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**Public Opinion on the Future of the Town Square Property:  
A Report to the Town of Black Mountain\***

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## **The Problem**

Most residents of Black Mountain know that the town recently purchased the 1.4-acre tract at the corner of State Street and Montreat Road—commonly referred to as the “Town Square Property.” There has been a lot of debate about what to do with this property, from elected leaders, from the press, and between private citizens.

To help make an informed decision, the Board of Alderman convened a Town Square Steering Committee of more than 20 individuals and charged them with the job of gauging public opinion on this important issue. Given our experiences in public opinion research and polling (see more about our backgrounds in Appendix A), committee members asked us to help assess public opinion related to the Town Square Property.

We should note at the outset, however, that we were not asked to recommend a solution for the town. Our job was to assess the current state of public opinion in Black Mountain. In many communities, the most vocal residents may not be representative of the entire community. A more systematic approach to gauging public opinion, therefore, can help town decision-makers better understand the views of the entire town. In addition, we can use statistical techniques to determine if there are differences in public opinion across various subgroups.

## **The Strategy**

After considering a number of options and consulting with the Steering Committee, we decided on a three-stage strategy to assess public opinion on this topic.

### **Stage 1: Initial Focus Group**

The first stage of the project included a focus group of 12 people. The goal of this focus group was to help us better understand the issues surrounding the property and to help us write the questions that could best address the options that exist for the property. We selected the focus group participants in consultation with the Steering Committee. The Steering Committee sent us approximately 30 names from a number of key constituencies including leaders in local churches, business leaders, community volunteers, long term residents and folks who had recently moved to the town. We called all of the names and eventually recruited 12 participants. Given the high level of civic engagement in Black Mountain, we were able to get representatives from most of the major groups. The final group included people of different genders, ages and time in the area and we feel confident that many different perspectives were represented. In addition to the moderator, two people transcribed the focus group data to ensure that all conversations were recorded accurately. Finally, it is important to note that the comments of all focus group participants were treated confidentially. In other words, we did not use any specific names when taking notes or presenting information in the final report.

### **Stage 2: Representative, Scientifically Valid Survey**

After obtaining detailed information from our focus group, we then used these findings to draft a brief questionnaire. We sent the draft to the Steering Committee who made important comments and suggestions that were integrated into the final version. Although we would have included more questions in an ideal world, additional questions cost more money and usually lead to a lower response rate. Because we wanted to manage costs and receive data from as many people as possible, we limited the questionnaire to 11 questions. Once we agreed on a final version of the survey questions, we then

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wrote an article for the *Black Mountain News* to make potential respondents aware of the project and let them know that they might be called and asked to complete the survey. The final question wording (and responses) can be found in Appendix B.

We sub-contracted the calling to a Raleigh based polling firm, Public Policy Polling (PPP). PPP is an industry leader in robo-calls—relying on a new technology to receive accurate and fairly inexpensive survey data on a large number of people. We had used PPP on a previous project and had very good experiences. In addition, external groups that analyze the accuracy of polling data have deemed PPP one of the most accurate polling organizations in the country. Although PPP makes the calls themselves, they use sample lists from Aristotle, an industry leader in sampling. The list is derived from registered voters and the vast majority of households with registered voters in Black Mountain were included in the sample.

The survey went into the field on October 19, 2010 and calls continued until October 21. The calling protocol indicates that each number is called up to 5 times. The number shows up on caller IDs as “unavailable” and if PPP does not reach a respondent, they do not leave a message. Therefore, it is possible that individuals could be called and never know it. After calling all 2,516 numbers on the list, we obtained completed survey data for 467 Black Mountain registered voters. This results in a response rate of 18.6%, which is very high for a survey of this type. The respondents were slightly older (average age of 64) than found in the population of numbers we called (average age=58), but this difference is common in survey research and should not cause any major concern. This response was extremely high and our margin of error calculations suggest that we can be 95% confident that our results are accurate within +/-4.5%. Completing more surveys would not have given us significantly more reliable data. Indeed, this response rate and sample size is far beyond what we expected. We are very confident that this stage of the project gave us reliable empirical data on what people think about the current state of amenities in Black Mountain and what the public believes should be done with the Town Square Property.

