

Joseph Branch Rail-with-Trail Public Opinion Survey Report

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Executive Summary

A public opinion poll was conducted on behalf of the Willowa Union Railroad Authority (owner of the rail corridor), from April 14, 2015 to June 17, 2015 to determine how the potential to build a 63 mile rail-with-trail from Elgin to Joseph was viewed by the public and a subset of registered voters. A total of 347 responses were received from general members of the public opting in to take the survey, and a total of 149 responses were received from a randomly selected subset of registered voters from Willowa and Union County. Results from the survey of registered voters are estimated to be accurate to within plus or minus 8% at the 95% confidence level. Results of the poll varied between the public and voter groups. Overall, 85% of the public survey participants support the trail and 7% oppose the trail entirely, while 62% of the voter survey participants support the trail and 17% oppose the trail entirely. This information indicates that a majority of the public and voters support the trail generally, and details of trail design and sequencing could be worked out as planning progresses.

Introduction

Background

This survey was commissioned as part of a concept study to examine the possibility of building a multi-use rail-with-trail from the city of Elgin to the city of Joseph, in Northeast Oregon. The 63-mile trail would provide recreational opportunities for area residents and visitors to the region. An initial 27 key stakeholder interviews were conducted to identify key issues, questions and expectations for the proposed trail. This input contributed to design of the questionnaire for a wider data set to determine public opinion regarding the potential trail. A survey of Willowa and Union county voters as well as a separate survey of the general public were conducted and are described in this report.

Purpose

The purpose of this survey was to determine the public opinion of trail design alternatives as well as issues surrounding the concept of building a rail-with-trail. The goal of the study was to survey two groups of people: 1) random sample of voters, 2) general public. Having these two separate groups ensured that a variety of opinions could be collected. The random sample of voters provided opinions of people who live in the counties of the projected trail. These thoughts and opinions were important because they come from those who have the potential to use the trail the most, which would likely benefit the most from having the trail built, and possibly be adversely impacted. The general public survey provided opinions of anyone interested in completing a survey voluntarily. These survey respondents could live anywhere, but knowing if they support the trail and how often they would use it is important information.

Partners

This study is funded through grants from Cycle Oregon and Northeast Oregon Economic Development District with EPA Brownfields Assessment Funding, and supported by Eastern Oregon University, Oregon Parks and Recreation Department, and the Eastern Oregon Regional Solutions Center.

Methodology

Survey Sample Design

Methods for this survey are based on Dr. Don Dillman's methods for public opinion polling (Dillman, 2009). This poll was administered in two formats and through a specific procedure outlined below.

A meeting between Terry Edvalson (EOU), Commissioners Mark Davison (Union County) and Mike Hayward (Wallowa County) on March 19, 2015 resulted in the decision to restrict the survey sample to the voters in communities directly on or near the rail corridor.

Wallowa County

All voters by the Wallowa County Zip Codes except those in the Imnaha zip code area, 97842, were included in the sample.

Union County

Only voters in the Elgin zip code area (Elgin Precincts 8 and 9) should be included in the sample.

The voter databases were obtained from the respective County Clerk's office.

A database was constructed of voters from each of the counties. The total number of voters in Wallowa and Union counties in the zip codes selected was 6,016 voters. A random number generator was used to select 550 voters and each voter was given a unique identification number. Then a new dataset was created of the selected voters and was used to track responses.

Surveys were mailed to the 550 randomly selected voters throughout the Union and Wallowa counties. The overall response rate for the randomly selected voters was 149 responses out of 550 or 27%.

At the same time, a separate online survey using the same questionnaire was opened on the EOU webpage for the public. This survey received 347 responses.

Survey Question Design

Eighteen questions were developed to evaluate demographic characteristics of respondents, and to gauge opinions on the potential development of a trail. Questions were reviewed by the Student Internship Advisory Committee before being finalized. The survey was designed to take approximately 15 minutes to complete. The full list of survey questions is included in Appendix A Correspondence.

Survey Format Design

The survey format was reviewed by the Student Internship Advisory Committee with substantial input from Oregon Parks and Recreation Department trail team. The paper survey and electronic survey formats were designed to be as similar as possible. Both formats had brief descriptions of the project preceding the questionnaire portion.

Electronic format

The public and voter electronic survey were done through the main EOU rail-with-trail informational website, by adapting the homepage and making use of Google Forms. Many options were considered during the drafting phase of the survey. In the end, Google Forms was chosen due to its user friendly nature and powerful data analysis tools. The Google form was identical to the paper version of the survey and a small trial determined it would take 12-15 minutes to complete. Overall, using Google Forms allowed the data collection phase to go smoothly and provided sufficient options analyze data using the Google spreadsheet summary tools. To ensure only voters answered the voter survey a unique identifier was provided to each voter that they were required to enter to access the electronic survey. To ensure that members of the public did not take the survey more than once, each person was required to enter their email address and each email was allowed only a single submission.

Paper format

The paper format of the survey was 7 pages (printed front and back). This survey was sent to all selected voters and made available upon request to the public. The mailed survey was accompanied with a cover letter explaining the project.

Survey Contact Methods

The 550 random sampled voters received a cover letter, a survey, and a stamped return envelope. There was an option for these voters to use the online version of the survey, which had identical questions but was accessed using a unique identification number provided on the paper version of their survey. Voters that did not respond to the initial mailing mail were sent reminder postcards.

The public was contacted through emails and communications from groups associated with the project and provided access to the survey through the EOU public website: <https://www.eou.edu/rails-with-trails/>, which is operated and managed by the student interns at EOU. The website includes postings of public meetings held in the surrounding communities, general background information, a link for the public to comment, and access to the public surveys.

Public Education/Outreach

In the months preceding the survey, and during the months that the survey was open, a number of methods were used to provide educational and outreach opportunities for the public to learn and ask questions about the potential rail-with-trail.

Panel Presentation

As requested in the Wallowa Public Workshop held in the Wallowa Senior Center on December 3, 2014, a panel presentation comprised of trail managers and property owners adjacent to established recreational trails in similar rural areas discussed recreational trail issues. The public was invited to the two “recreational trails as neighbors” presentations, one in Elgin (April 8, 2015) and one in Enterprise (April 9, 2015). Panelists attended from the Weiser River National Recreation Trail (including an adjacent land owner), OC & E Woods Line State Trail, Oregon Parks and Recreation Department. Panelists were interviewed by reporters and the meeting was advertised in newspapers (La Grande Observer on Friday, April 3 and Monday April 6 and Wallowa Chieftain on Wednesday April 1 and Wednesday, April 8), radio, and website. A newspaper insert was also utilized to advertise the event and provide additional information.

Workshops

Three public workshops were conducted by OPRD and EOU to discuss the potential trail prior to initiation of the survey. These workshops were announced through newspapers, posters, radio ads, letters, and website links. A total of 163 participants attended workshops in Elgin, Wallowa, and Enterprise. All those who attended these public meetings and provided contact information were sent emails asking them to participate in the public survey.

Survey timeline

An original paper copy of the survey was mailed to all voters on April 9, 2015. A letter and survey form were sent out with postage paid return envelopes requesting voters take the survey by returning the hard copy questionnaire or by participating in the survey online. Each voter in the random sample was assigned a controlling registration number. The control number was a means of making certain that a voter could only respond once within the context of the random sample. Reminder postcards were mailed on May 11th, 2015, and June 8th, 2015. These cards thanked the respondents for returning the survey or requesting them to do so if they had not yet. Approximately 20% of surveys were returned as undeliverable. These were mailed out to the voter’s second address (if available from the voter database) on May 11th, 2015 and this subset of voters received one reminder postcard on June 8th, 2015.

The public survey was advertised on the EOU website from April 14, 2015 to June 17, 2015. Reminder emails were sent to the interested public two times during the survey. In addition, the public survey link was shared on the NEOEDD website/facebook page, and on the Joseph Branch Trail Consortium website and facebook page.

Sample Groups

Random Sample of Voters

A random, representative sample of voters from Union and Wallowa County were selected. Voting registration records were obtained and a random sample of approximately 10% of the total voters in each designated area of the two counties was selected to participate. The polling of a sample of registered voters was suggested by the Wallowa Union Railroad Authority, a local public entity, as a way to help determine public opinion about the proposed trail.

Public

Interested Public

An email invitation was sent to members of the public who had attended community workshops and/or were on the lists as having an interest in the trail. These people were invited to respond to the online survey, or to request a hard copy of the survey.

Unaffiliated Public

In order to spread awareness of the trail, outreach was conducted to engage members of the public that had previously not been involved in the public meetings. Newspaper advertisements, radio ads, and website postings were utilized to inform the public that anyone interested in taking the survey could either take it online, or request a hard copy to be sent to them.

Deviations from Survey Methodology

The following issues occurred during the survey that were considered deviations from the original survey methodology.

Of the original 550 surveys, 148 surveys were returned as undeliverable. Wallowa County does not have door to door mail service, and some people in Elgin have PO boxes as well as physical addresses, therefore these 148 surveys were sent to the secondary address, mostly PO Boxes, on May 11th, 2015 and a reminder postcard on June 8th, 2015.

To check for duplicate users in the public survey, the electronic form asked for participants' email addresses. This was not a foolproof method, because it is possible for someone to enter a fake email address, but it does give fairly accurate accounts. The accuracy depends on the honesty of the participants. The reason this method was used was that google forms had limited options for password protected services. Due to this constraint, the group created a random number generated spreadsheet and assigned individuals special numbers which they were asked to input twice for verification during the first part of the voter survey.

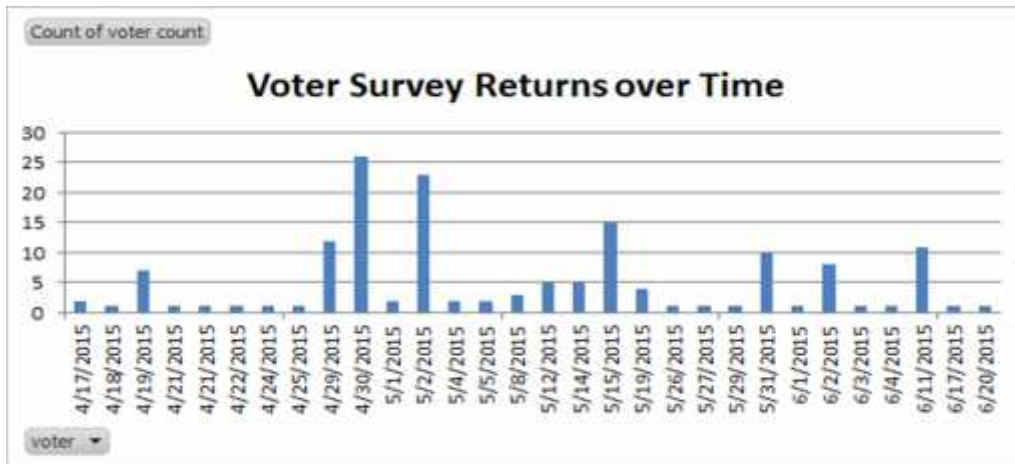
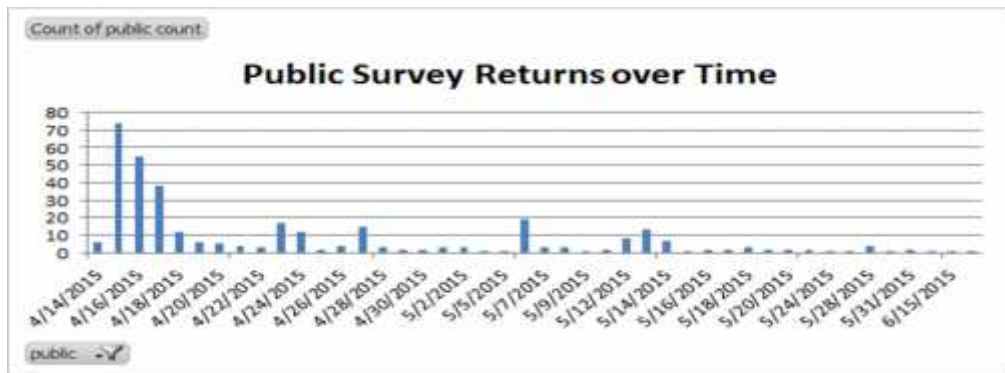
Another issue was completion rates. Many voters and some public survey takers did not make it to the end of the survey, and thus results are skewed toward the people with stronger feelings that completed the survey. Survey fatigue tended to occur toward the second half of the survey.

