

Vermont

State of Recreation Survey Summary Report



Compiled by:



In collaboration with:
Vermont Recreation and Parks Association

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A. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the Governor's office and Vermont's state agencies have increasingly emphasized the value of recreation to our local communities and to our state as a whole. The way we think about public recreation has evolved significantly, but the metrics we track and the data we have to inform our decision making has not necessarily kept pace.

To rectify this situation, SE Group—a Vermont-based recreation and planning consultancy—working in collaboration with the Vermont Recreation and Parks Association (VRPA), prepared and distributed a baseline survey to Vermont towns. The purpose of the survey was to establish a foundational understanding of the current state of recreation at the municipal level.

Recreation has been an important community value in Vermont, but recent trends at the state level have placed additional emphasis on expanding recreational opportunity in connection with economic development. Recognizing this, SE Group thought a baseline understanding of what and how Vermont's towns deliver recreational services might inform the discussion going forward, and with continued surveying, would help illuminate trends and identify opportunities. The survey was not intended to provide statistical relevancy around any specific question, but rather establish a more empirical framework against which to consider more qualitative and anecdotal inputs on the management of recreation in Vermont.

The survey was tailored to how Vermont recreation departments, commissions, and committees operate and strived to ask questions that are relevant to our towns—we will continue to refine so please send us your thoughts. The questions primarily focused on the operations of recreation departments and committees but also asked about trails, forests, and other town recreational assets.

B. METHODOLOGY

The 2019 Vermont State of Recreation Survey was distributed to Vermont's 255 municipalities through a variety of means. Members of the Vermont Recreation and Parks Association—which generally includes recreation department staff, recreation volunteers, and some other town staff with parks and recreation programs within their purview—were emailed about the survey first on March 25th 2019. Municipalities that are not members of VRPA were also contacted on March 25th via the Town Clerk's email list managed by the VT League of Cities and Town. Follow up reminders were sent to municipalities who had not yet participated every two weeks between March 25th and when the survey was closed on May 31st 2019. Survey reminders were also included in VRPA's weekly Rec Check In email newsletter. Respondents who completed the survey by May 31st were entered into a raffle for a FREE registration for the 2019 state recreation conference (\$195 value).

This analysis defines a small agency as any local recreation department with five (5) or fewer full-time employees. Correspondingly, a large agency is any local recreation department with more than five (5) full-time employees. Volunteer agencies are those without full-time employees, relying on volunteer boards or commissions.

1. SURVEY RESPONSE

The sample size for this survey instrument limits establishing statistical relevancy. The survey collected 49 complete and partial responses from the closed distribution list (i.e., sent out to VRPA members and

through the Vermont Planners Association (VPA) listserv). The original distribution list included all 255 Vermont Municipalities, giving the survey a response rate of approximately 19%.

Partial responses were considered in this analysis, owing to the baseline nature of the survey. A partial response is one where respondents did not complete all questions (i.e., some questions were skipped or left unanswered). Skipping was expressly allowed in the online survey, and piping was established to channel respondents to only those questions that made sense based on earlier responses. All valid responses to each question were considered. Approximately 61% of all responses were complete.

Figure 1- Survey Response

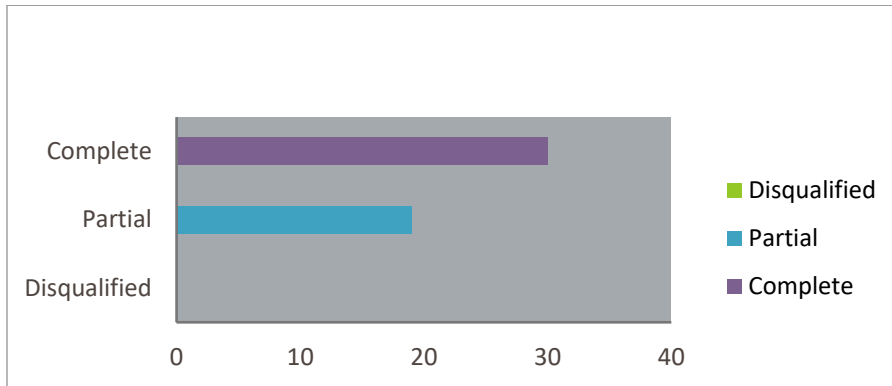


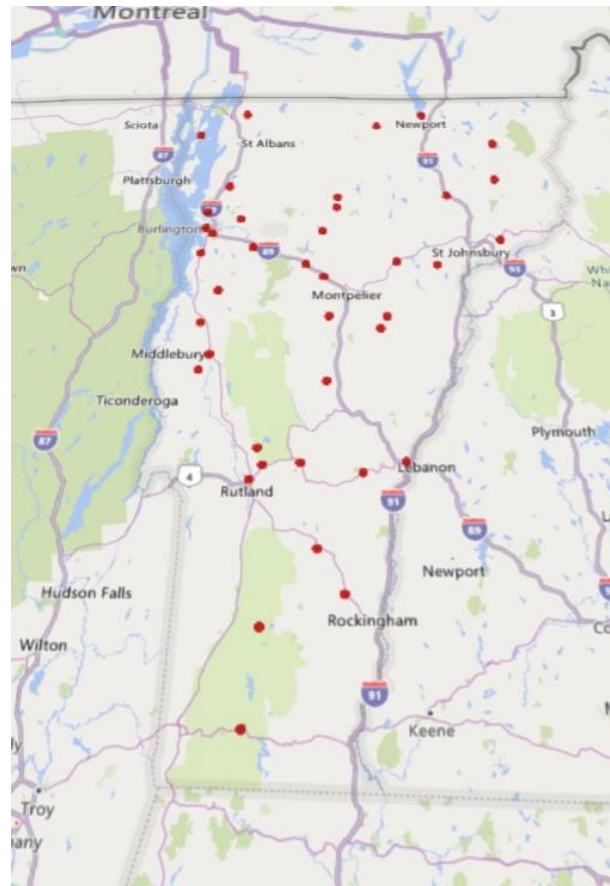
Figure 2 - Survey Respondents

The collected response data was also segmented based on agency type and composition:

- Volunteer Agency – Group or committee without any paid staff; twenty-five (25) responses
- Small Agency – Recreation department with five (5) or less full-time staff; fifteen (15) responses
- Large Agency – Recreation department with six (6) or more full-time staff; nine (9) responses

While the analysis below considered aggregate inputs from all respondents, the segmentation approach allowed for the consideration of agency size for specific questions.

The geographic distribution of the survey results was somewhat disappointing. Respondents were largely from the northern tier of the State with significantly less representation from Windham and Windsor counties.