### **Stage 3: Final Focus Group**

After completing the survey, we then moved into the third and final stage of data collection. In consultation with the Steering Committee we called another set of Black Mountain residents to recruit for a second focus group. We eventually received 10 confirmations to appear for this focus group to help us better understand the results. This group was, again, quite diverse and reflected a good cross-section of Black Mountain residents. With that said, the goal of the focus group was not to be representative of views of the entire community, as the survey had provided that, but rather to give us a rich and detailed description of how people talk about the future of the Town Square Property and their detailed views on whether public money should be used. This focus group was invaluable in helping us contextualize the survey results and understand what they mean. Once again, in addition to the moderator, we had two graduate students attend the focus group to transcribe the conversation and assure accurate reporting of the results.

## **The Results**

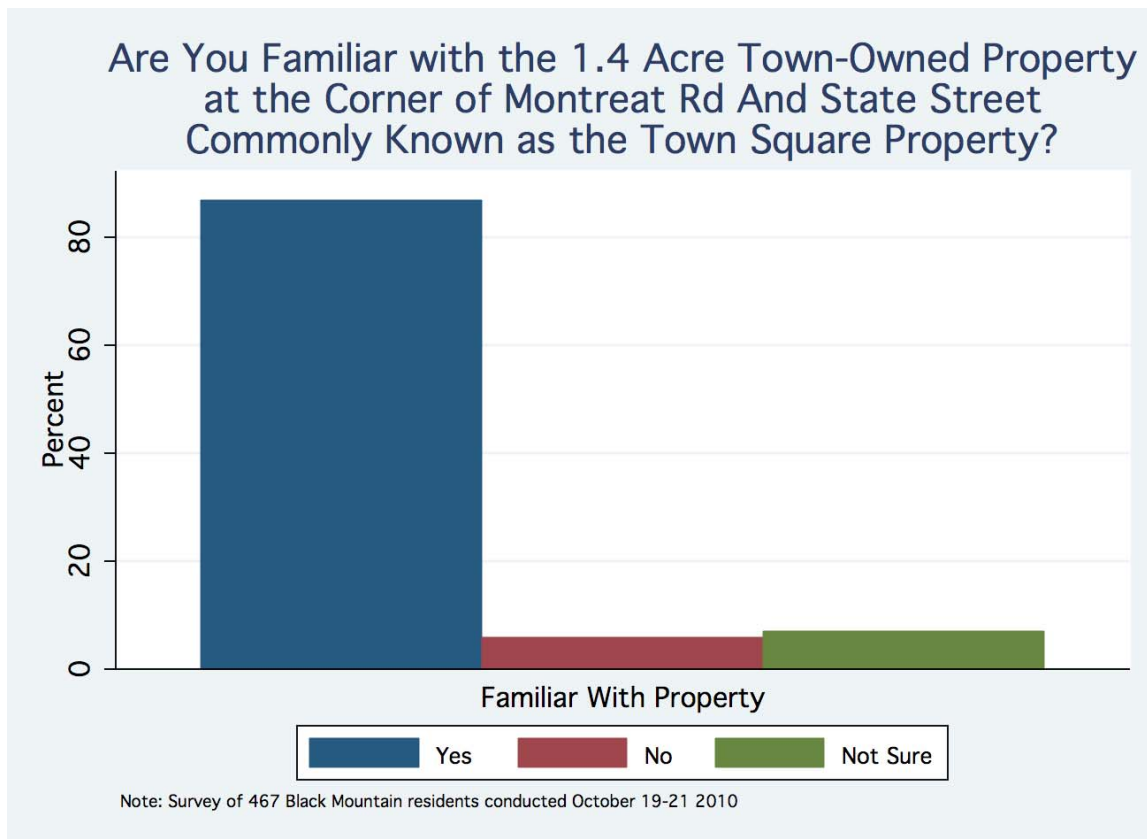
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Below we review the results of the survey and include insights from the focus groups when applicable. We also ran a number of statistical models to determine whether responses differed by the amount of time a person had spent in the region. Those results are reported in the text when applicable.

## Familiarity

Before reviewing the results about the current state of the property, we first wanted to assess whether respondents were familiar with the property. The results (presented below) clearly demonstrate that the vast majority of respondents are aware of the town square property. Though not surprising for such a civically engaged community, this is important as it means that the respondents are in a good position to weigh in on the future of the property. Had we found very little knowledge of the property, the remainder of the results would be considerably less useful. Our focus group data also reinforced that the Town Square Property is an important and salient topic for the vast majority of the people in Black Mountain. The citizens are clearly watching this closely.