Results

Response Rate

The survey was open from April 14, 2015 to June 17, 2015. A total of 350 responses were received from the public survey. All responses were received electronically. A total of 149 responses were received from the voter survey. Of these responses 36 were received electronically and 113 were received as mailed hard copies.

The number of surveys that were returned varied throughout the timeframe. Most of the public surveys were completed and returned within the first few days that the poll was open. Then another flood of voter surveys were received in the days following the reminder postcards. These postcards were only sent to the registered voter group. The graphs below show the difference in response rates between the public and voter groups.



Sample Size and Representativeness

Confidence Intervals and Margins of Error were calculated for the voter survey to help analysts generalize the results of the survey more accurately. Performing these calculations provides the analyst with a range of numbers that describe a statistical parameter. They also provide information about how certain an analyst is on a particular value that has been estimated. Use of these calculations are common practice for research when trying to measure the accuracy or precision of a particular estimate, in this case the estimation of public opinion regarding the development of a rail with trail.

The confidence interval and level provide a range of numbers that if the survey were conducted again, the results would fall into this range. For example, if there were a narrow or small confidence interval for a particular question, this would indicate that if the same question were to be asked again, similar results can be expected. A wide or larger confidence interval would indicate that it is less likely that the results will be repeated and suggests that a larger sample size could provide more accurate information. Typically larger surveys that are conducted give a smaller confidence interval, while smaller surveys result in a larger confidence interval. It is important to note that confidence intervals can be calculated at different levels. They most commonly range from the 90-99%, depending on how accurate one is trying to be. This is considering that 90% is less accurate and 99% is the most accurate.

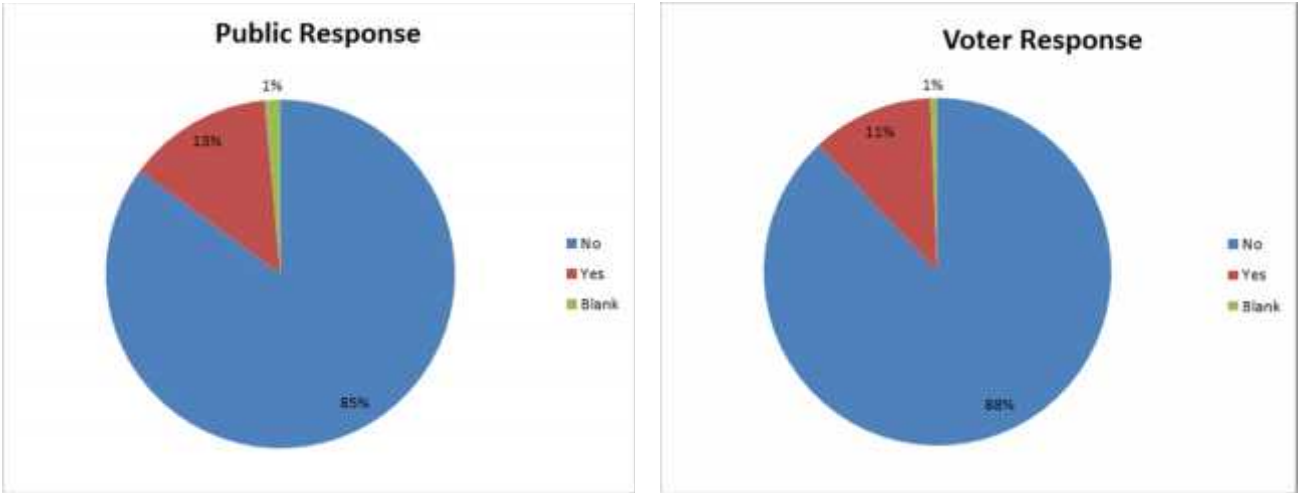
The total population is the 6,016 voters in the Union and Wallowa counties. The 149 surveys that were returned represents the sample size. There is a 7.85% margin of error at the 95% confidence interval. This means that there is a 95% certainty that the data is accurate to within plus or minus 7.85% of the reported values. Therefore, there is a 95% chance that the results would be the same (within plus or minus 8%) if the survey were conducted again. It can also be concluded that the with the most recent results of approximately 62% voter support for the entire trail, the number of actual supporters of the trail is between 54% and 70%.

This was considered adequate for this survey because of the large margins of support for the trail.

Response Summary

Outputs from survey response forms were obtained and the data was processed and reviewed for errors and completion. When ambiguous data was discovered it was excluded. Blank cells were excluded from the total counts.

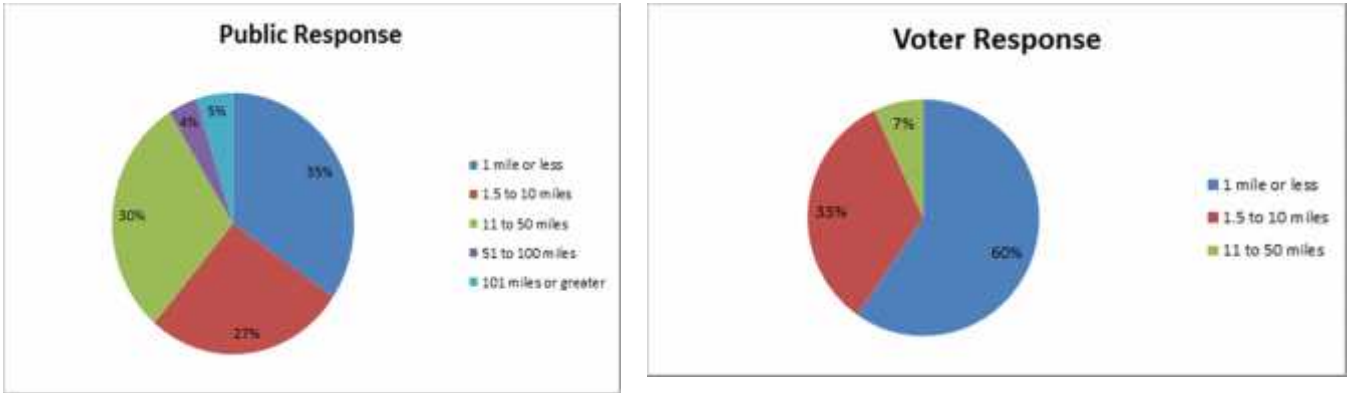
Question 1 Do you own property next to or immediately adjacent to the Wallowa Union Railroad right of way?



Adjacent property owners included 13% of public survey respondents and 11% of voter survey respondents. Therefore a majority of those surveyed own property one mile or more away from the Wallowa Union Railroad right of way.

Approximately equal percentages of the public data set and voter data set were property owners.

Question 2 If no, approximately how far do you live from the Wallowa Union Railroad corridor?

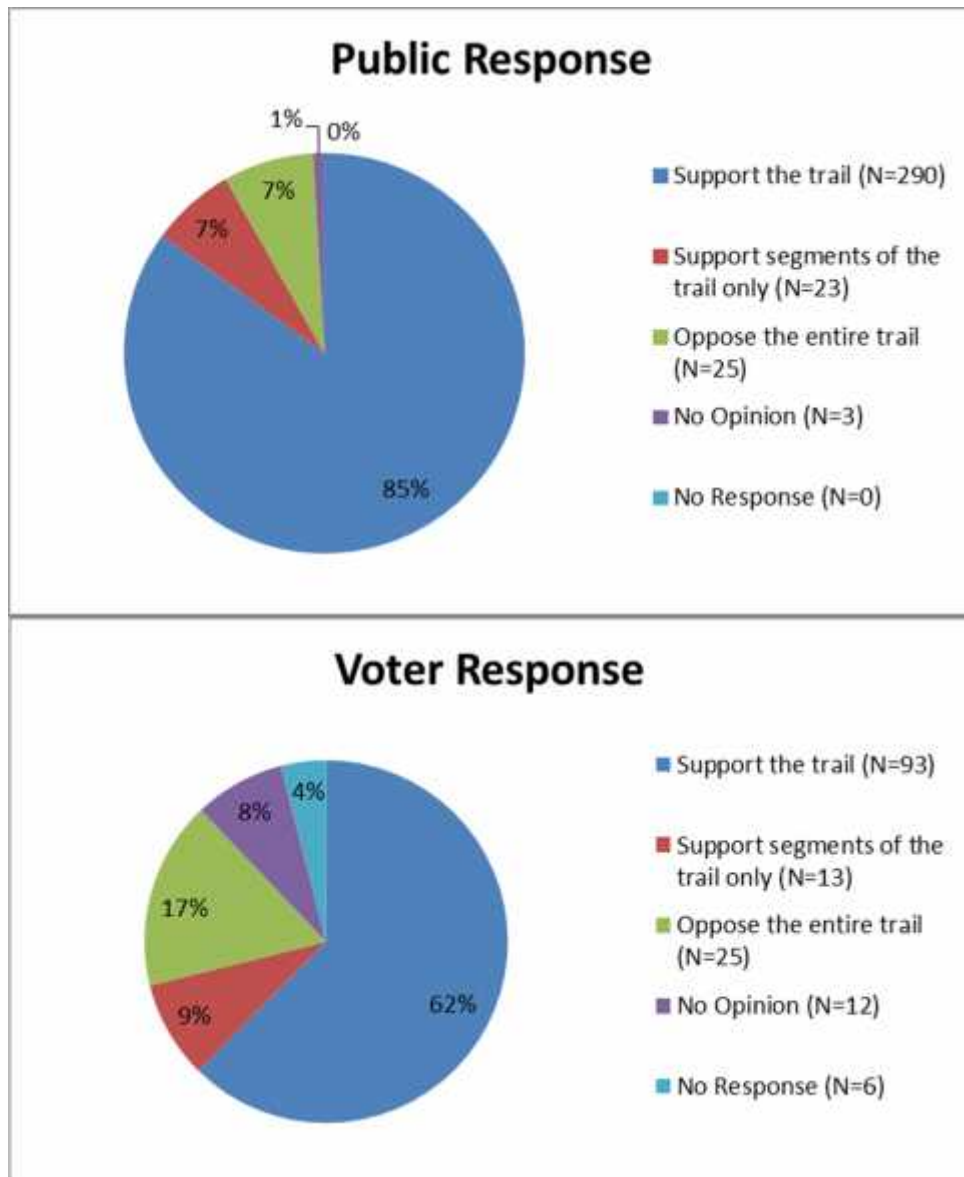


A total of 35% of public survey takers and 60% of voter survey takers live approximately 1 mile or less from the Wallowa Union Railroad corridor. An additional 27% of public survey takers and 33% of voter survey takers live 1.5 to 10 miles away from the corridor. For the public results a little more than 50% of

survey takers reside less than 10 miles away from the corridor, while for voter results, 90% survey takers reside less than 10 miles away from the corridor.

The fact that 9% of public survey respondents lived at a distance greater than 51 miles from the rail corridor indicated the potential interest of non-local visitors in rail-with-trail development. Of the public survey respondents, 84% were local community members, identified as such by their zip codes.

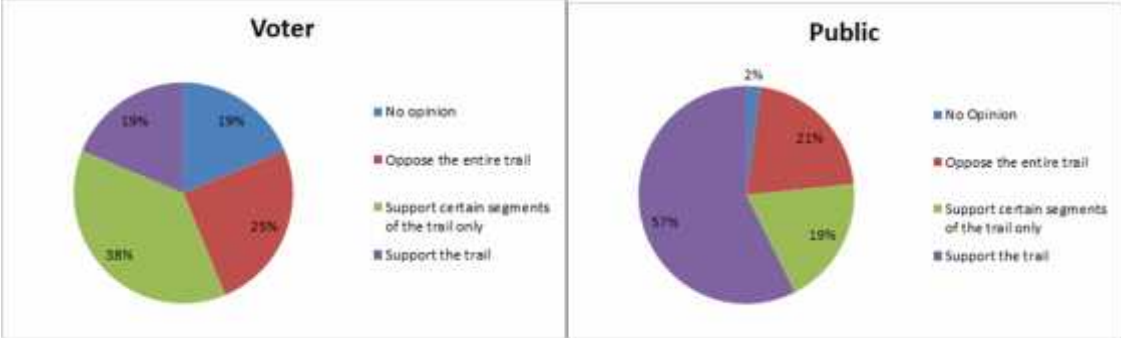
Question 3 Do you oppose or support the development of a recreational trail on the Wallowa Union Railroad line between Elgin and Joseph, Oregon?



A total of 85% of the public survey participants support the trail, while 7% oppose the trail entirely. A total of 62% of the voter survey participants support the trail, while 17% oppose the trail entirely. The public survey participants seem to support the trail more than the voter survey participants mostly likely because the voter participants have a higher percentage of people who live nearer to the proposed trail than the public participants, therefore the voter survey participants will be affected more directly by the trail.

