

# Suburban Illinois Regional Conservation Message Survey

August 2019

PREPARED FOR:



By:

[John Wilson Research](#)

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## ABOUT THE CONSERVATION FOUNDATION

Established in 1972, the mission of The Conservation Foundation (TCF) is to improve the health of our communities by preserving and restoring natural areas and open space, protecting rivers and watersheds, and promoting stewardship of our environment, **mainly in DuPage, Kane, Kendall and Will counties.**

By providing a reasoned voice, utilizing grass-roots support, and using a variety of tools and creative methods, TCF has helped preserve 35,000 acres of land in eight Northeastern Illinois counties.

In 1997, TCF launched a series of ballot measure campaigns throughout our region to promote the public acquisition of open space. These campaigns have helped raise public funds for open space preservation in DuPage, DeKalb, Kane, Kendall, and Will Counties through the passage of referenda. To date, TCF has organized and managed 14 successful referenda campaigns (plus six additional advised) that have raised nearly \$750 million preserving approximately 30,000 acres of land in these counties. Regionally, voters in Northeast Illinois have approved 37 out of 41 conservation ballot measures (90%) since 1993, raising \$1.5 billion to purchase, restore and preserve open space and natural areas.

## ABOUT THIS SURVEY

This size and scope of the survey allowed TCF and its partners (Forest Preserve Districts of DuPage, Kane, Kendall, Lake and Will Counties, and the McHenry County Conservation District) to examine open space, and parks and recreation issues. This survey consisted of 1,200 voter interviews with 200 in each of the six collar counties in the region. High-frequency voters, as well as likely 2020 voters, were surveyed. The overall margin of error is +/- 2.8%. The phone surveys took place April 1-4, 2019 and lasted approximately 15 minutes each.

The purpose of the survey was to:

- Develop consistent, regional conservation messages that resonate with voters/public.
- Update previous polling/survey data with fresh 2019 data.
- Identify any trends in messaging and voter concerns over the past 20 years from previous surveys.
- Conduct an in-depth voter demographic analysis.
- Assess potential success for a 2020 or 2022 referenda. (Note- as of the date of this report, none of the six Districts were planning a referendum)

TCF would like to thank and express appreciation to the **Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley Foundation** (Chicago) for funding this study, to John Wilson Research for going above and beyond expectations, and to the six county open space districts for their cooperation and their excellent conservation work over the decades.



GAYLORD AND  
DOROTHY DONNELLEY  
FOUNDATION

## KEY POINTS SUMMARY

**Note:** The five collar county forest preserve districts (DuPage, Kane, Kendall, Lake and Will) and the McHenry County Conservation District will collectively be referred to in this report as the “**Districts.**”

### KEY MESSAGESS FOR CONSERVATION

#### **Altruistic Appeals**

When it comes to open space and conservation districts, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Forest preserves and conservation districts are more than just natural lands, walking trails, bike paths and picnic shelters. They are an integral part of the community and a part of the community’s identity and quality of life. Most voters feel that parks and recreation areas are good for the community as a whole, regardless of whether they use the amenities or not.

#### Top Key Messages:

- We owe it to our children and grandchildren to save open space, clean water and wildlife so future generations can enjoy them the way we do.
- Our County’s land, water and wildlife are our natural heritage and we have a responsibility to protect and preserve them for future generations.
- Preserving natural areas, wildlife habitat and water resources and providing outdoor recreational opportunities play a very important role in preserving the quality of life.

#### **Uses for Funds**

Within the context of a hypothetical referendum, the Uses for Funds that impact everyone, regardless of whether they visit the parks and recreation areas or not, are the Uses for Funds that receive the highest ratings. These include uses related to drinking water and water quality in general, air quality and flooding. In addition, Nature Education for Children gets very high ratings.

#### Top Key Messages:

- To Protect **Drinking Water Sources**
- To Protect **Water Quality**
- To Protect **Watersheds** to Improve Water Quality of Rivers, Lakes and Streams
- To Help Reduce **Flooding**
- To Improve **Air Quality** by Planting Trees
- To Create and Maintain Resilient and **Sustainable Ecosystems**
- To Provide **Nature Education for Children**

### **Hypothetical Referendum Support**

Support for a hypothetical referendum that would cost the average homeowner an additional \$24 per year is both high and broad across the region and in all six counties in the survey. While voters express increasing concern over rising property taxes in general, the cost (\$24) of this hypothetical referendum, whether expressed as an annual cost or a monthly cost, is not enough to significantly impact voter support.