We then ran a statistical model (ordinal logistic regression) to determine whether responses differed by the age of the respondent or the percent of a respondent's life that they had lived in Black Mountain. Both variables are included in the model simultaneously, meaning that all differences we reported here take into account or "control for" the other variable. The results of this analysis indicate that younger people are no more or less likely to have heard of the property than older people, but that the percent of life a person has lived in Black Mountain is related to awareness of the property. This difference is statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ) and further analysis reveals that a person who just moved to Black

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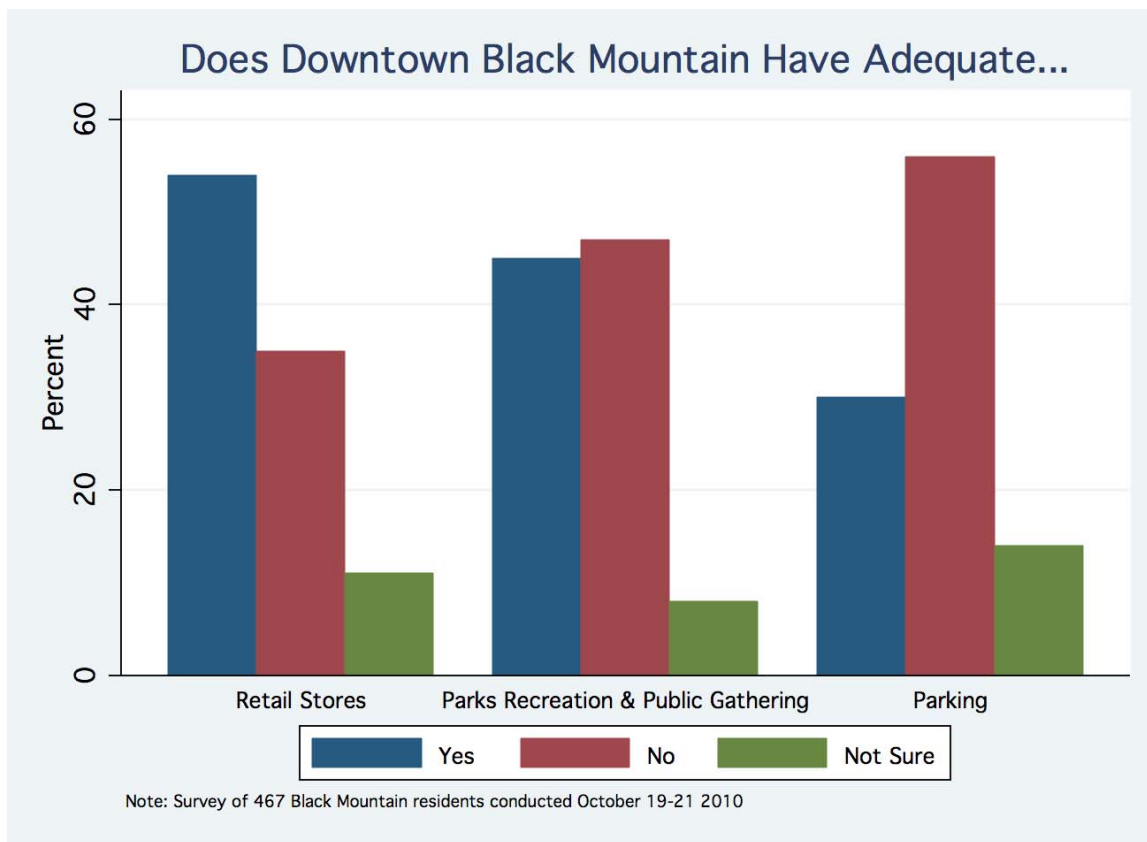
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Mountain has a 91% probability of being familiar with the property, compared to an 81% probability for a Black Mountain native.<sup>1</sup>

### Current Conditions in Black Mountain

Next, we wanted to determine what residents thought about the current conditions in Black Mountain. The graph below presents the results for three questions—one to find out whether respondents believe that downtown Black Mountain has an adequate number of retail stores, one to find out whether respondents believe Black Mountain has adequate parks, recreation and public gatherings spaces, and one about whether downtown Black Mountain has adequate parking. These options were suggested by the first focus group and supported by the Steering Committee.

As you can see in the graph below, the majority of respondents believe that downtown Black Mountain has enough retail stores. The focus group data reinforced that many believe that there is enough retail, but it also raised some important limitations of this specific question. In particular, a few participants were confused whether the question was referring to retail space or retail stores—two distinct concepts. Some participants also pointed out that there are vacant store-fronts in downtown Black Mountain currently. The focus group participants seemed to be open to more stores downtown, but were less enthusiastic about building more store-fronts.