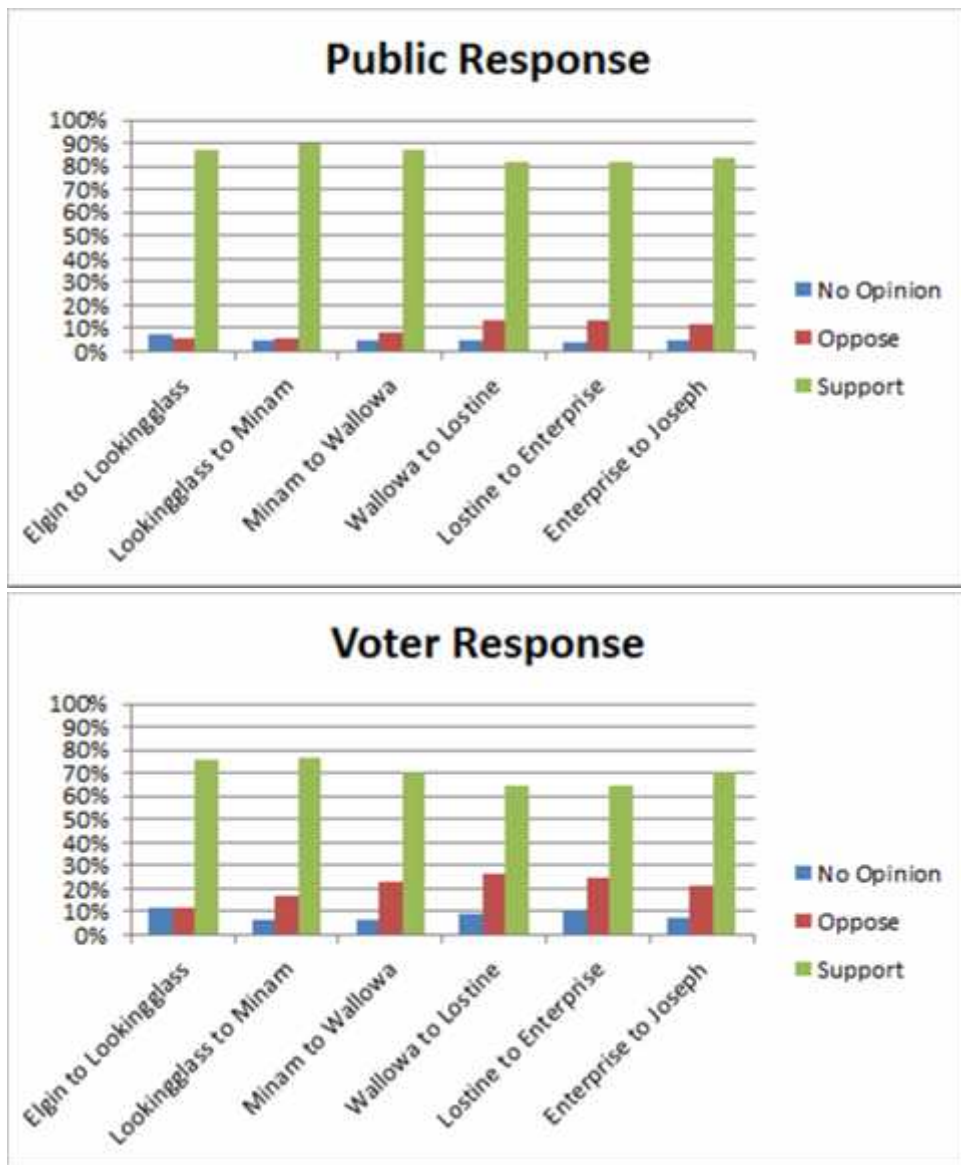
It was noted that the majority of public and voter survey takers support the entire trail, however voters lag behind the public in support by approximately 23%. The percent of voter respondents who oppose the whole trail is double that of the public respondents. Increased support from the public is likely due to the engagement of trail supporters in outreach and information sharing about the project and the survey.

Of the 16 adjacent landowners who participated in the random voter survey, 25% oppose the entire trail, 19% support the entire trail, and 38% support only certain segments of the trail. Of the 47 adjacent landowners who participated in the public survey, 21% oppose the entire trail, 57% support the entire trail, and 19% support certain segments of the trail.

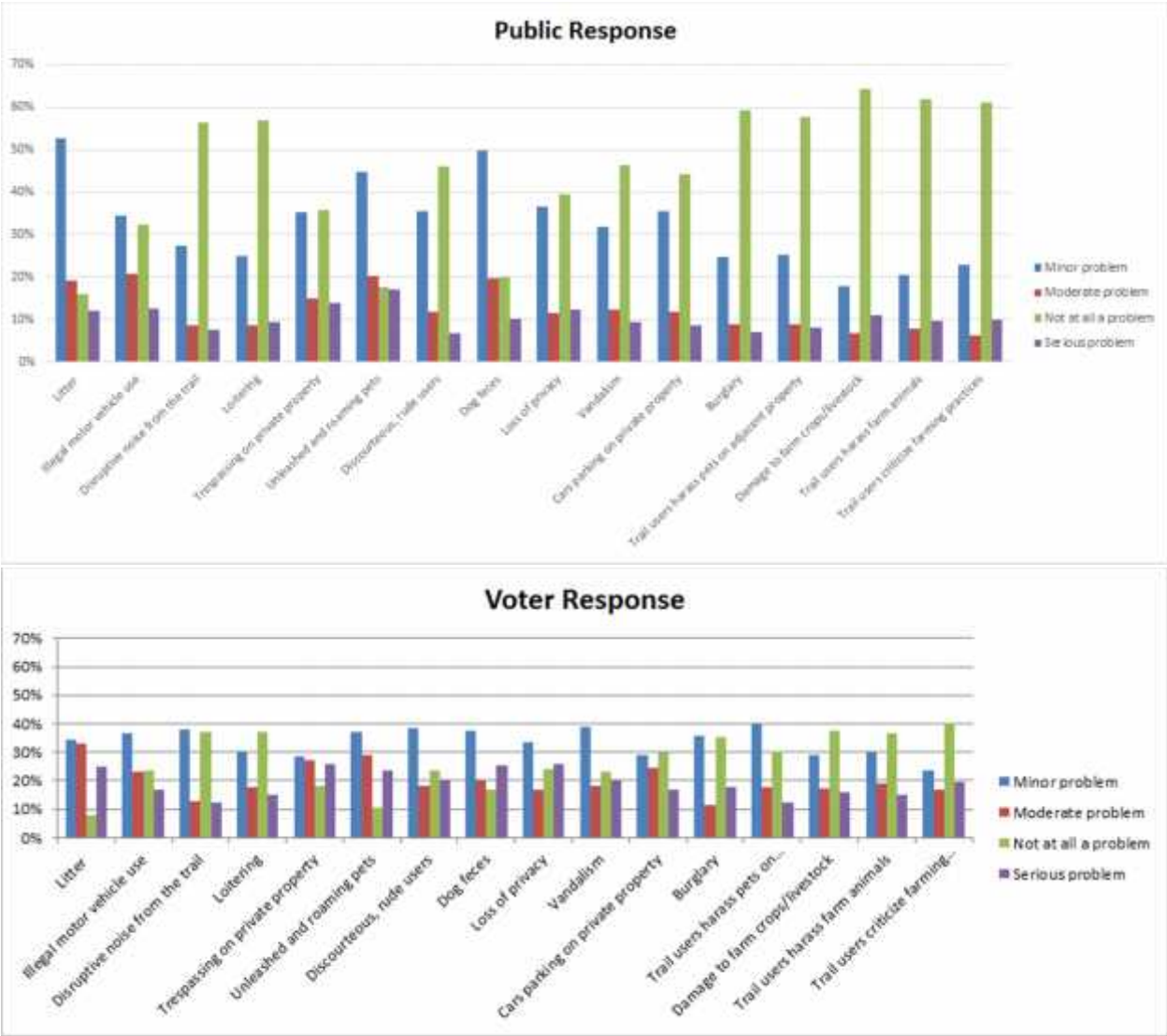


Question 4 If you only oppose segments of the trail, please identify your support or opposition for each of the six specific trail segments along the entire railroad line.

When the entire dataset was evaluated (ie: including those who supported every segment), support for segments of the trail was evident. The public response included 197 rankings, and the voter response included 65 rankings. The below graphs indicate that the majority of people who chose to respond to this question support each section. The Wallowa to Lostine and Lostine to Enterprise segments had the least support from the respondents of both surveys.

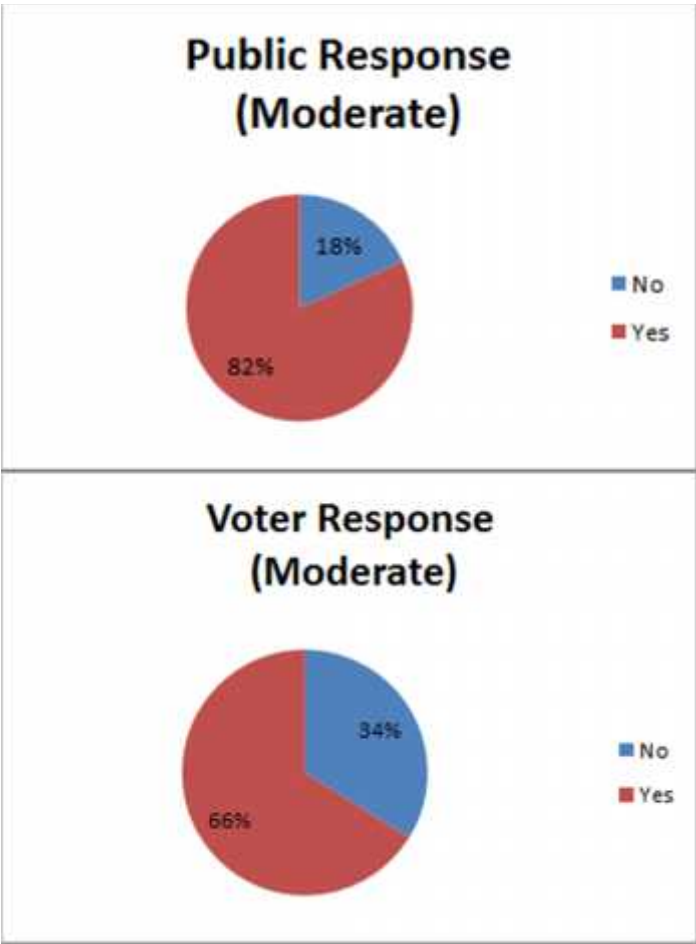


Question 5 Please identify your perception of problems trail users could cause.



The three issues with the highest percent of concern as a “serious problem” for voters were trespassing, dog feces, and loss of privacy, all of which were at 25%. For the public it was unleashed pets (17%), trespassing (15%), and illegal motor vehicle use (13%). Overall, voters had more concerns about problems than the public, which is likely a reflection of the higher percent of overall support from the public for the trail than from voters.

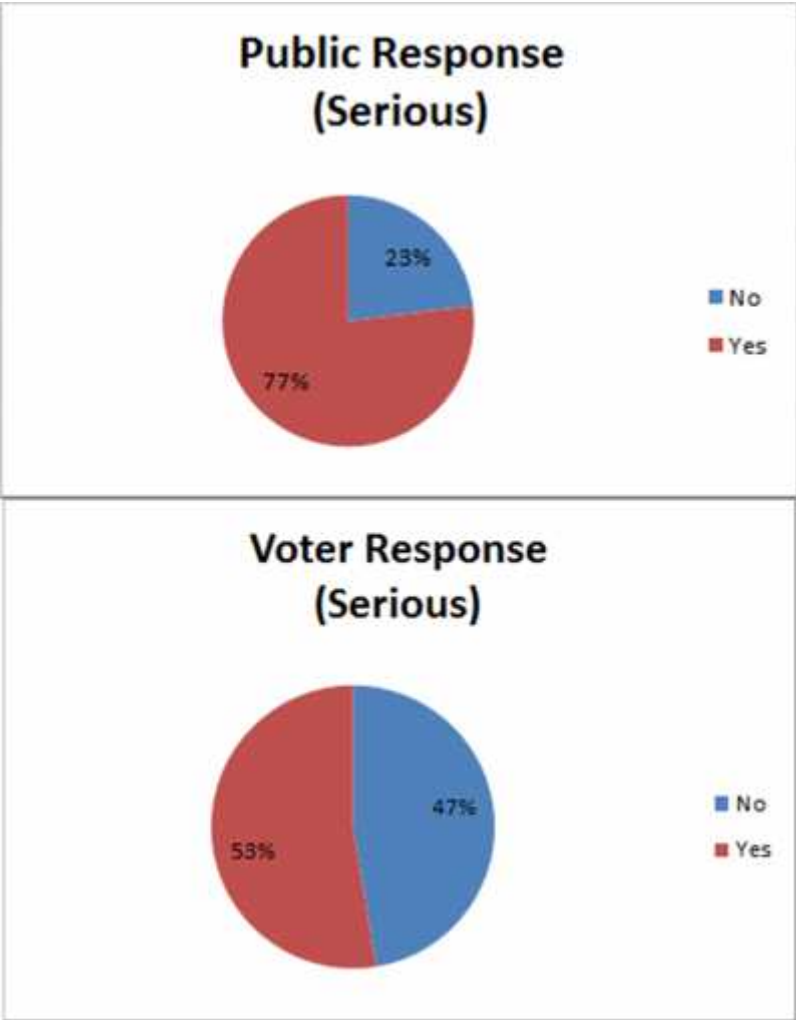
Question 6 Do you believe the problem(s) you defined as moderate can be mitigated in trail planning and management by working to address individual landowner’s issues?