C. WHAT WAS LEARNED

As the initial baseline survey of an expected annual effort, the 2019 results are inherently a starting point for the identification of trends. With that caveat, the analysis of the results largely validates many assumptions SE Group had before the effort; Vermont is a place of contrasts – smaller and larger communities with smaller and larger recreational resources.

Within these results, however, some important observations emerged and are described below.

1. OBSERVATION #1 - SIZE MATTERS!

Premise: The data shows a very stark difference in the robustness of programs, facilities, and activities when correlated to the size of the recreation department and community.

Supporting Data: Volunteer, small, and large agencies are all striving to deliver meaningful recreation resources to their respective communities. As shown below in Figure 3, most respondents manage recreation and athletic fields, basketball courts, and playgrounds.

Figure 2 – Distribution of Park and Recreation Facilities

Value		Percent	Count
Diamond fields (baseball, softball, etc.)		78.6%	33
Rectangular fields (football, soccer, multi-purpose, etc.)		71.4%	30
Outdoor ice rink		38.1%	16
Outdoor basketball courts		71.4%	30
Outdoor tennis courts		52.4%	22
Pickleball specific courts		9.5%	4
Flexible tennis/pickleball courts		45.2%	19
Playgrounds		73.8%	31
Pump track or bike skills parks		7.1%	3
Skate park		26.2%	11
Dog park		19.0%	8
Other - Write In		19.0%	8

Looking more deeply at this data, it becomes clear that volunteer agencies manage fewer park resources (compare Figures 4 and 5) when compared to small and large agencies. While such an observation is not surprising, it also suggests that residents within those communities may not be getting access to the depth of recreational resources they desire.

Figure 3 – Managed Park Features – All Respondents

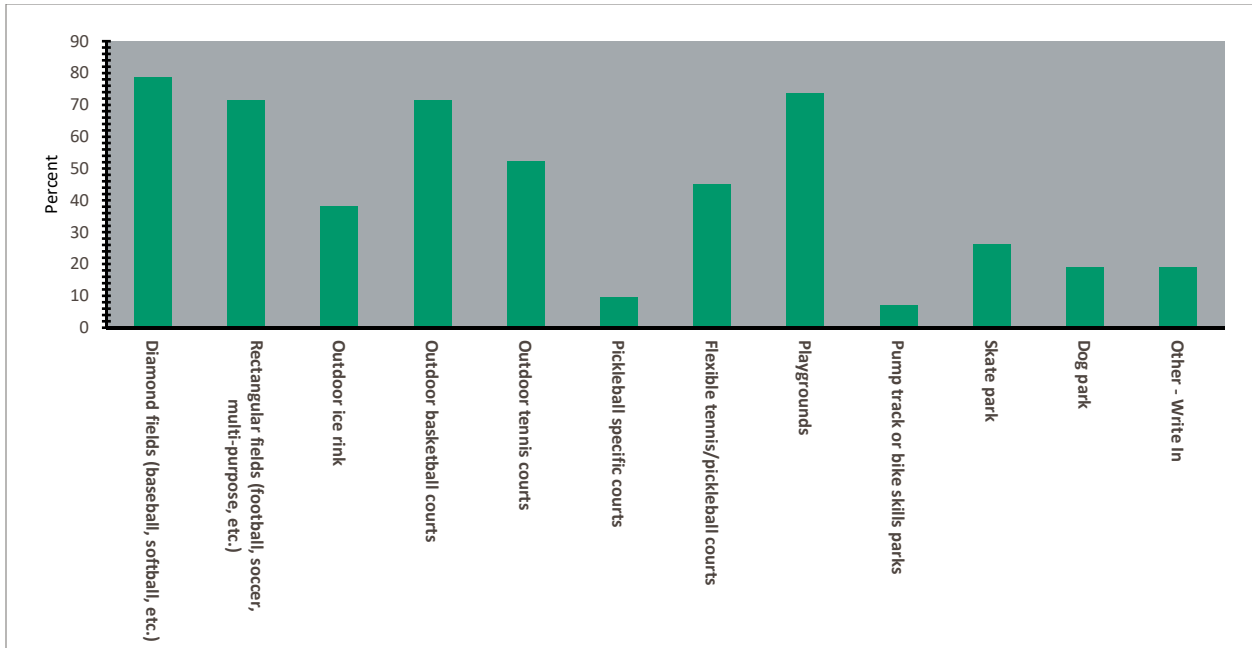
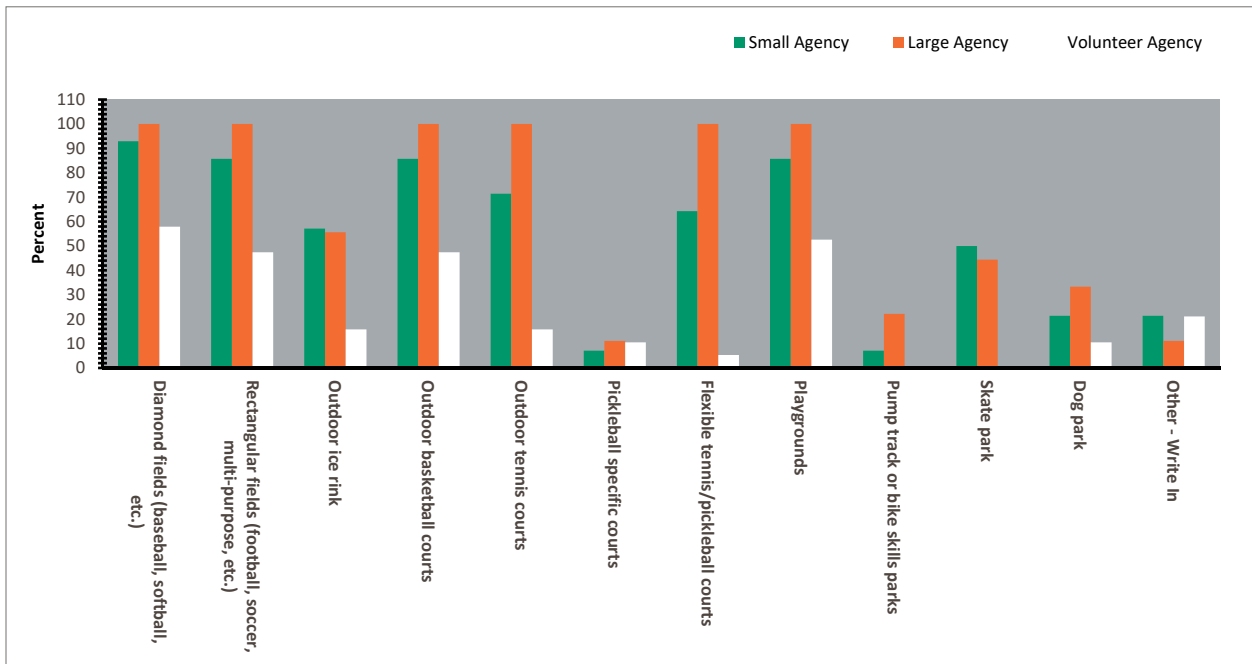


Figure 4 – Managed Park Features by Agency Type



A similar pattern emerges when looking at managed recreation programs (compare Figures 6 and 7). The depth of programs offered by all respondents is impressive, but volunteer agencies appear to deliver fewer programs in general. Team sports were the most commonly delivered program among all size agencies.