Slightly less than half of the survey respondents believe that Black Mountain has enough parks, recreation and public gathering spaces. Once again, the focus group gave us considerable insight into these responses. Many participants were unsure whether the question was referring to Black Mountain

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<sup>1</sup> This, and all other probabilities are computed using the Clarify program for the Stata statistical package.

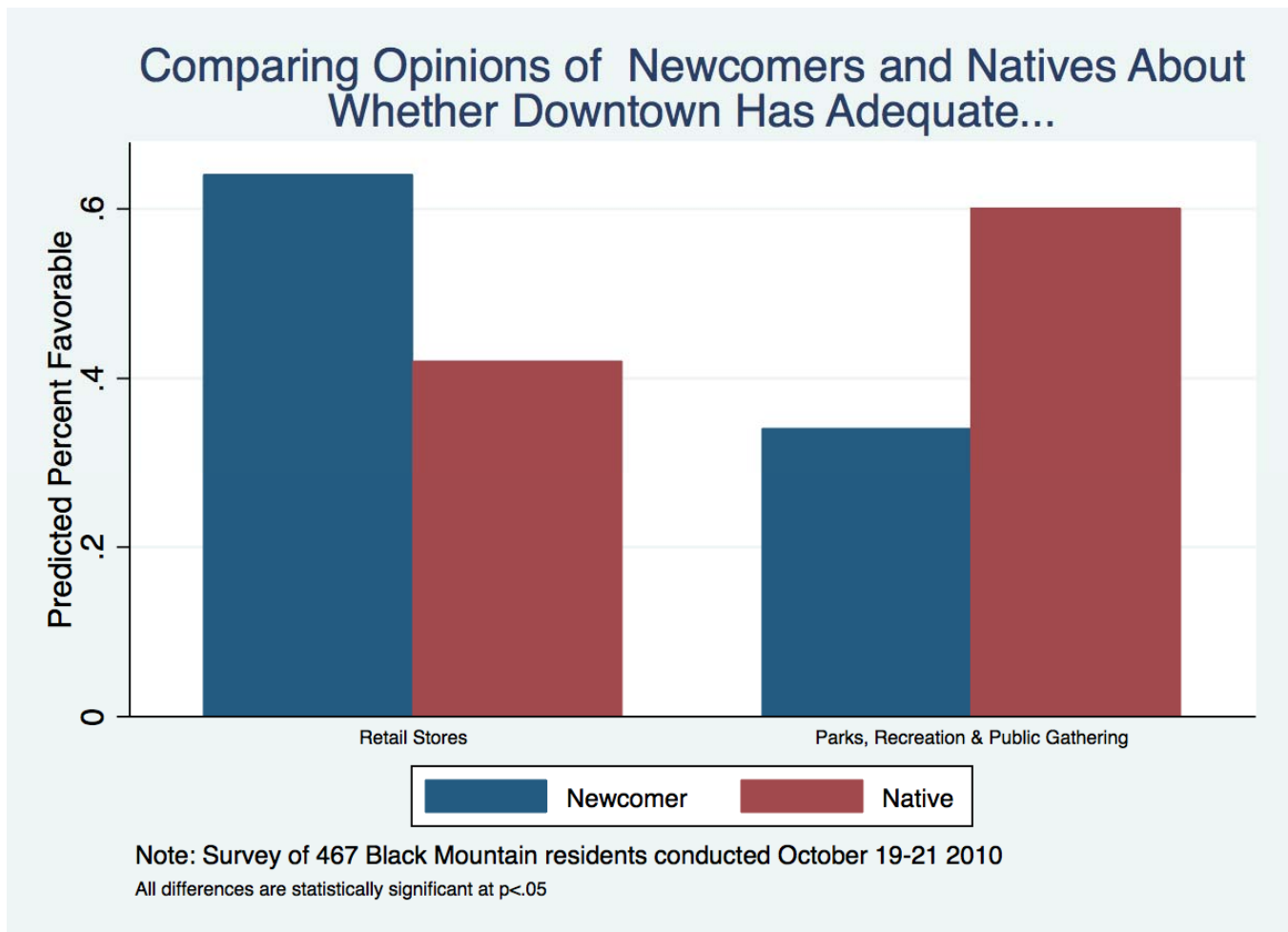
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in general or just downtown. Some participants pointed out the presence of Lake Tomahawk nearby, but others stated that it is too far away from the center of town to have an impact on the downtown area. One participant summed up the issue quite nicely by noting that while Lake Tomahawk is an asset to the town, it provides a very different park experience than a small park downtown.