A total of 82% of public survey participants and 66% of voter survey participants believe that the problems they defined as moderate can be addressed by planning and management while 18% of public survey participants and 34% of voter survey participants do not believe that these problems will be addressed through consultation with individual landowners.

It is important to note that for the public survey there was a 90% response rate, meaning 10% of the voters who took the survey did not respond to this question. The Private survey had a response rate of 91%, so only 9% of voters did not answer this question.

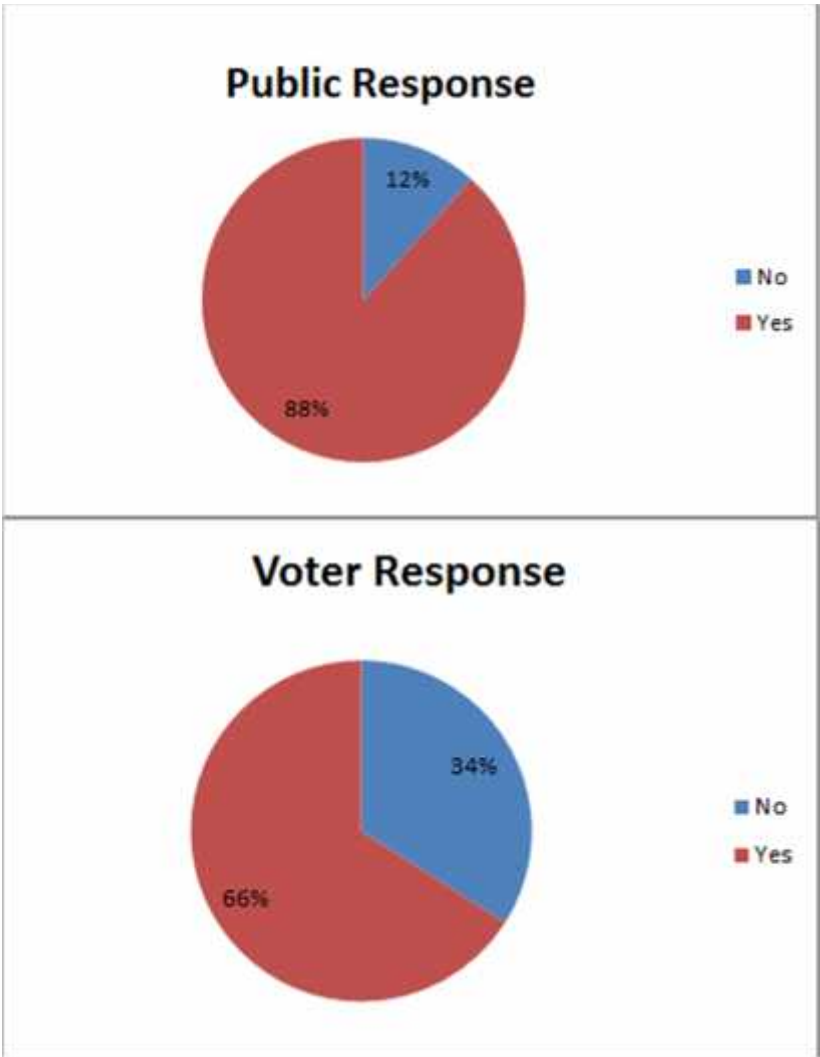
Question 7 Do you believe the problem(s) you defined as serious can be mitigated in trail planning and management by working to address individual landowner’s issues?



A total of 77% of public survey participants and 53% voter survey participants believe that the problems they defined as serious can be addressed by planning and management while 23% of public survey participants and 47% of voter survey respondents do not believe that these problems will be addressed through consultation with individual landowners. This indicates that there is a widely held perception among voter survey respondents that serious issues cannot be addressed through the planning process.

Not every respondent answered question 6 and question 7. In regards to question 7, there was an 81% response rate for the public survey and a 74% response rate for the private survey. Blank responses were removed. It is likely that the narrow gap in Q7 for voters is due to people who had no serious issues not responding to this question.

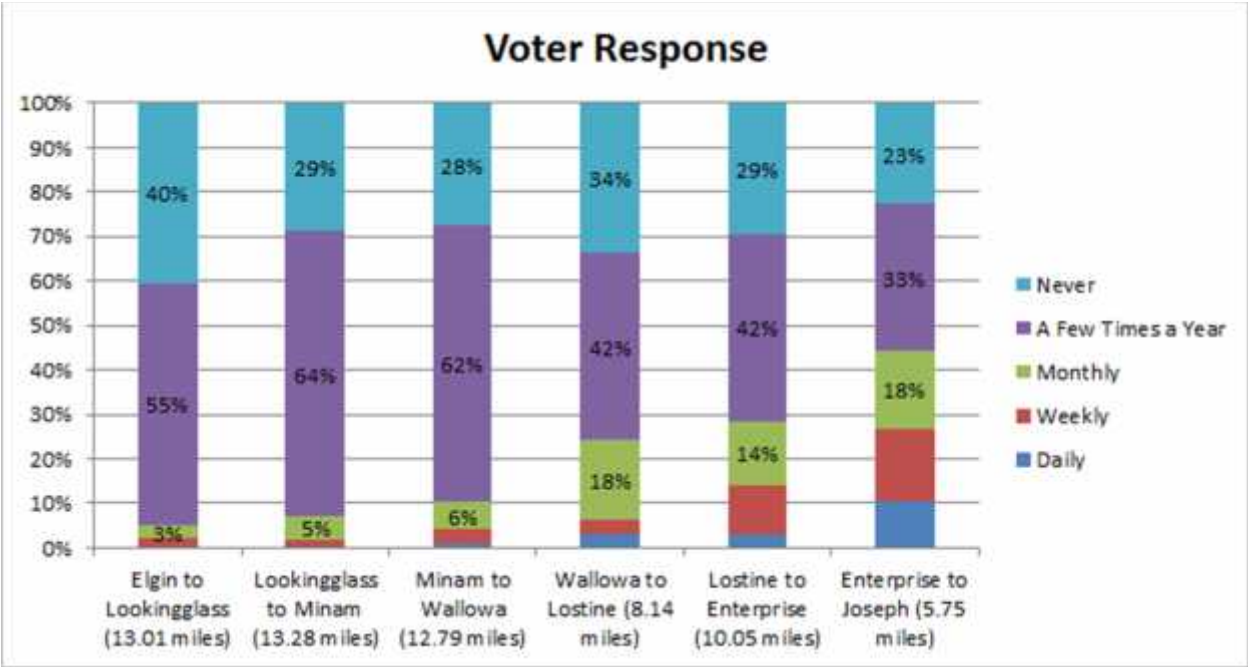
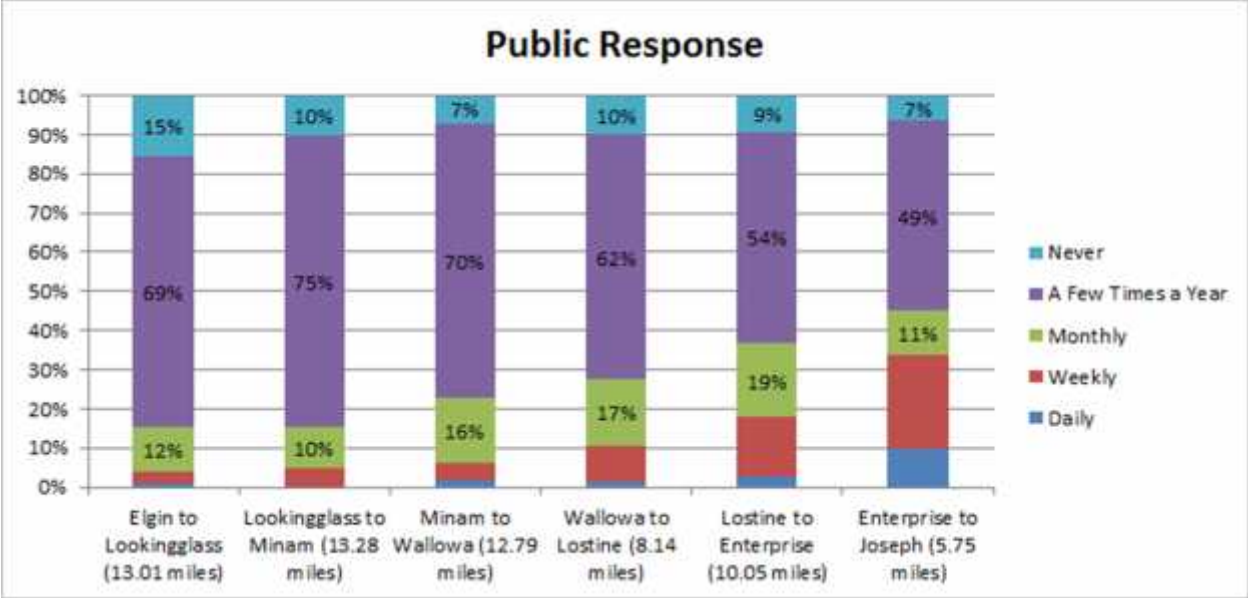
Question 8 Will you or members of your household likely use a recreational trail if developed on the Wallowa Union Railroad line between Elgin and Joseph, Oregon?



A total of 88% of public survey participants and 66% of voter survey participants answered that they will use a recreational trail if built from Elgin to Joseph, however 12% of public survey participants and 34% of voter survey participants answered that they would not use the trail if it was built.

