMi and if so, at what frequency?” This type of programming doesn’t currently exist (and the reason it is not tabulated in the ‘current’ option). The following option was made available “Watch ACMi program dedicated to financial matters.” 67 respondents chose this option. Not high numbers, but enough to pay attention to how we might serve this audience and include it in our overall financial communication strategy.



Additional Comments From Respondents

The survey included a place where respondents could offer their own feedback on how we can better deliver financial information to them. We received 202 comments. The top six themes provided by respondents were: Town Email (36), Executive Summary (24), Online Reports (18), Doing a Good Job (16), Education (13), and Accountability (11). The word cloud below provides an interesting way to view the top 15 results and their approximate commonality with respondents.

Conclusions

Although 58% of respondents are satisfied or very satisfied with how the Town communicates financial matters there are opportunities to improve our methods and engage more residents.

Engagement: Overall, respondents showed a willingness to spend more time learning about the Town's financial reporting. For some, the survey itself acted as an engagement tool that created awareness of the Town's efforts to communicate its financial condition to new constituents.

Format: It is clear that executive summary style documents are desired. It is represented in comments by respondents in the feedback section and the PAFR (The Town's four-page financial summary) was rated 3rd as preferred method to obtain financial information. A primary message from this survey was simplify and make our documents accessible. Education was also requested, a "Financial 101."

Distribution: Local media and online are the distribution channels that currently reach the most respondents and are the top two preferred methods. The spike in online distribution being preferred over local media may favor online as most respondents took the survey online, but it should be noted the increase is in line with increases in traffic on the Town's website, especially when deployed in conjunction with Town Notices. For an example of the effectiveness of our email campaigns, just review the response rate of Town Notices to this survey on the first page of this report. We anticipate online distribution, tightly integrated with email campaigns, will only increase access to financial information online.

Although ACMi rated low as preferred method to receive financial information, we feel there is a place for ACMi programming as part of the Town's overall financial communications strategy, especially now that they provide video-on-demand. ACMi programming can now be accessed 24/7 and can be more tightly integrated with our online properties. With the use of video, we may be able to provide some of the educational and accessibility requests respondents seek. For example, a Financial 101 program, linked to the current FY Budget and Financial Plan online, produced and promoted prior to Town Meeting or perhaps a broadcast of a public information session can provide another effective avenue to communication the Town's financial condition. These are just a couple examples we'll be exploring in the coming months.

Next Steps: We've found this feedback from residents invaluable and we look forward to putting a strategy together that delivers on the concerns and desires expressed in the survey balanced with available resources. As the Town works through the current budget cycle in the next several months, we'll look toward these findings and develop a communications strategy that leverages existing communication activities and channels and create new materials as warranted.