Figure 5 – Managed Recreation Programs – All Respondents

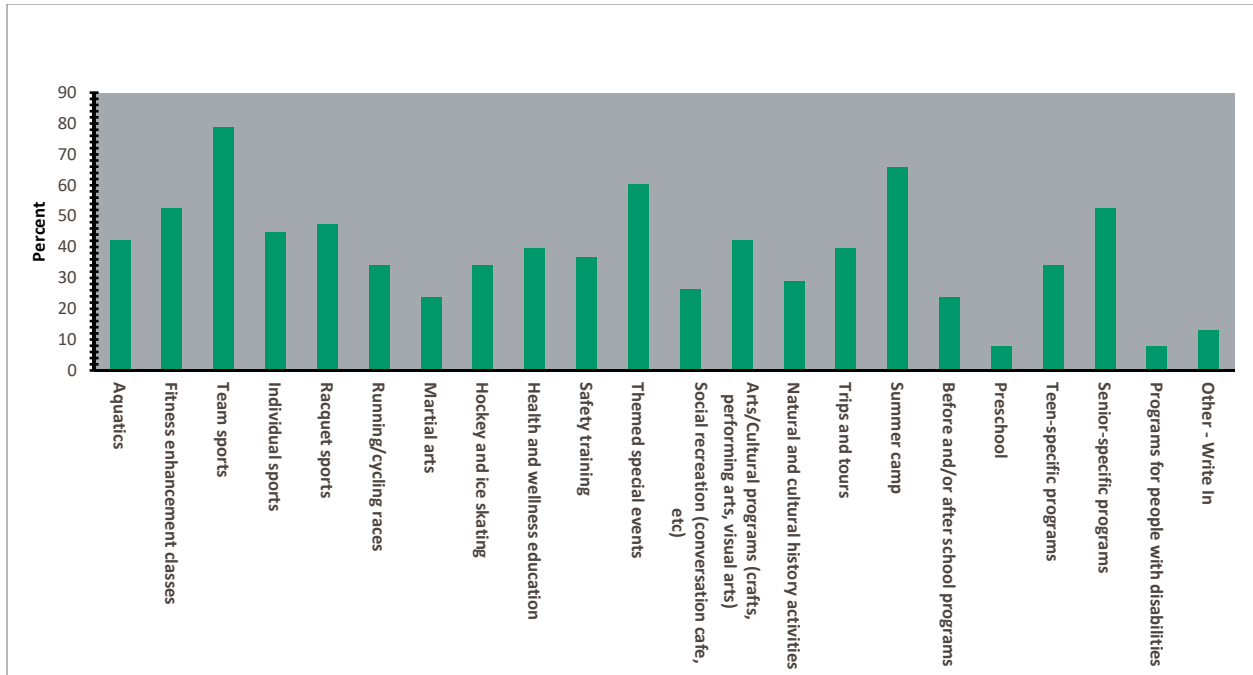
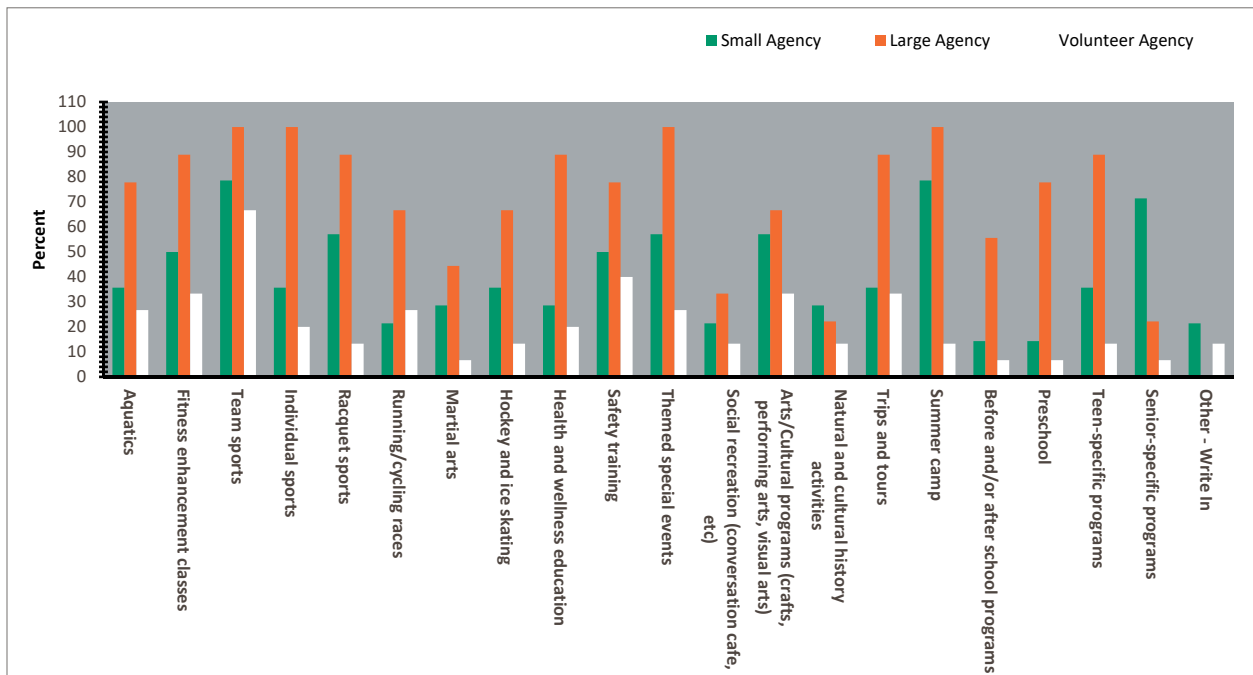