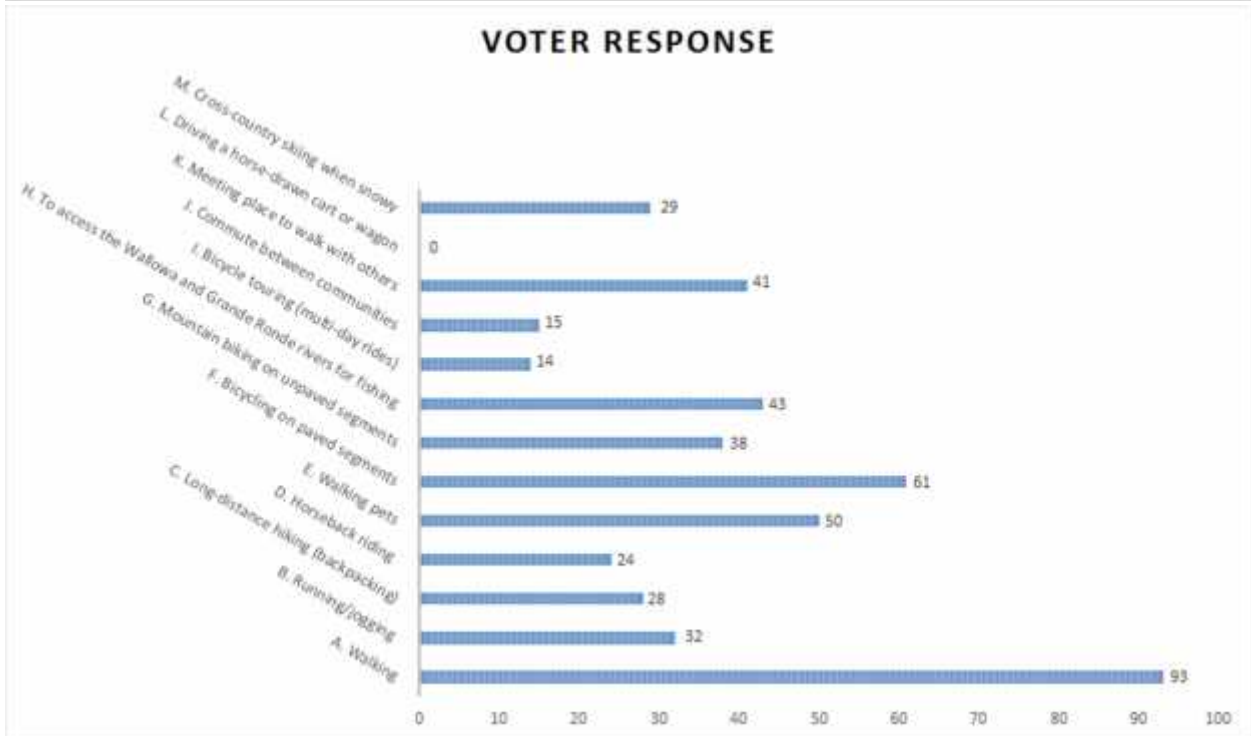
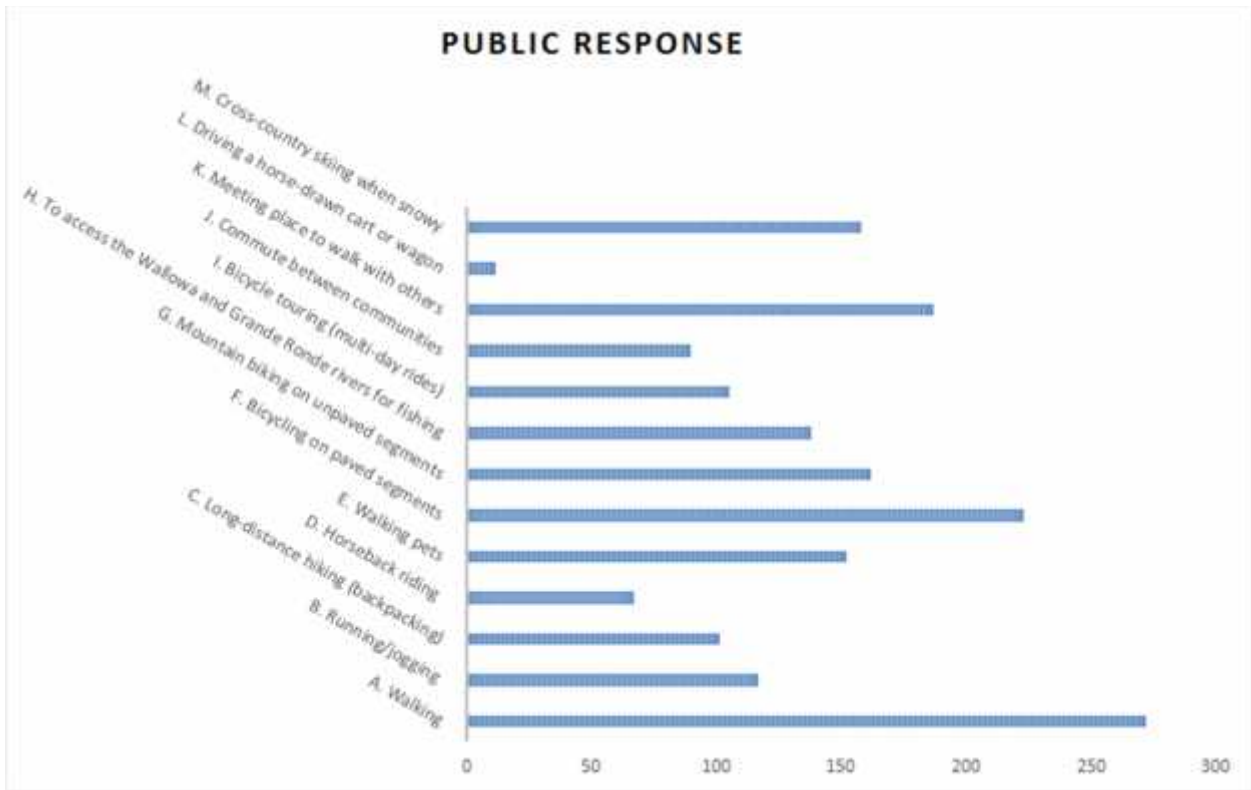
Question 9 How often might you or members of your household likely use each of the specific segments of the Wallowa Union Railroad line trail if it is built?

Not every person surveyed responded to this question, meaning the results may be biased toward people who supported the trail, 307 of 347 public survey participants responded to this question and 99 of 149 voter survey participants responded to this question. The lack of response could also indicate that the respondent did not know how to answer the question.



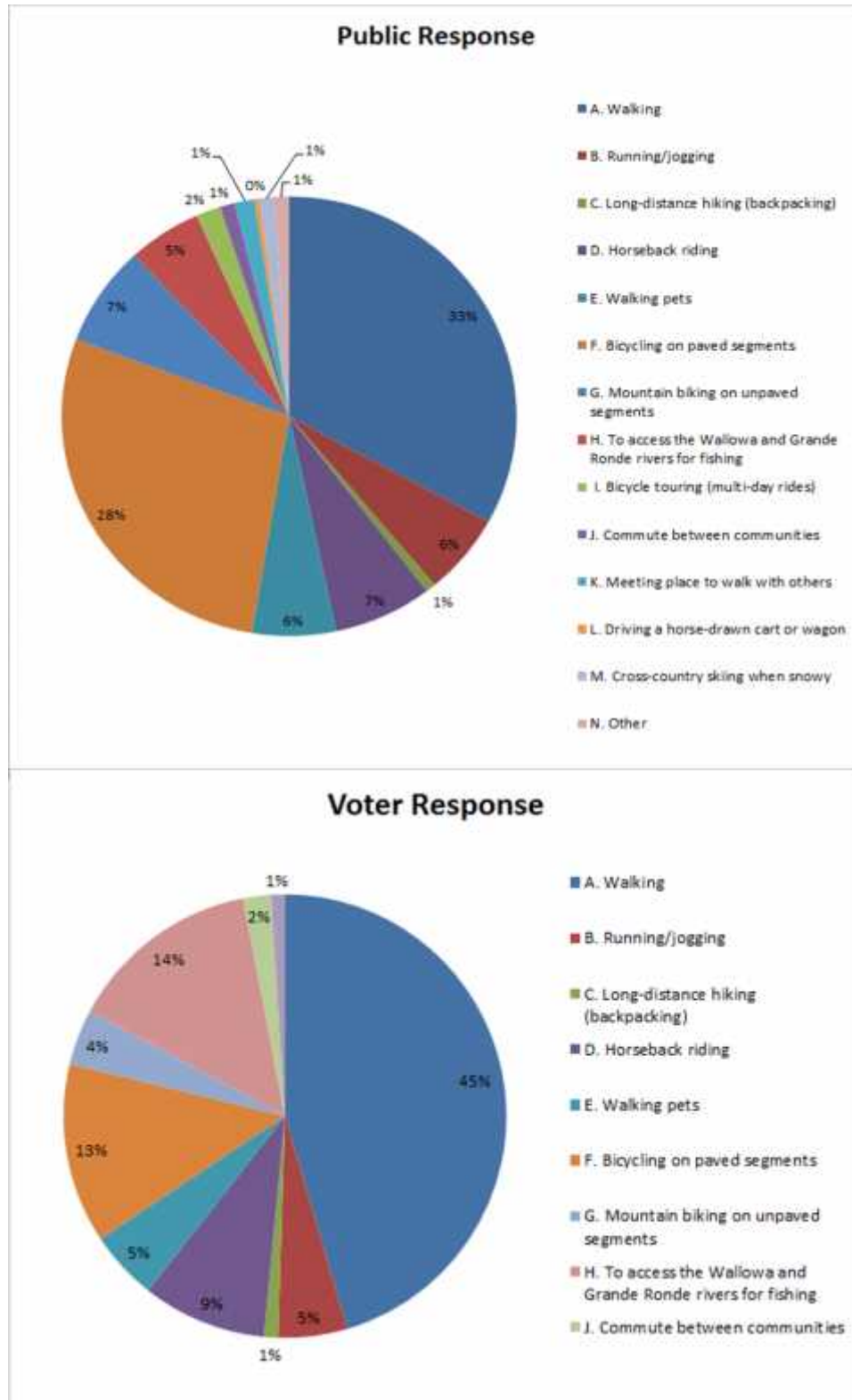
Both the public and voter survey respondent indicated they were most likely to use the trail a few times a year. A larger percentage of voter respondents indicated they would never use the trail. A total of 10% of both the public and voter survey participants believed they would use the Enterprise to Joseph segment daily.

Question 10 Please check all trail activities that you or members of your household would do on a recreational trail if developed on the Wallowa Union Railroad line between Elgin and Joseph, Oregon



The most popular activities for the public respondents were walking, bicycling on paved segments, and as a place to meet with others. The most popular activities for voter survey participants were walking, bicycling on paved segments and walking pets. These answers indicate that people most want a space for walking, but may use the trail for a variety of purposes.

Question 11 From the activities in Question 10 above, what is the ONE primary activity that you would do most often?

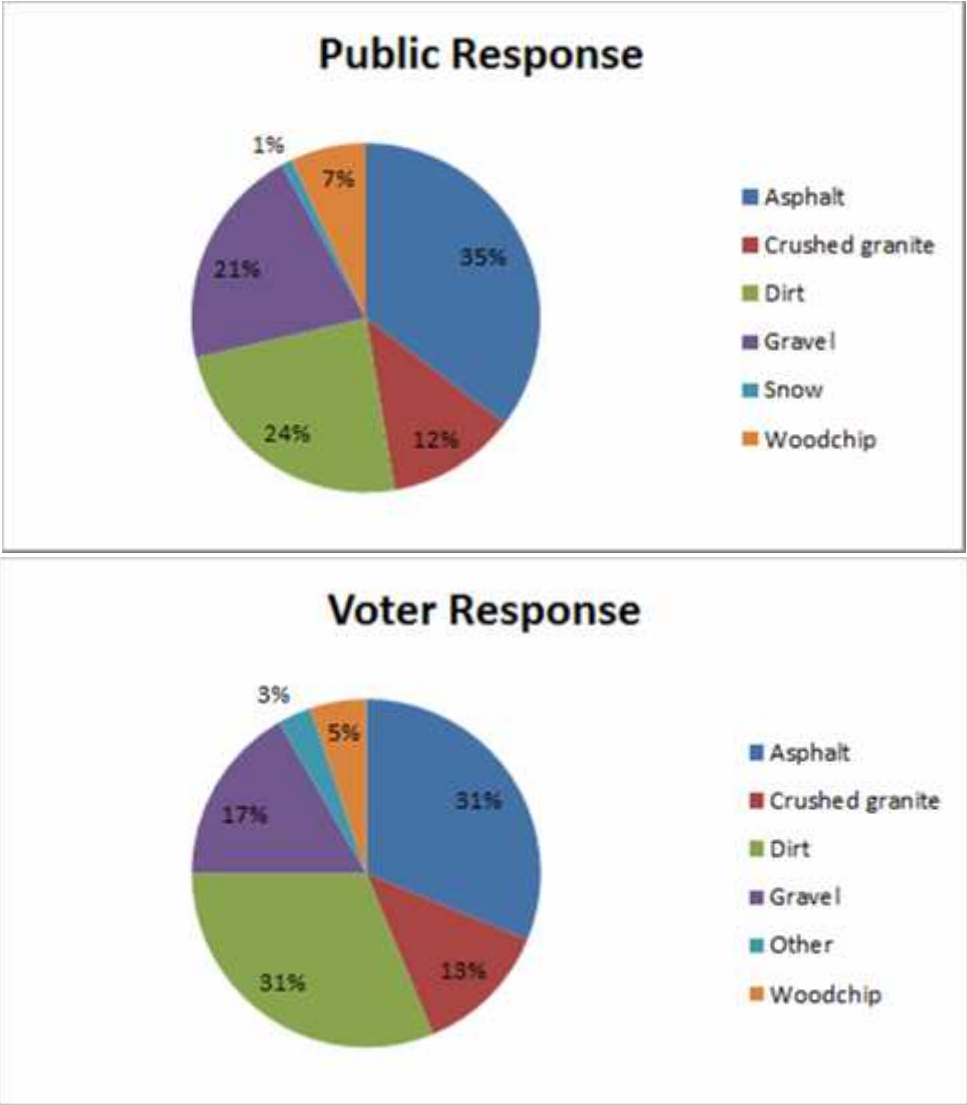


Of the 285 public respondents who answered this question, walking and biking on paved sections were the most popular answers. In the “other” category, 2 responses listed geocaching and 1 listed rail riding.