### **Support for Additional Funding for Maintenance**

Most voters appear to understand the need for the Districts to have more funding to maintain the lands and the programs that they currently have as the amount of land they have increases. At the same time, there is clearly more support for spending that preserves and improves lands and programs, versus spending on buildings, structures, etc.

### **Political Environment**

Even though concern for the rate of growth has diminished significantly over the past ten or twenty years (growth has slowed in general), the information concerning the role open space preservation can play in controlling growth and development, and improving quality of life is still very important to voters.

### **Forest Preserve District / Conservation District Ratings**

Forest Preserve District / Conservation District favorability ratings are very high ranging from 64% to 80%. Similarly, a large majority of voters have a Great Deal or Fair Amount of confidence that their District will use funds raised from a referendum wisely. Naturally, these high ratings are reflected in voter support for the hypothetical referendum.

## RECOMMENDATIONS ON HOW THE REGION SHOULD TALK ABOUT LAND CONSERVATION

As stated, this survey was targeted to high-frequency and likely 2020 voters. Since voters are a sub-set of the “public” at large, this group would likely decide any referenda that might appear on the ballot in 2020. There is an assumption that, if these messages resonate with voters, they would also resonate with the public at large. This has been TCF’s experience from managing open space referenda campaigns, and running a major not-for-profit conservation organization operating in the Chicago suburban collar counties for nearly 50 years.

Based on that experience, the results of this survey and past surveys, the following is what TCF recommends as a way to talk to our neighbors and constituents about land conservation and local environmental issues. Of course, we all know our individual audiences best, so tweaking messages based on your audience is appropriate.

- **Focus on higher level, quality of life messages, rather than getting into the “weeds.”** If we want to connect with people, we have to talk to them where they are at, not where we are at or where we want them to be. Start a conversation with issues we know are important to them, then you can go from there. If we do not connect with people at their level first, then we have missed an opportunity.
- **Connect preserving open space and natural areas to clean water, clean air, etc.** Talk about these as the obvious benefits of preserving land. By preserving land and open space, we get better water and air quality, etc.
- **Focus as much as possible on clean water.** Any discussion about water resonates with people. Drinking water quality, general water quality in rivers and lakes, flooding and wetland protection are good messages. “Open space protects our watersheds and improves the water quality of rivers, lakes and streams” is a good message. Also, “preserving open space, especially along rivers and streams, helps alleviate flooding.”
- **Talk about our responsibility to future generations.** This is of particular interest to older people and more conservative voters. We want to leave the land, our planet, in a better condition for our children and grandchildren.
- **Know your audience.** Knowing who you are talking with matters. Messages about recreational benefits, endangered species (better with urban and suburban voters), nature education for kids, wildlife and natural areas protection are all very good conversations.
- **Here is how we talk about the importance of open space at The Conservation Foundation:**
  - Conserving open space lands plays a very important role in preserving our quality of life.
  - Open space lands along rivers and streams protect water quality and our drinking water.
  - Open space improves our air quality and preserves wildlife habitat.
  - Open space creates recreational opportunities where people can enjoy the outdoors.
  - We have a responsibility to future generations.