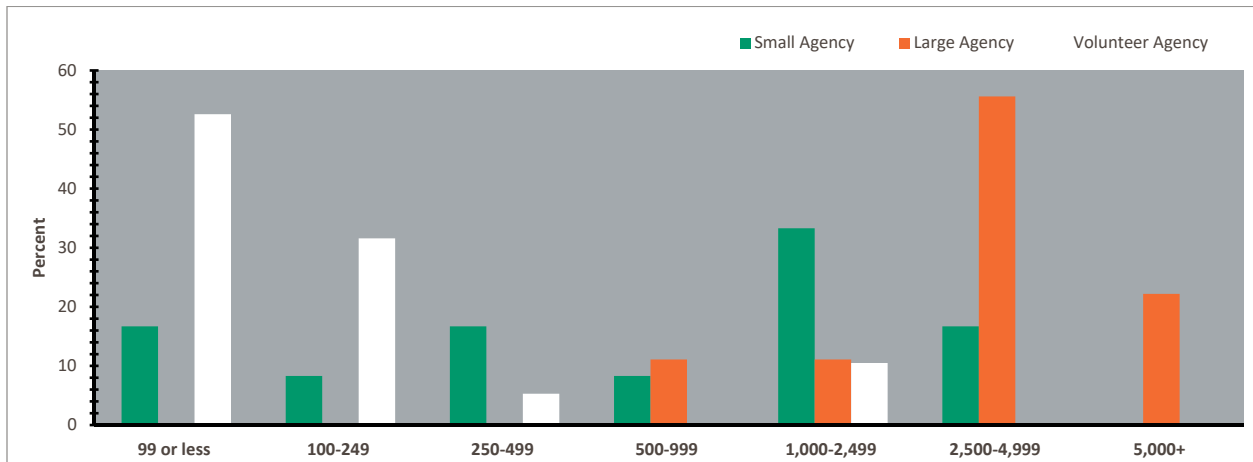
Figure 6 – Managed Recreation Programs – By Agency Type



When looking at the number of program participants by agency type (see Figure 8), the pattern affirms expectations; smaller agencies serve fewer people! What’s most interesting about this information is the relative scale between volunteer, small, and large agencies. Large agencies can serve upwards of 50 times those of volunteer agencies, even though the relative difference in population is significantly less.

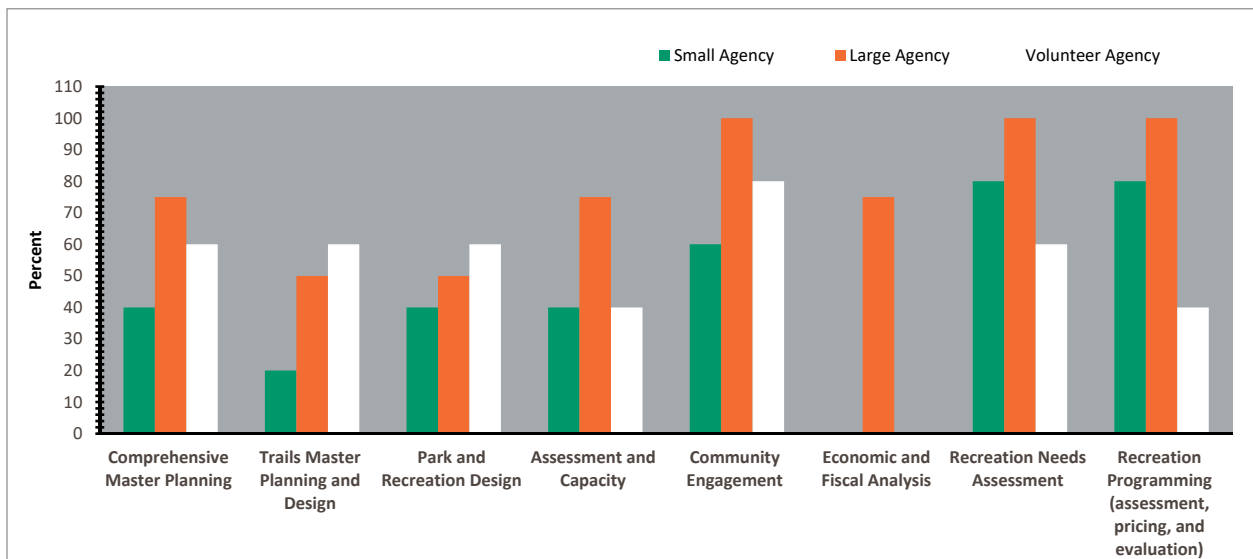
What is not clear from the data is whether smaller agencies are delivering more relative to their populations. Future survey results might help illuminate this issue.

Figure 7 - Recreation Program Participation by Agency Type



Implications: As a baseline survey, it is challenging to draw too many conclusions related to the size of an agency, but the results do attest to the fact that the capacity of smaller recreation agencies to provide recreational facilities and programs is limited, raising several important questions. Are residents of Vermont’s smaller towns forgoing access to recreation? To what degree do other communities or providers fill in the recreation needs? As seen elsewhere in the survey results, respondents from all types of agencies are interested in a better understanding of recreation needs and taking steps to plan for the results of that work.

Figure 8 - Interest in Future Recreation Planning by Agency Type



2. OBSERVATION #2 – THE ALL-VOLUNTEER ARMY

Premise: The data shows that for nearly all respondents, a volunteer pool is critical in the delivery of programs. The reliance on unpaid, temporary, or ad hoc staff support has implications on the consistency and effectiveness of delivery of services.

Supporting Data: Of the 49 respondents to the survey, about 50% of them were volunteer committees or similar groups. Volunteers provide much of the work of managing and promoting recreation in Vermont’s towns and villages.

For an overwhelming majority of respondents (84%), volunteers are part of the management of recreational resources (see Figures 10 and 11). Regardless of whether they are small or large, all classes of recreation agencies rely on volunteers to help direct the delivery of recreation at the local scale.