Of the 99 voter survey participants who responded to this question, walking was the most popular response (45%) followed by fishing (14%) and biking on paved sections (13%). There was less diversity in the answers from voters.

Question 12 For this primary activity, what is your preferred trail surface type?

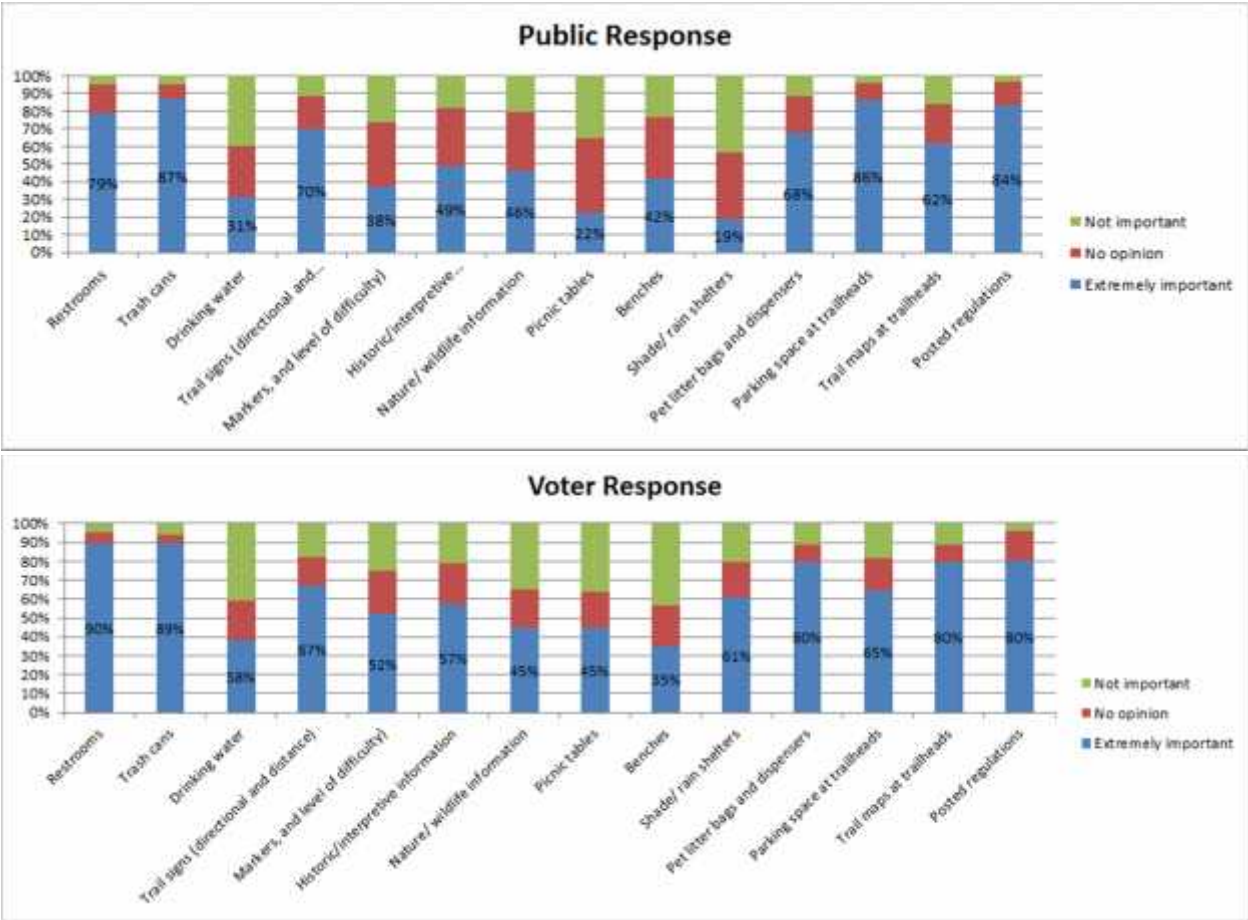
Of the 300 public respondents who answered this question, Asphalt and Dirt were the top two choices. Out of the 99 voters who responded to this question, Asphalt and Dirt were also the top two choices.



A total 35% of public survey participants and 31% of voter survey participants chose asphalt as the preferred surface type. The next most popular trail surface type was dirt selected by 24% public survey participants and 31% voter survey participants.

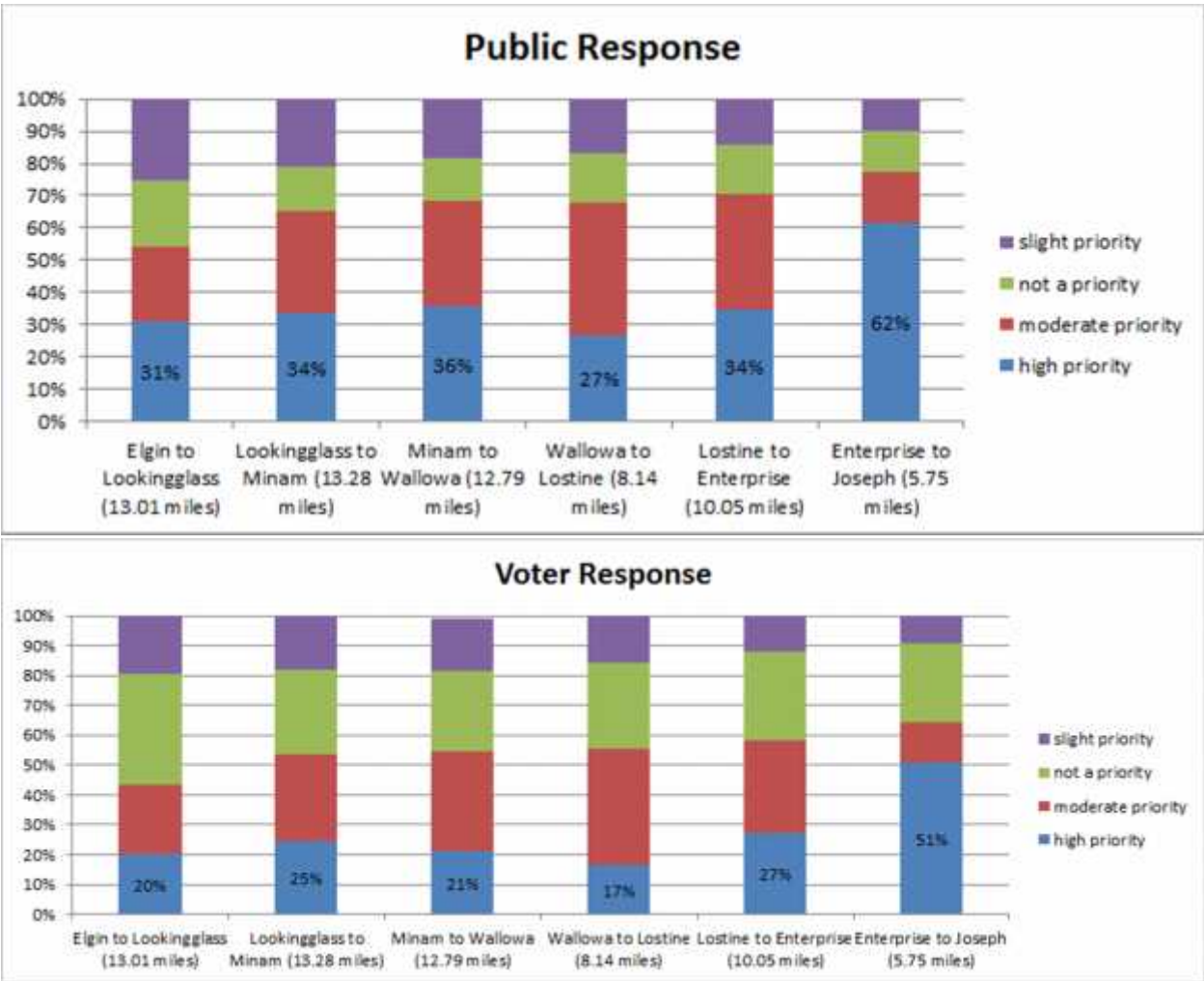
Question 13 Please identify how important you feel the following trail amenities would be at trailheads and along the trail at reasonable intervals along the Wallowa Union Railroad line trail.

These rankings were from Extremely Important, No Opinion, to Not Important. Although people could vote for 1-5 on the ranking scale, for the purposes of data analysis, they were categorized into three categories with 1-2 being not important, 3 being no opinion, and 4-5 being Extremely Important.



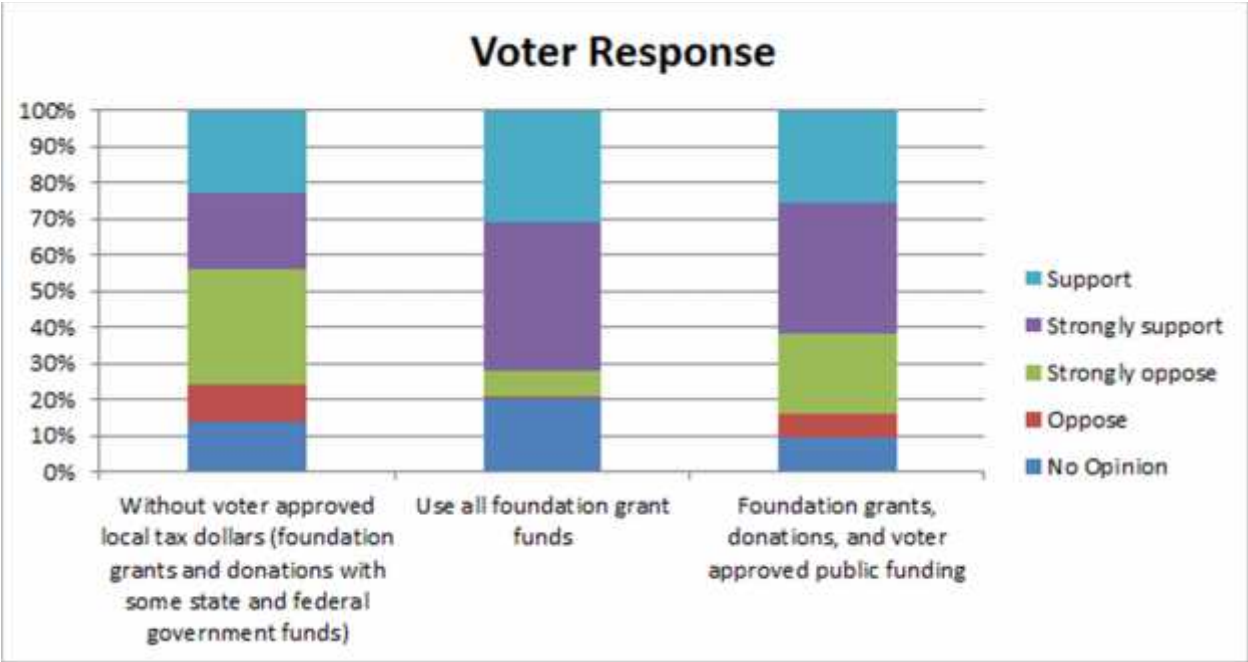
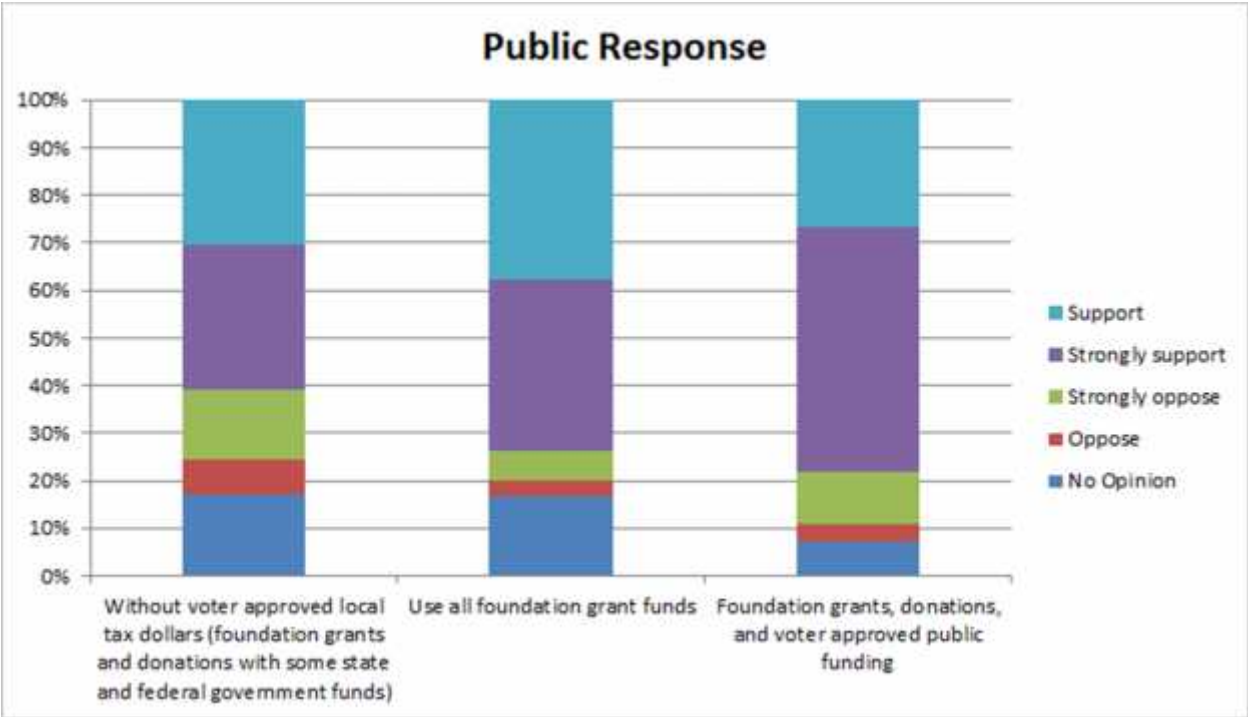
According to the public survey participants, the top three trail amenities categorized as extremely important were trash cans at 87%, parking space at trailheads at 86%, and posted regulations at 84%. According to the voter survey participants, the top three trail amenities were restrooms at 90%, trash cans at 89%, and pet litter bags and dispensers, trail maps at trailheads, and posted regulations tied at 80%.