Parking seems to be the biggest perceived need—with only about 30 percent of respondents believing that there is adequate parking downtown. The focus group participants were somewhat skeptical of this answer, noting that there is plenty of parking downtown, but it is not as convenient as many people would like. Focus group participants also pointed out that the parking problem is exacerbated when local merchants park in customer parking spaces downtown.

We next ran a series of ordinal logistic regression models to determine whether answers differed by age or percent of life in Black Mountain. These results are presented in the Figure below.



Although neither variable influences opinions about whether there is adequate parking, native status has a significant influence on opinions of whether the town has adequate parks, recreation and public gathering and whether the town has enough retail stores. A person who just moved to Black Mountain has a 34% chance of believing that there is adequate space for parks, recreation and public gathering, whereas natives have a 60% chance of believing that there is adequate space for parks, recreation, and

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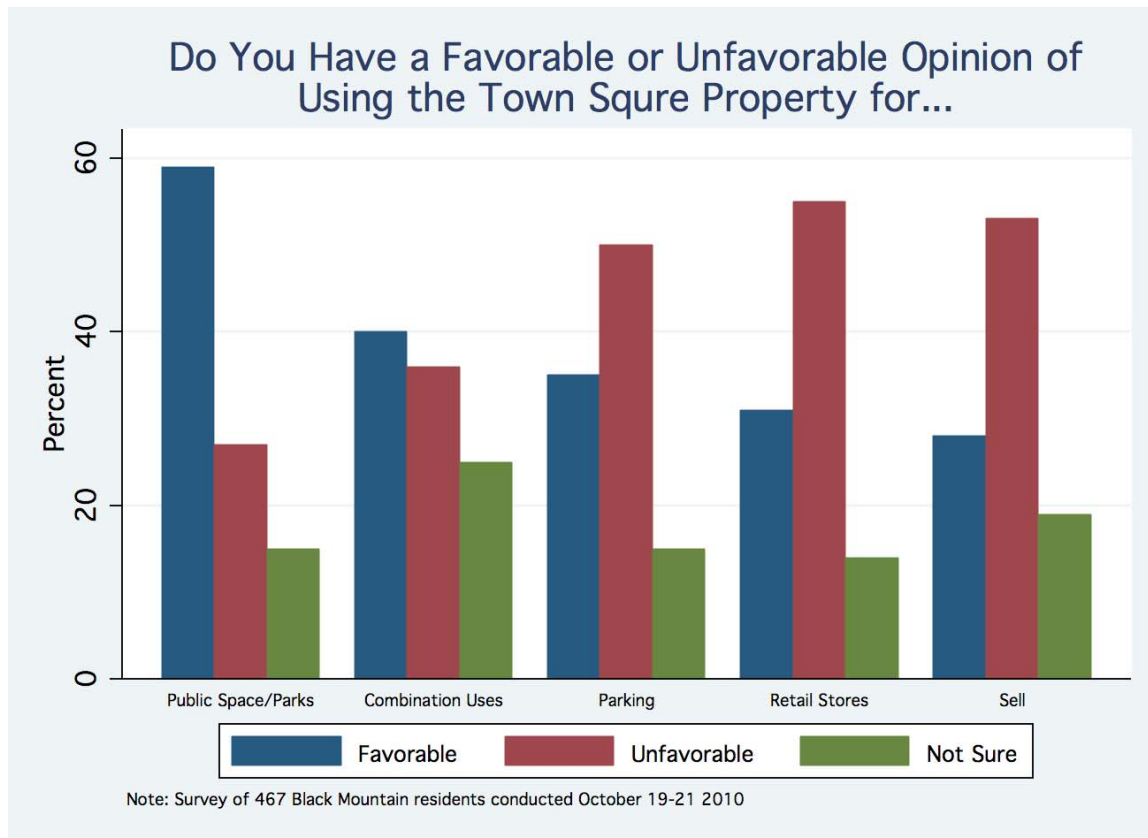
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public gathering.<sup>2</sup> We see the opposite effect for retail stores where natives have a 42% change of thinking that there are adequate retail stores, compared to a 64% chance for a newcomer. Both of these differences are statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ) and hold even while controlling for age. Regardless of the amount of time they have lived in Black Mountain, younger people are less likely to think there is currently enough space for parks, recreation and public gathering ( $p < .05$ ).