Figure 9 – Inclusion of Volunteer Recreation Committee, Commission, or Boards for Management of Recreation – All Respondents

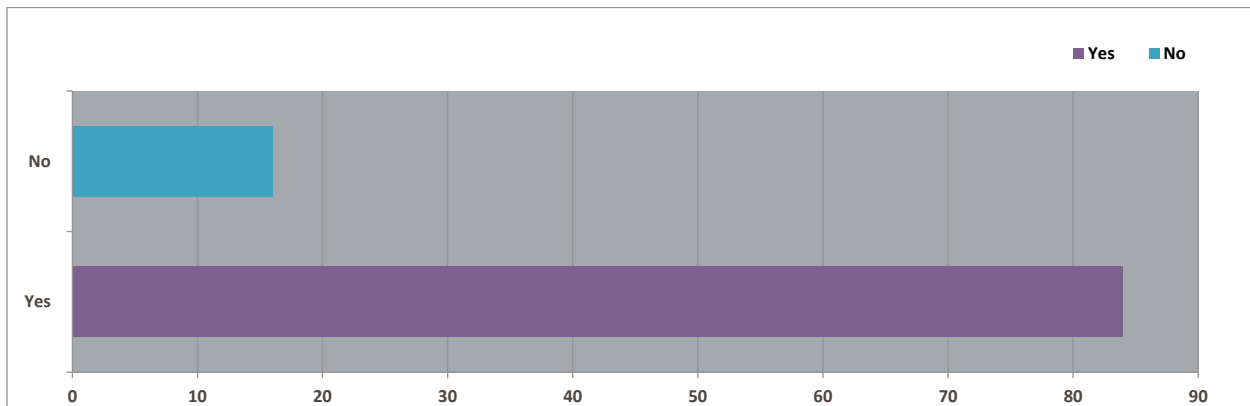
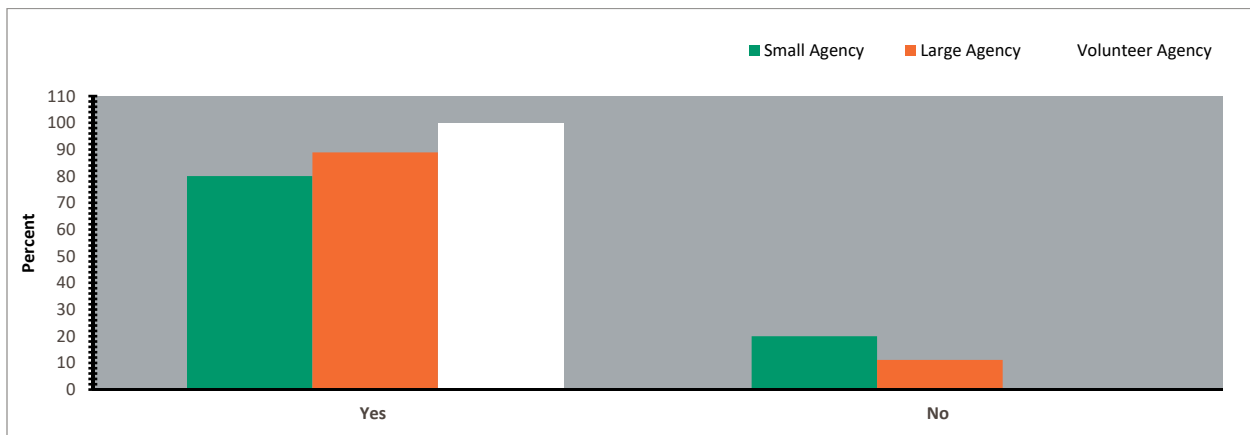
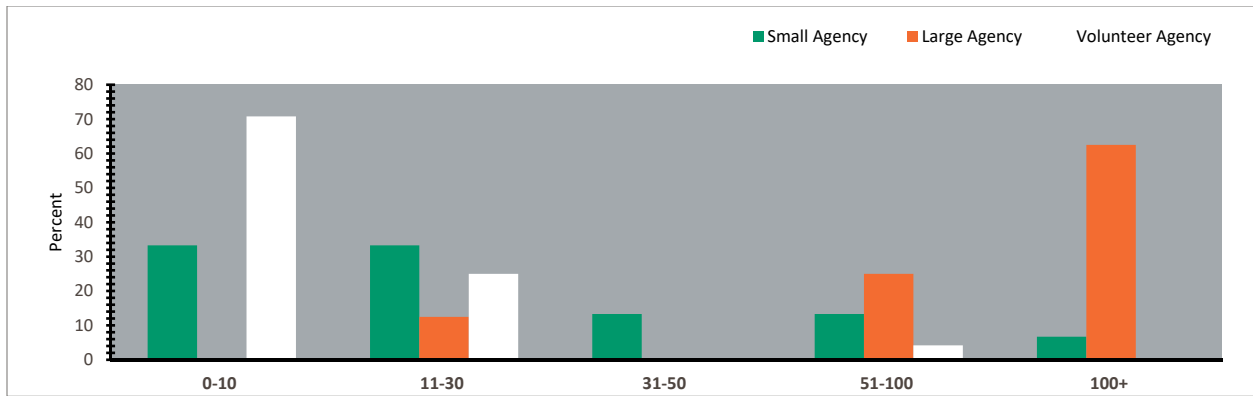


Figure 10 – Inclusion of Recreation Board or Commission in Management by Agency Type



In addition to the role that volunteers play in helping to manage recreational departments, they are also integral in the delivery of programs. For all agency types, volunteers provide program support as coaches, instructors, and other similar roles (see Figure 12). Interestingly, the need for volunteers essentially scales with the size of the agency; larger recreation departments appear to offer more programs and correspondingly rely more heavily on volunteers.

Figure 11 – Number of Volunteers for Program Delivery by Agency Type



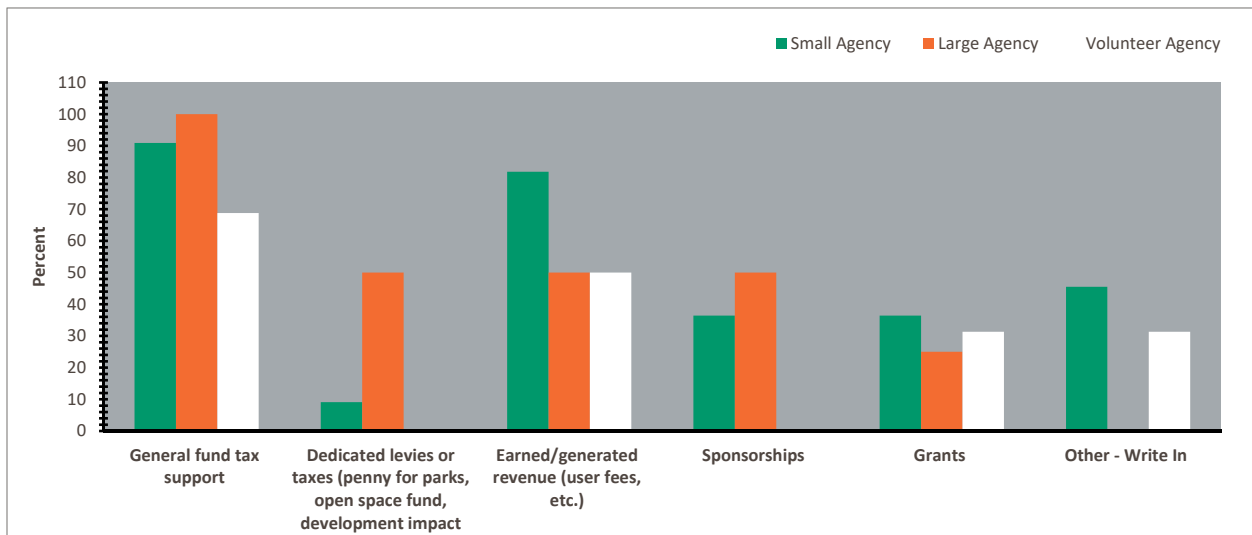
Implications: Volunteers are the backbone of Vermont’s recreation infrastructure. Managing and maintaining strong volunteer teams is demanding work. The reliance on volunteers in the management of local recreation would seem to help ground the efforts to local needs. However, the data suggests a lack of local capacity (seen elsewhere in the survey) to raise funds, plan for new programs, and other management activities. The delivery of programs requires volunteers, regardless of agency type.