Question 14 It is likely the Wallowa Union Railroad line trail would be financed and constructed in segments if built. Please choose one to reflect your priority for each trail segment construction.



The majority of the public and voter survey participants ranked the Enterprise to Joseph segment as a high priority to be built. The Wallowa to Lostine section had the least support from both voters and the public.

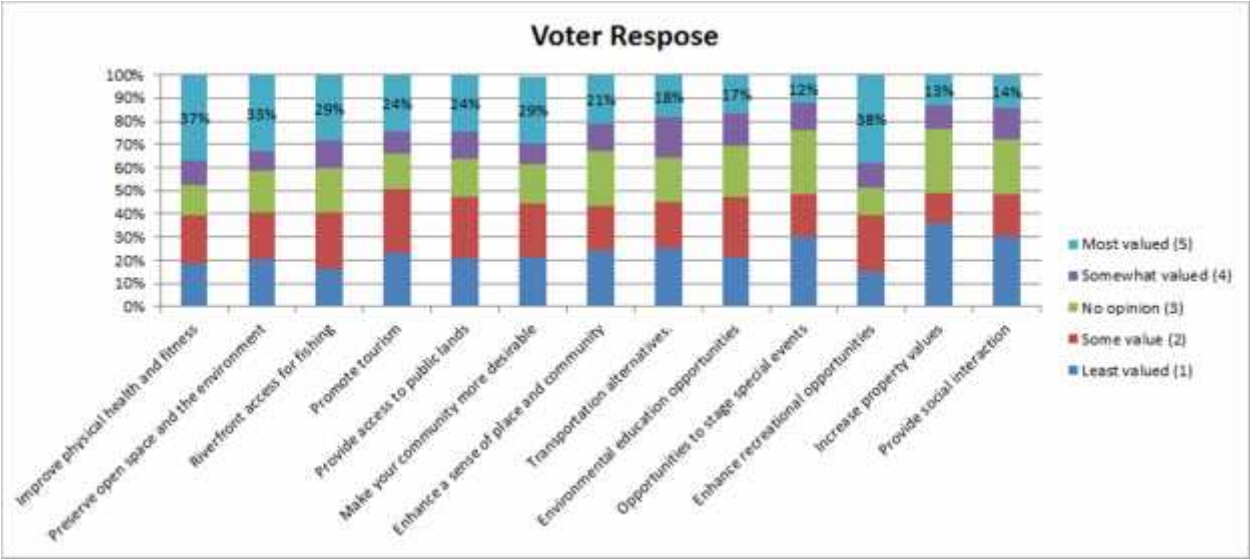
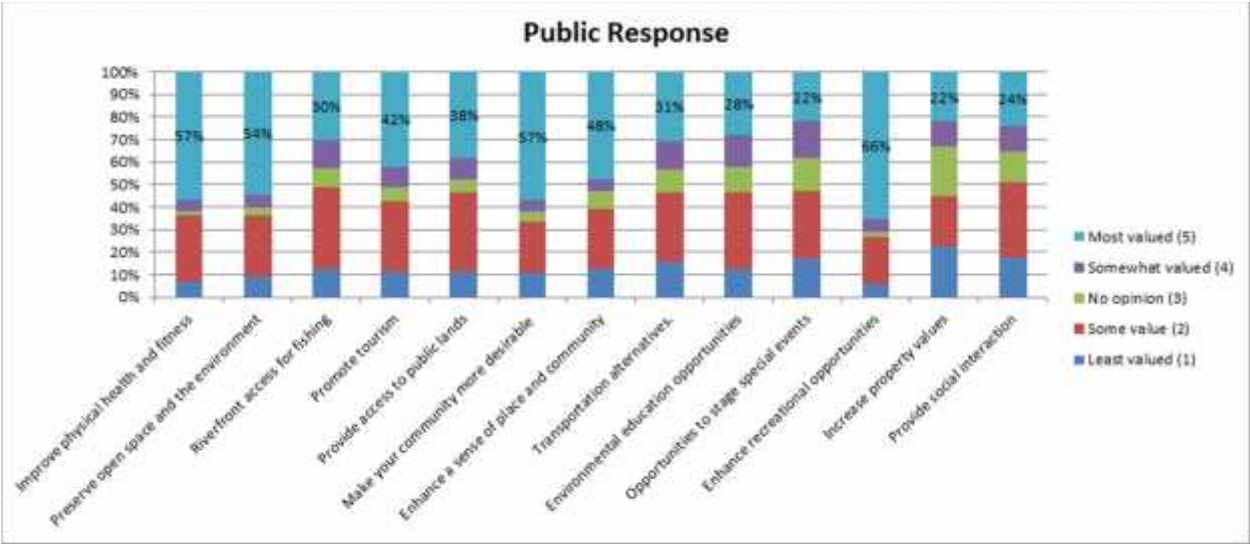
Question 15 To what extent do you oppose or support trail or trail segment construction funding?



Out of the public survey participants, 78% of respondents strongly or very strongly support funding the trail by a combination of foundation grants, donations, and voter approved public funding.

Out of the voter survey participants, 62% of respondents strongly or very strongly support funding the trail by a combination of foundation grants, donations, and voter approved public funding.

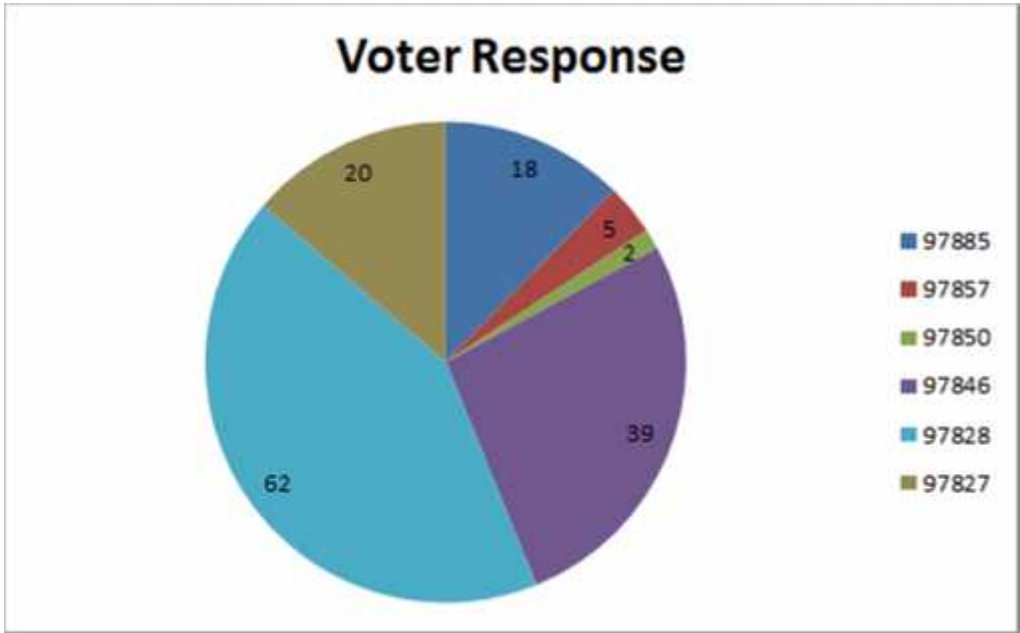
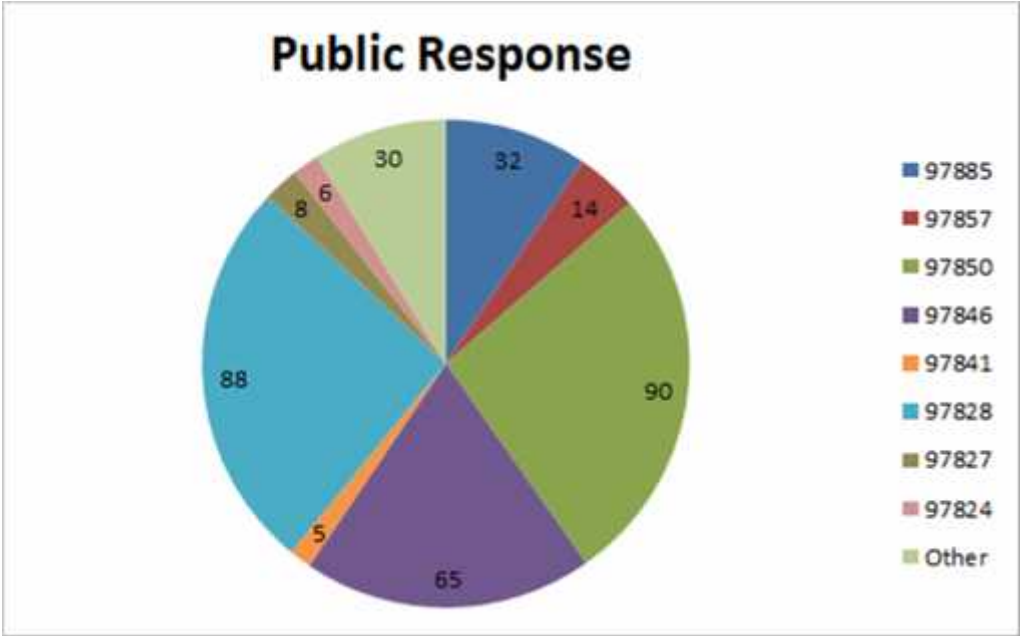
Question 16 For each of the potential benefits of a Wallowa Union Railroad line trail, please rate how much you would value the benefit, from Least valued to Most valued.



The most valued trail benefit for the public and voter survey participants was to enhance recreational opportunities.