### Possibilities for Black Mountain

The next section of the survey asked respondents to indicate their support for various proposals about the Town Square Property. Instead of giving participants “forced choice” options, we allowed them to weigh in on each possibility individually. The results (presented below) indicate that using the space for parks, recreation and public space has the most favorable responses, followed by combination uses, parking, and retail stores. Selling the property had the lowest number of favorable responses.

Although these results look fairly straightforward, it is important to note the large number of “not sure” responses for the options of selling the property and using it for a combination of purposes. The ambiguity on these questions was also borne out in the focus groups.



Many focus group participants noted that it is difficult to weigh in on whether the town should sell the property without knowing what the price might be and what the uses would be after the sale. For example, one participant noted that he would be willing to sell for enough money if it went to retail that he agreed with, but not if it went to a “big-box store.” Most participants indicated that they did not think the town should sell the property unless they could control how it would be used.

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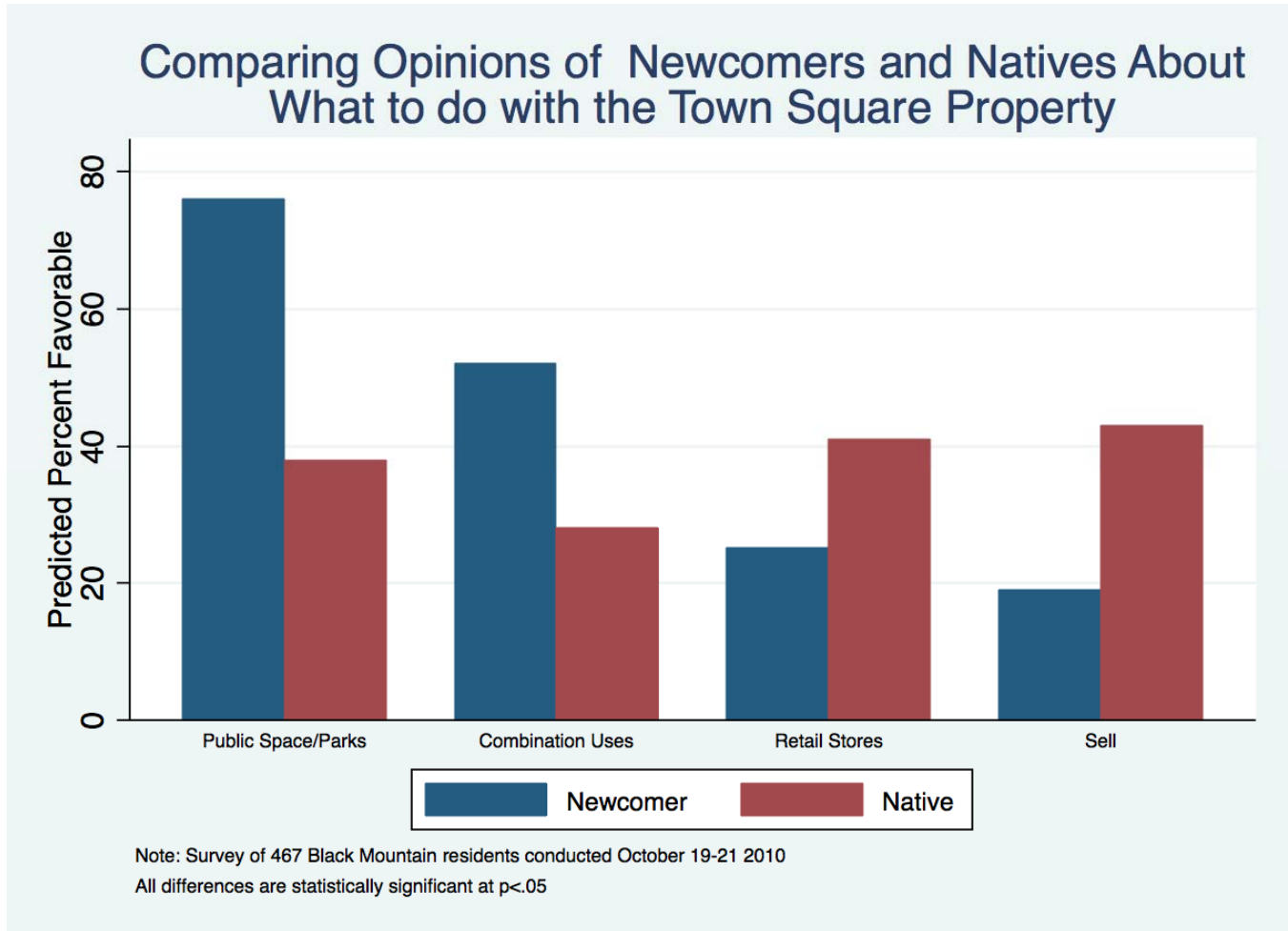
<sup>2</sup> Although we only highlight the differences at the extremes (newcomer vs. native), we estimated these models to account for the entire range of the distribution.