3. OBSERVATION #3 – SHOW ME THE MONEY!

Premise: The lack of money flowing into recreation departments has consequences. Agencies are often leveraging diverse sources for revenue, but at the smaller scales, those options are limited. Going after grants and other revenue sources takes time, something smaller agencies don't necessarily have.

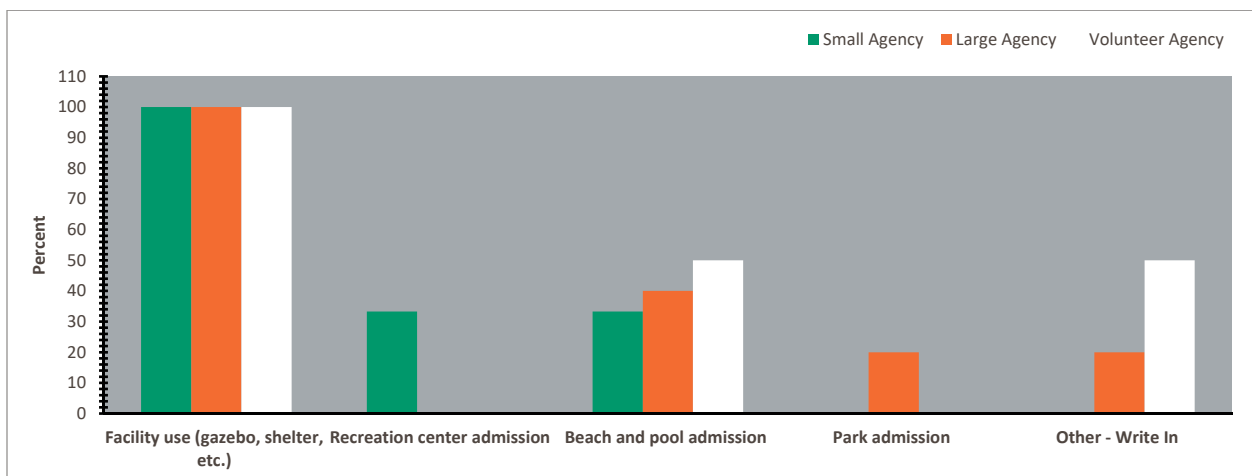
Supporting Data: Like nearly all efforts undertaken by municipalities, supporting recreation is done by leveraging many sources of funding. The local general fund is nearly universally one of the primary sources for funding (see Figure 13). Except within larger agencies, dedicated levies as a funding source were nearly non-existent in the survey results.

Figure 12 - Sources of Funding to Support Recreation



A sizeable percentage of respondents (generally above 45%) cited earned revenue as an important part of the overall financial picture in supporting local recreation. Interestingly, smaller agencies reported more frequently that revenue generation was a part of their funding. In addition to programs, many respondents cited the following as sources for fee revenue (see Figure 14), but the majority did not indicate any fee structure.

Figure 13 - Sources of Fee Revenue for Parks and Facilities by Agency Type



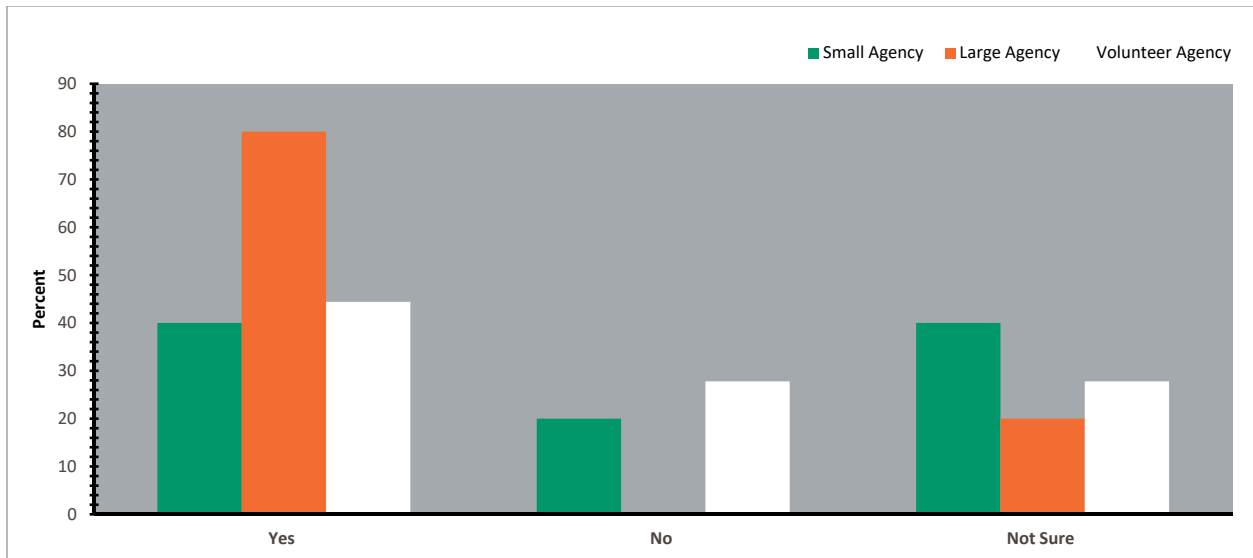
Some respondents cited grants as a part of their local funding, and the survey asked a series of questions about various grant programs and the participation of agencies within those programs. As summarized below (see Figure 15), the majority of respondents indicated that they had not applied for grants within the past five years. In looking at the comments provided, and as subsequent questions probed, seeking grant funding is time-consuming, and the success rate is generally low.