## SUMMARY OF SURVEY ANALYSIS

### Top Conservation Messages and Approved Uses of Funds

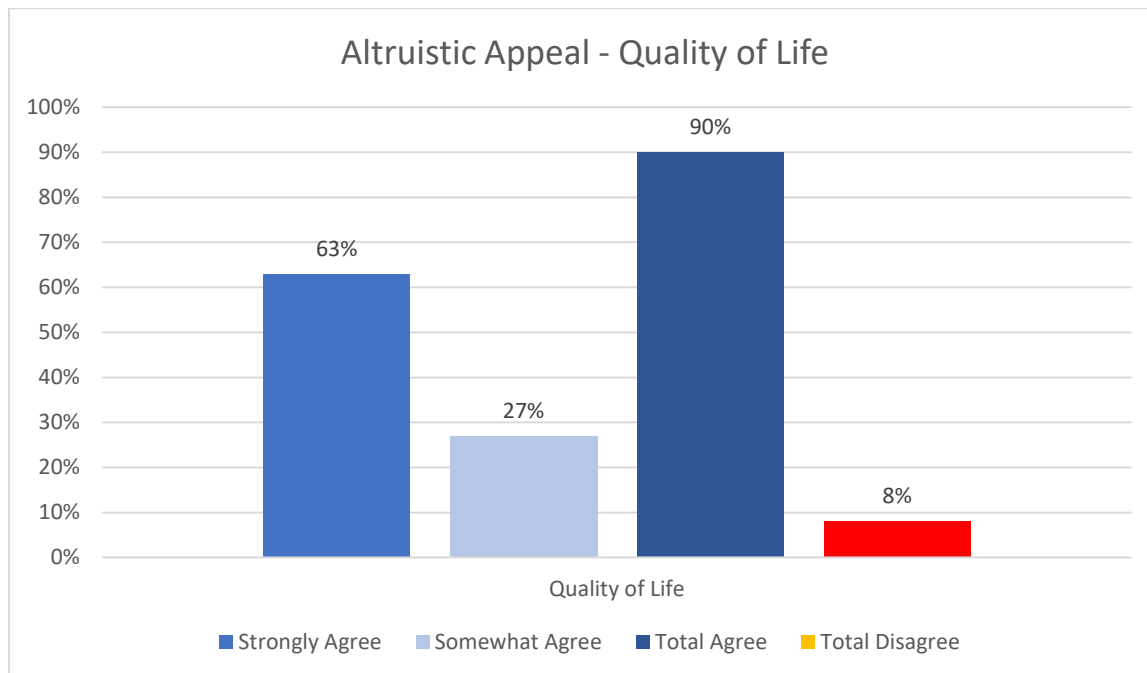
When it comes to Forest Preserve Districts/Conservation Districts (Districts), the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Forest preserves and conservation districts are more than just natural lands, walking trails, bike paths and picnic shelters. They are an integral part of the community and a part of the community's identity. Most voters feel that parks and recreation areas are good for the community as a whole, regardless of whether they use the amenities or not.

#### General Altruistic Appeals

This altruistic sentiment is probably best summed up in the statement, *"Preserving natural areas, wildlife habitat and water resources and providing recreational opportunities plays a very important role in preserving the quality of life in COUNTY NAME."* Overall, 90% agree with this statement and almost two-thirds (63%) *strongly* agree with it. Agreement is also consistently high throughout the region ranging from 88% in Kane County to 92% in Kendall and McHenry Counties.

Even among voters who are least likely to support a hypothetical referendum, agreement with this statement is very high. For instance, among those who Seldom or Never use the parks and recreation areas, 84% agree with this statement and a majority (52%) *strongly* agree. Similarly, among those who give tax and spending issues as the most issues important facing their area, 85% agree with this statement and a majority (55%) *strongly* agree.

Over the last two decades this question has been asked numerous times in DuPage, Kane, Kendall and Will Counties. Agreement with this statement has been consistently high in DuPage and Will County and has risen in Kane County from 78% in 1998 to 88% today. Similarly, agreement has risen in Kendall County from 81% in 2001 to 92% today.



The **Strongly** Agree response was above average among several groups including Millennials (74%) Millennial Women (81%), and Widows (73%). Of course, the Strongly Agree response was also very high among those who use the Parks and Recreation areas on a Daily, Weekly or Frequent basis (70% Strongly Agree)

Another statement that has been asked numerous times over the years involves the need to preserve open space for future generations. There have been several variations in the wording over the years, but the language in this survey was:

*“We owe it to our children and grandchildren to save COUNTY NAME open space, clean water and wildlife habitat so future generations can enjoy them the way we do.”*