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Many focus group participants were interested in the possibility of using the property for a mix of uses, but some raised questions about the size of the property and most were unclear on whether the property was big enough to use for both parking and recreation, for example.

Next, we ran a series of models to determine whether responses differed by age or percent of life in Black Mountain. Once again, the percent of a person's life that they have lived in Black Mountain (computed as number of years in Black Mountain/Age) is an important predictor of all of these questions, except for the one concerning parking. All of these differences are statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ), even after controlling for age. These predictions are presented in the Figure below.



The larger proportion of a person's life a person has lived in Black Mountain, the less likely they are to want to use the property for parks, the more likely they are to want to use the property for retail, the more likely they are to want to sell and the less likely they are to want to use for a combination of purposes. Relative newcomers to Black Mountain strongly prefer using the town square property for public space and parks. Among Black Mountains natives, however, opinion is quite similar across the four options for the property. We should also note that these responses correspond quite nicely with people's assessment of whether the current conditions are adequate. People who believe that there is not adequate space for parks are more likely to want to use the Town Square Property for parks. Similar relationships are found for the other possibilities as well.

### Conclusion

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The survey and the focus groups reinforce that the Town Square Property is salient for most residents. Although these data cannot tell the town what to do with the property, they do suggest some general directions to help guide future decisions.

First, public opinion does not support using the space for retail. The majority of residents believe that there is adequate retail already in downtown Black Mountain and less than a third of respondents have a favorable attitudes towards using the property for retail. Selling the property seems to be similarly unpopular.

Public opinion is considerably more favorably predisposed towards using the property for public space. This option has the highest level of support among the people in Black Mountain. It is the number one option for relative newcomers and is almost as popular as the other possibilities among natives. Many of the focus group participants described how public space downtown could transform downtown Black Mountain. Some pointed to Blowing Rock as one example of how this might look. Others reinforced how public space on the property could bring more foot traffic downtown and help spur economic growth in the downtown area.

If there is enough space, the public might also support a combination of uses for the property. Some space for parking and some space for a small park seems to be one possibility that might work.

No matter what option the town chooses, the public clearly wants to be involved. A number of participants expressed an interest in seeing various “concept plans” so the town might want to consider having a planning group draw up three or four different visual representations of the major options and invite the public to weigh in on which one they prefer. In addition, focus group participants talked about the active and talented volunteer community in Black Mountain that might be available to provide free labor for the project.

Most of what we learned from this project was very positive for Black Mountain. The high level of civic engagement bodes well for the future of the town. The one note of caution would be to make sure that any future initiatives incorporate the opinions of both natives and newcomers.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we believe it is imperative that the board move quickly. The focus group participants were almost uniform in their desire to see the project move forward soon. Without question, the Town Square property represents an exciting opportunity for the town of Black Mountain.

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## Appendix A : About the Authors

**Christopher A. Cooper** (PhD, University of Tennessee) is Associate Professor of Political Science and Director of the Public Policy Institute at Western Carolina University. His work on state and local politics, political opinion, political psychology, and southern politics has been published in *Public Administration Review*, *Policy Studies Journal*, *Social Forces*, *Political Research Quarterly*, *American Politics Research*, *Psychological Assessment*, *Social Science Quarterly*, *State Politics and Policy Quarterly*, *State and Local Government Review*, *Social Science Computer Review*, *American Review of Politics*, *Southern Cultures*, *the Journal of Applied Social Psychology* *the Journal of Psychology: Interdisciplinary and Applied*, *PS: Political Science and Politics*, and *Social Science Journal* as well as in edited works published by Brookings Institution Press, Congressional Quarterly Press, and the University Press of Kentucky, among others. His book, *The New Politics of North Carolina* (edited with Gibbs Knotts) was recently published by the University of North Carolina Press. His work uses a variety of research and data collection techniques including surveys, experiments, archival research and qualitative interviewing.