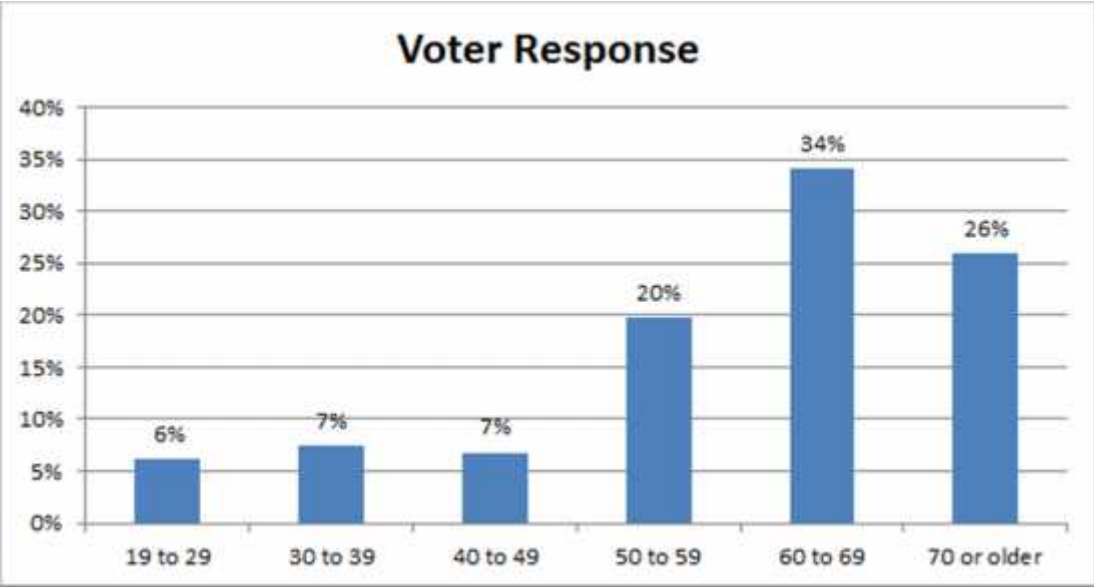
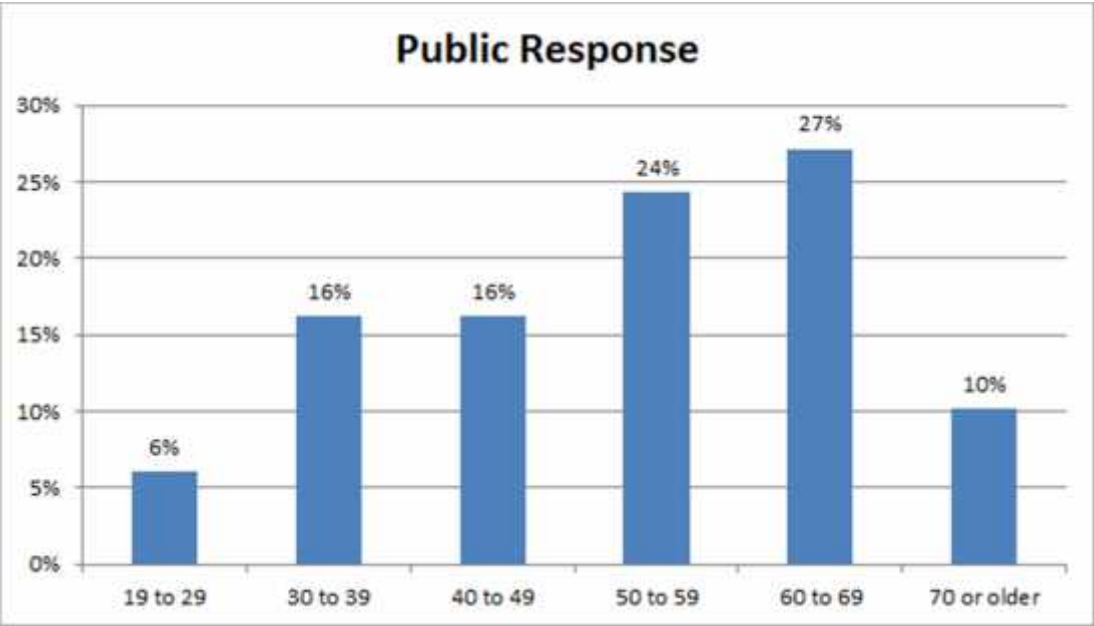
Question 17 What is your household's zip code?

A total of 338 public respondents listed their zip codes. The Public graph "Other" Category includes respondents from zip codes with less than 5 people responding. 146 voter survey participants listed their zip codes.



The public survey had 30 responses from people with non-local zip codes.

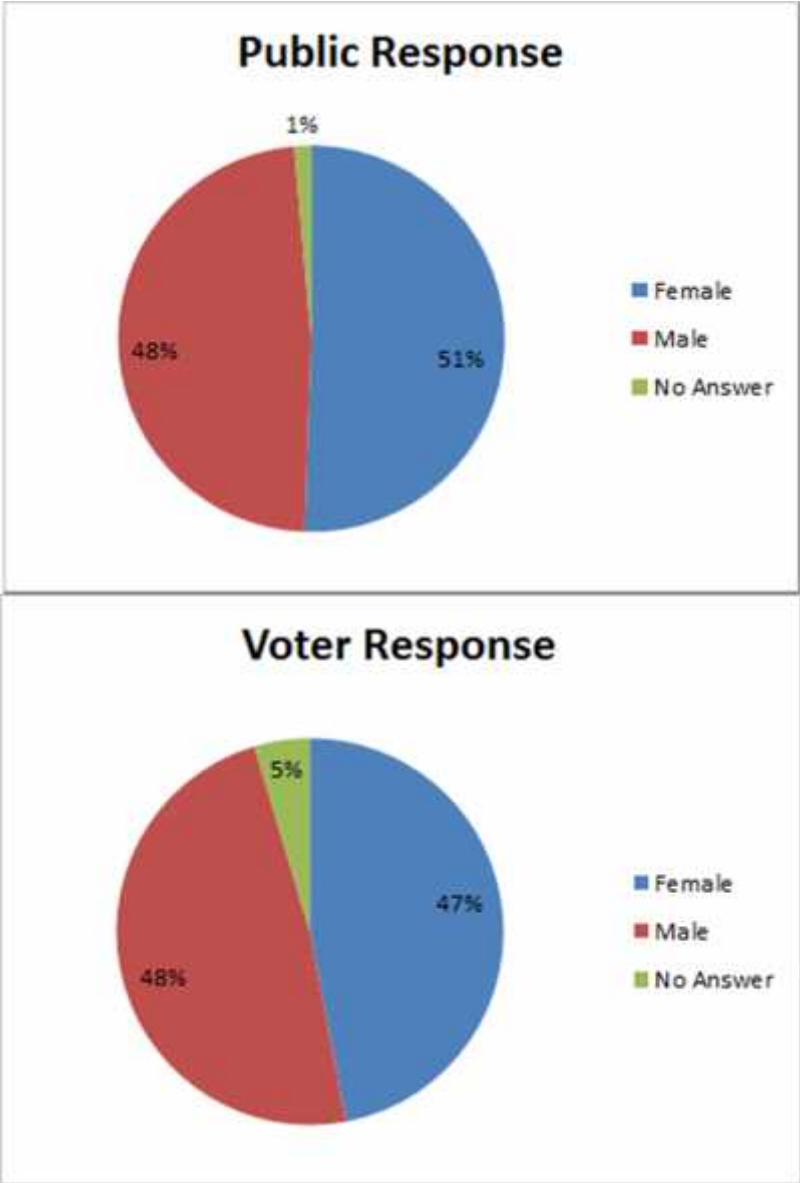
Question 18 How old are you?



The majority of public survey takers (51%) were between the age of 50 to 69 while the majority of voter survey takers (60%) were between the ages of 60 to 70 or older.

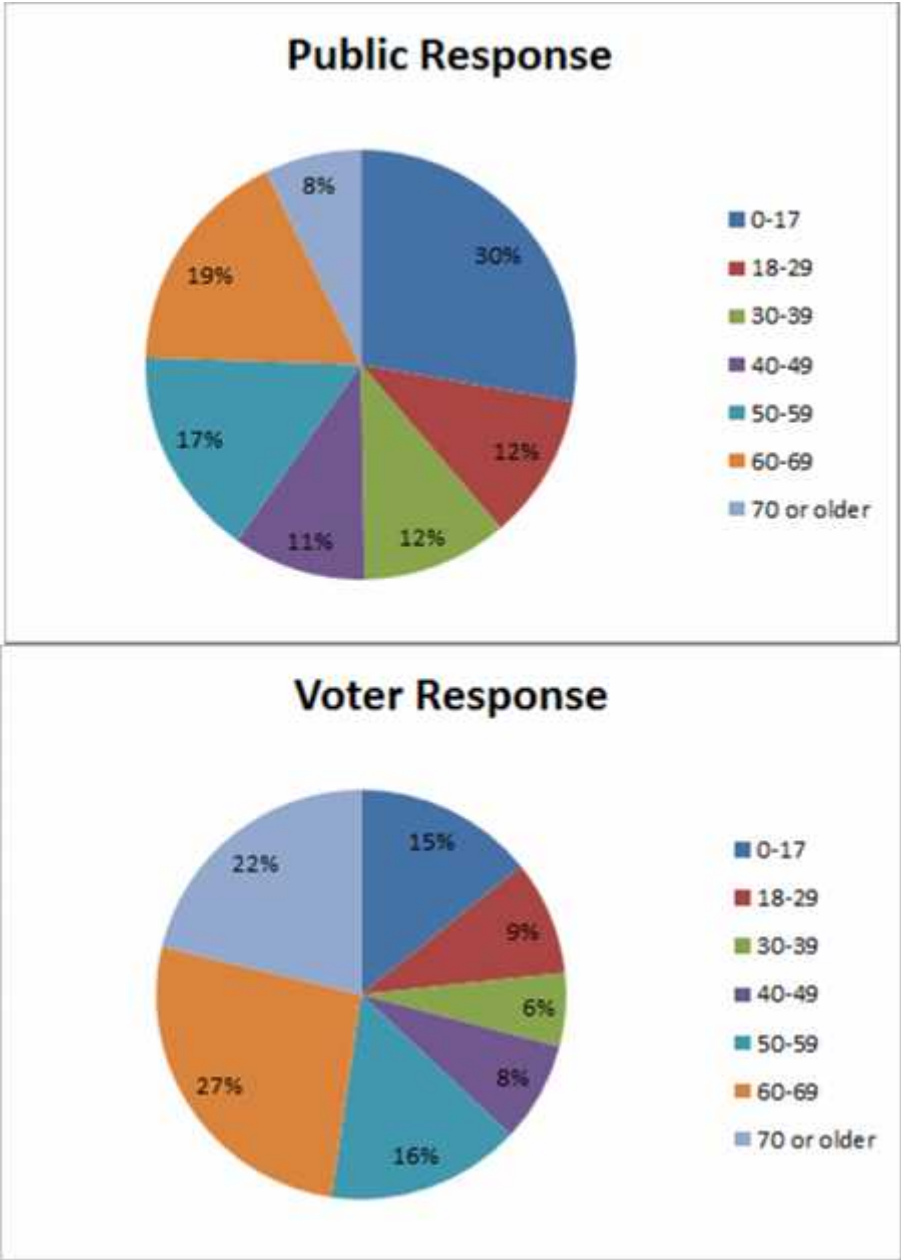
Question 19 What is your gender?

Both the public and voter surveys had a nearly even split of male and female respondents.



Question 20 Including yourself, how many persons live in your household in the following age categories?

Data was gathered to determine age dynamics of households. For voter survey participants, the average household size was 2.4 people with an average of 49% of the household being age 60 or older and 15% being age 17 or below. For the public survey participants the average household size was 3 people with an average of 27% of the household being 60 or older and 30% of the household being age 17 or below.



Question 21 What else would you like to tell us about the proposed Wallowa Union Railroad line recreational trail between Elgin and Joseph, Oregon?

For visual purposes two word clouds were made using the website <http://worditout.com/>. The size of the word is correlated with the amount of times it was used by the group.

Public Participant Word Cloud



Voter Participant Word Cloud



Discussion

After reviewing the survey results it is evident that in the surveys of both voter respondents and public respondents, a majority of people support the trail and believe that the trail would be most beneficial for enhancing existing recreational opportunities. There is the greatest amount of support for the Enterprise to Joseph segment, and the least for the Wallowa to Lostine segment (by small margin). Both voter survey respondents and public survey respondents felt that the top activities that they would use the trail for would be walking, followed by biking on the paved segments. This information is likely related to surface type preferences of first asphalt, and second dirt, for both voter and public survey respondents. Asphalt is the most expensive type of trail surface material, and dirt is one of the least expensive. Important amenities included trash cans, parking spaces and posted regulations for the public survey respondents; and restrooms, trash cans, and posted regulations/pet litter bags for voter survey respondents. Both the public and voter survey respondents felt that concerns ranked as moderate could be resolved through planning and mitigation, while there was much less certainty about the ability to resolve serious concerns.

Conclusion

The survey data provides valuable insights into the concerns and levels of interest that the general public and voting population have about the potential trail. Support of the majority of voter respondents indicates support to continue with the design phase of the proposed rail with trail. Development of design options should be informed by preferences for priority segments, preferred activities and surface types. Information provided by survey respondents will help the rail corridor owner, the Wallowa Union Railroad Authority, to make decisions on whether or not to proceed to the design phase and inform the design process if trail development moves forward in 2016.

References

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