Figure 14 – Applications to Common Grant Programs within the Past Five Years

Grant Programs	Yes		No		Responses
	Count	Row %	Count	Row %	Count
Land and Water Conservation Fund State and Local Assistance Program (LWCF)	5	17.9%	23	82.1%	28
National Park Service Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program (RTC)	1	3.7%	26	96.3%	27
Recreational Trails Program (RTP)	6	20.7%	23	79.3%	29
Municipal Planning Grant Program (MPG)	7	23.3%	23	76.7%	30
Recreational Facilities Grants Program	10	34.5%	19	65.5%	29
NRPA Grant Programs	3	11.5%	23	88.5%	26
Private and community foundations (Vermont Community Foundation, Lintilhac Foundation, etc.)	7	26.9%	19	73.1%	26

While maintaining local funding sources, seeking grants and sponsorships, and striving for earned revenues is decidedly challenging, it was only in the large agencies where respondents indicated that additional financial support is needed to fulfill their missions (see Figure 16). A sizeable percentage of respondents, regardless of agency type, remain “unsure” about new funding.

Figure 15 – Whether Additional Financial Support is Needed to Meet Agency Mission by Agency Type



Implications: While recreation agencies of all types make do with the resources they have, they desire more financial support. Grant writing and management is complex, and the results from the survey suggest that smaller and volunteer agencies cannot effectively undertake the process. The Municipal Planning Grant (MPG) program managed by the Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development (ACCD), has been leveraged in support of recreation planning, but in competition with a wide spectrum of other local planning initiatives (town plans, infrastructure studies, zoning ordinances, etc.) Opportunities to enhance revenue generation, sponsorships, and local levies exist, but the lack of capacity stymies those efforts.

4. OBSERVATION #4 - THE TIMES THEY ARE A-CHANGING

Premise: While recreation at the local level is generally small-scaled, growth in recreation departments, programs, and facilities is happening. Agencies of all types want to keep adapting to local needs.

Supporting Data: When asked whether recreational agencies had become bigger in the past five years, more than 60% of both small and large agencies responded that they had grown. No respondent indicated that they shrunk. Most indicated some growth and expansion in programs, while growth in parks or other recreation facilities (see Figures 17 and 18) was largely limited to large agencies.

Figure 16 – Status of Program Offerings over the Past Five Years by Agency Type

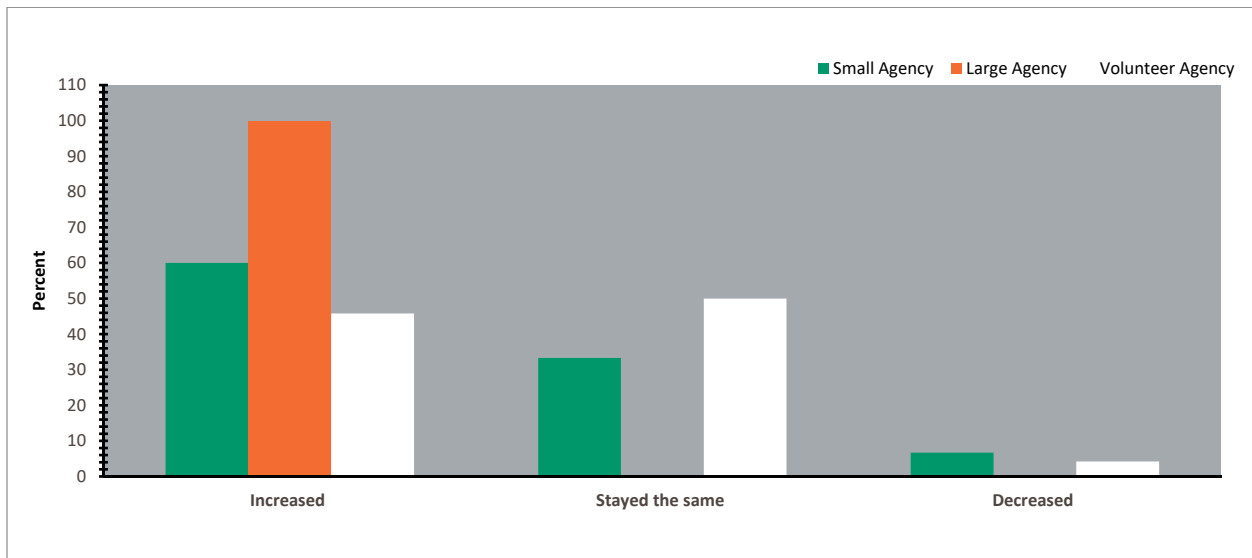
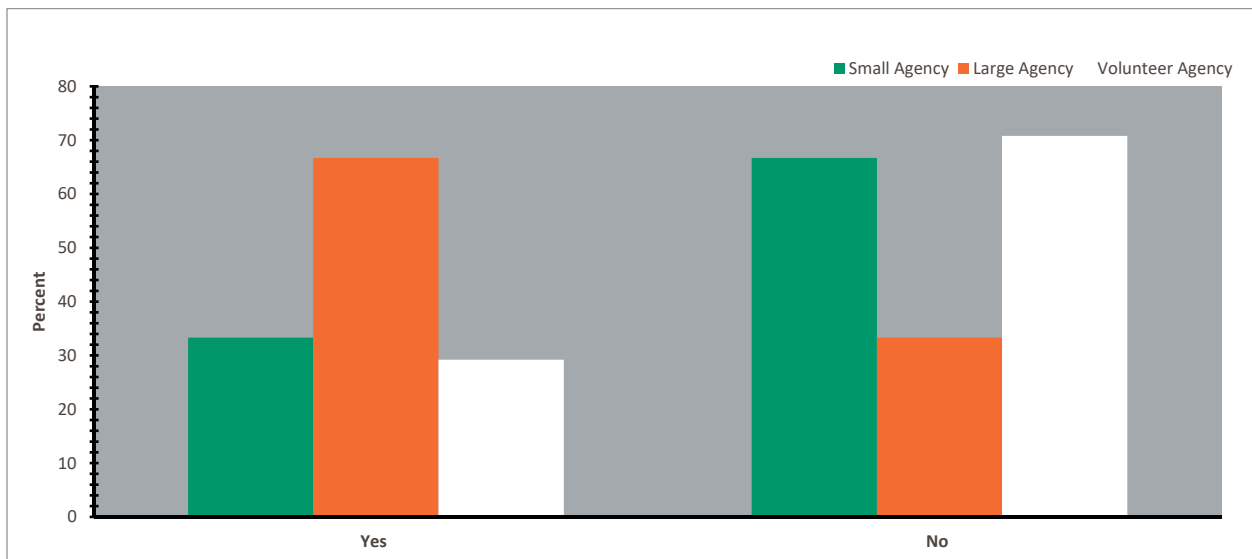