In addition to his academic work, Dr. Cooper frequently conducts evaluation studies for local governments and non-profits throughout North Carolina. He has worked on survey design, implementation and analysis in consultation with many government and community partners including the United States Bureau of the Census, the City of Asheville, CBS News, the Cherokee Nation, NC Farmer's Markets, Yancey County schools, the Town of Sylva, the Smoky Mountain News and Buncombe County. He is also co-author of two versions of the Regional Outlook Report, a major outreach initiative by Western Carolina University that assessed public opinion in the 23 westernmost counties.

Dr. Cooper has conducted over a hundred interviews with a variety of print and electronic media including the *Christian Science Monitor*, *Boston Herald*, *USA Today*, *Charlotte Observer*, *Asheville-Citizen Times*, *Winston Salem Journal*, *National Journal*, *Rock Hill Herald*, *Smoky Mountain News*, *Hendersonville Times*, *Sylva Herald*, *Mountain Express*, CNN, FOX News, WLOS TV, WATV, WFSC, and KISS FM. He has also published more than 25 op-eds in newspapers across the Southeast and frequently gives talks throughout the region about politics and public policy.

**H. Gibbs Knotts** (PhD, Emory University) is department head and associate professor of political science and public affairs at Western Carolina University. He received his undergraduate degree from the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill and did his graduate work at Emory University. He has published articles on southern politics, public opinion, and public administration in scholarly journals including *The Journal of Politics*, *Public Administration Review*, *Social Forces*, *Southern Cultures*, *Social Science Quarterly*, and *State Politics and Policy Quarterly*. He uses a variety of data collection and data analysis techniques and strives to write in a way that is easy for both academics and non-academics to comprehend.

Dr. Knotts has worked with a number of local governments and nonprofits in the Western North Carolina region. Along with Dr. Cooper, he recently partnered with the *Smoky Mountain News* on a Jackson County poll that focused on key issues facing the community. Dr. Knotts also provides expert opinion to a variety of media outlets and he has written op-ed pieces for newspapers including the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, the *Charlotte Observer*, the *Durham Herald-Sun*, the (Raleigh) *News & Observer*, the *Greenville (SC) News*, and the *Asheville Citizen-Times*. He has received a number of awards for his teaching and research including the 2004 Chancellor's Distinguished Teaching Award, the 2010 Board of Governors Teaching Award, and the 2010 University Scholar Award.

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**Billy Hutchings** holds an undergraduate degree from the University of Massachusetts, Boston and is currently a Graduate Assistant in the Public Policy Institute and a graduate student in the Master of Public Affairs Program at Western Carolina University. He has worked on many applied projects in consultation with groups throughout the region including recent work on the French Broad Congestion Management plan.

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# Black Mountain, NC, Survey Results

**Q1** Does downtown Black Mountain have adequate parking?

Yes..... 30%  
No ..... 56%  
Not sure ..... 14%

**Q2** Does downtown Black Mountain have adequate public space for parks, recreation and public gathering?

Yes..... 45%  
No ..... 47%  
Not sure ..... 8%

**Q3** Does downtown Black Mountain have an adequate number of retail stores?

Yes..... 54%  
No ..... 35%  
Not sure ..... 11%

**Q4** Are you familiar with the 1.4 acre town-owned property at the corner of Montreat Road and State Street, commonly known as the town square property?

Yes..... 87%  
No ..... 6%  
Not sure ..... 7%

**Q5** Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of using the town square property as a public space for parks, recreation, and public gatherings?

Favorable..... 59%  
Unfavorable ..... 27%  
Not sure ..... 15%

**Q6** Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of using the town square property for retail stores?

Favorable..... 31%  
Unfavorable ..... 55%  
Not sure ..... 14%

**Q7** Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of using the town square property for parking?

Favorable..... 35%  
Unfavorable ..... 50%  
Not sure ..... 15%

**Q8** Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of selling the town square property?

Favorable..... 28%  
Unfavorable ..... 53%  
Not sure ..... 19%

**Q9** Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of using the Town Square property for a combination of public and private uses?

<i>Favorable</i> .....	40%
<i>Unfavorable</i> .....	36%
<i>Not sure</i> .....	25%