Figure 17- Whether new Parks or Other Recreation Facilities were Developed over the Past Five Years by Agency Type



It appears that this growth path is expected to continue with large percentages of respondents from all agency types indicating they expect growth in both programs and parks (see Figures 19 and 20)

Figure 18 - Potential Expansion of Program Offerings within the Next Five Years by Agency Type

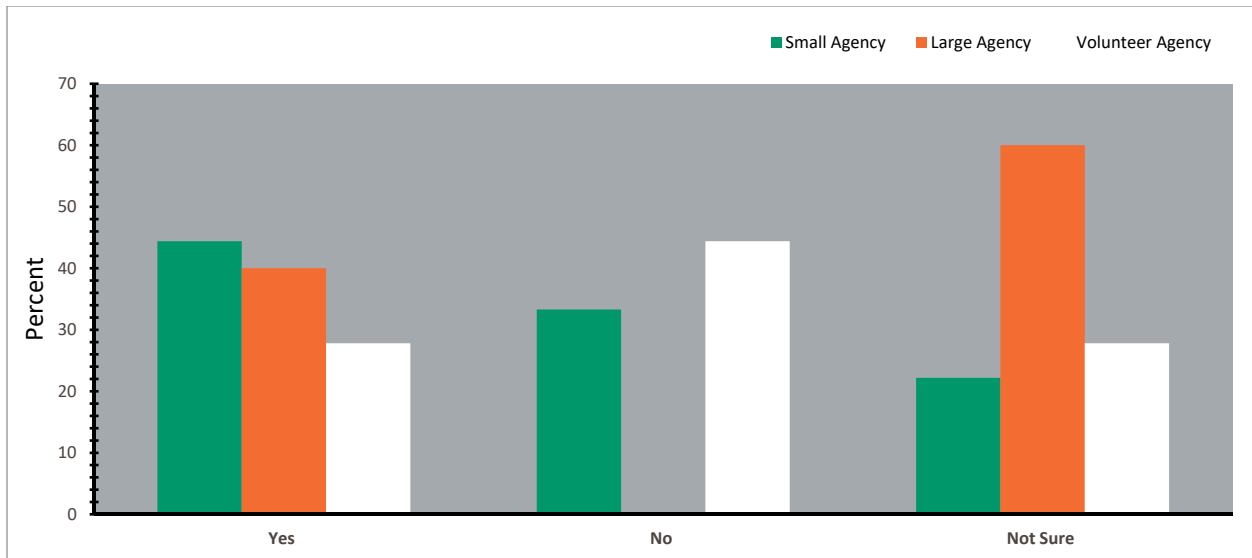
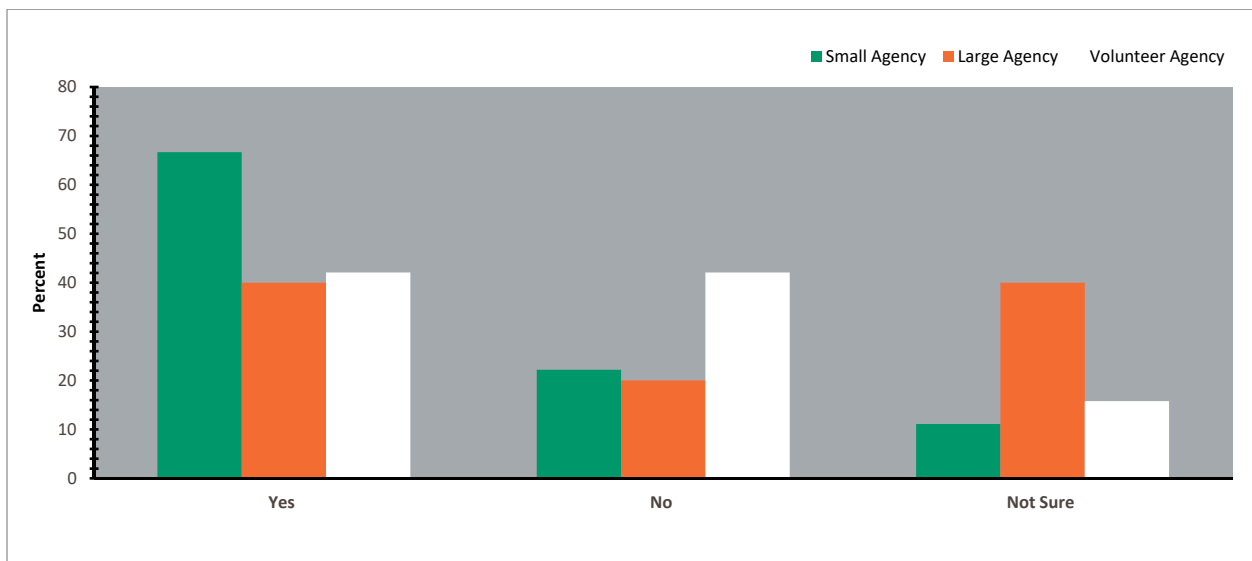


Figure 19 - Expansion of Parks and other Facilities in the Next Five Years by Agency Type



Implications: The growth in recreation in Vermont over the past five to ten years has been remarkable. While Vermont has long been a state that valued its outdoor recreational assets, the expansion of recreation programs at the local level appears to have been of great focus by the state’s recreation agencies. In the coming years, the data suggest a bit of catch-up might be in the offing. Smaller and volunteer agencies are poised to expand both program offerings and their facilities (parks, etc.). Larger agencies are less sure about program expansion.

D. CLOSING THOUGHTS

It is always important to start from a place of understanding. The primary objective of this survey was to help establish that understanding. In that regard, it has been successful.

The state of recreation in Vermont is strong. Strong because of the hard work of the multitudes of volunteers and professional recreation staff who help oversee the delivery of quality recreation programs, facilities and access to wonderful parks, trails, and open spaces.

However, as strong as Vermont may be, it can be better. Resources are lacking. Financial support for recreation varies widely and may become even more problematic as local needs for programs and facilities are better understood. Existing grant programs are complex, and local recreation agencies are understaffed. The value of recreation at the local scale has not always correlated to the cost of its delivery. Education, communication, and advocacy could help. Some of these results might assist in those efforts.

While these challenges are real, the tenacity of those who make recreation their vocation or advocacy, suggests progress will be made. We look forward to next year, comparing results and measuring that progress.