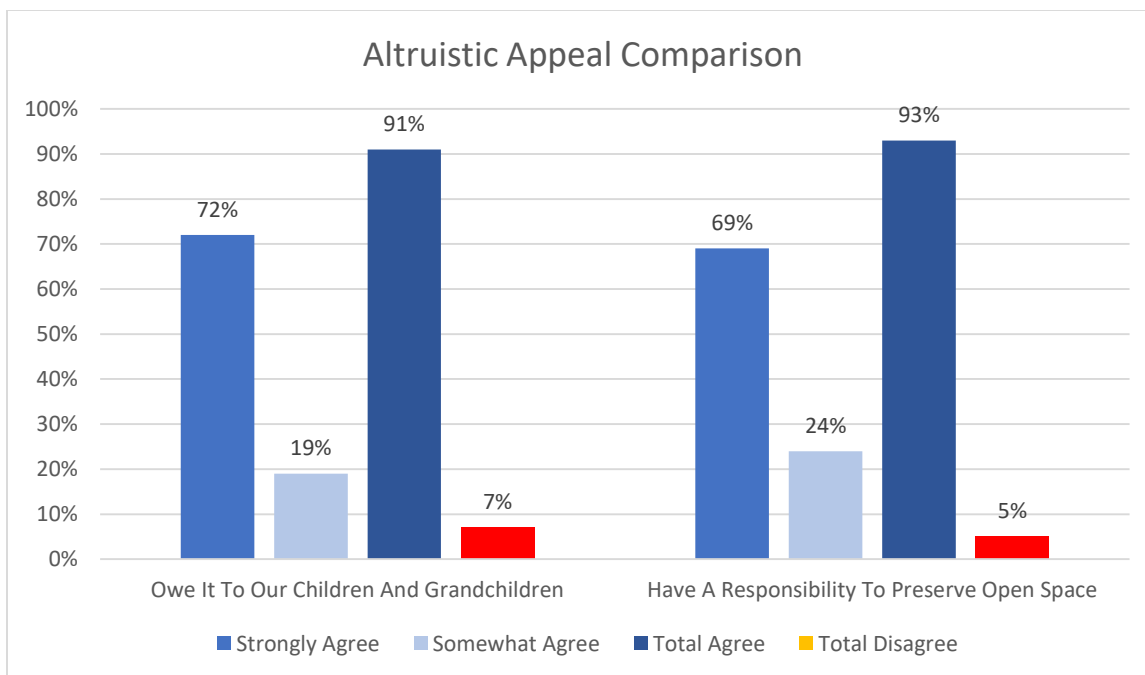
A variation on this was:

*“With land prices rising dramatically and the amount of natural lands dwindling we must act now to preserve our last remaining open space for our children and grandchildren before they are lost to development.”*

Whatever the precise language the result has been overwhelming agreement. Across the region, 91% agree and almost three in four *Strongly* Agree (72%). Among the individual counties, agreement is also very high ranging from 88% in Lake County to 94% in DuPage County.

Perhaps because of the reference to “children and grandchildren” the Strongly Agree response is higher among women (79%) than among men (65%). This is particularly true among Mothers (84% Strongly Agree), Millennial Women (91%) and Baby Boomer Women (85%).

In short, this a very strong altruistic appeal with a great deal of potential to rally support for the goals and objectives of the Districts.



From the foregoing graph it appears that there is very little difference between these two altruistic appeals. This is not only true for the region as a whole, but is also true for the individual counties in the survey.

The Strongly Agree response is at least 65% among virtually all demographic groups for both questions. Both of these questions receive above average Strongly Agree scores from Millennials (82% Strongly Agree for both questions). Similarly, Hispanic respondents are above average in Strongly Agreeing with these two arguments (84% and 81% Strongly Agree respectively).

Naturally, agreement with these two statements is very high among those who use the parks and recreation areas on a Daily, Weekly or Frequent basis, but it is almost as high among those who Seldom or Never use the parks. In fact, among those who Seldom or Never use the parks and recreation areas 89% agree with the first statement (63% Strong Agree) and 90% agree with the second statement (57% Strongly Agree).

In short, these three altruistic appeals are powerful tools to unite the voters for the common good of the entire community. And while these views are intrinsic in the community and voters don't need to be convinced that they are true, it doesn't hurt to remind them of these things from time to time.

### **Community Health Altruistic Appeals**

The survey also tested two other altruistic appeals for the health of the community in general and for children in particular.

The first asked respondents to agree or disagree with the statement, *"In today's digital age it is more important than ever to provide parks, playgrounds, youth sports and recreation programs and places where children can play and be physically active."*

Once again, agreement was very high and strong. Regionally, 89% agreed with this statement and 70% Strongly Agreed with it. At least 87% of the voters from every county agreed with this statement and strong agreement was consistently high ranging from 63% in Kane County to 75% in Will County.

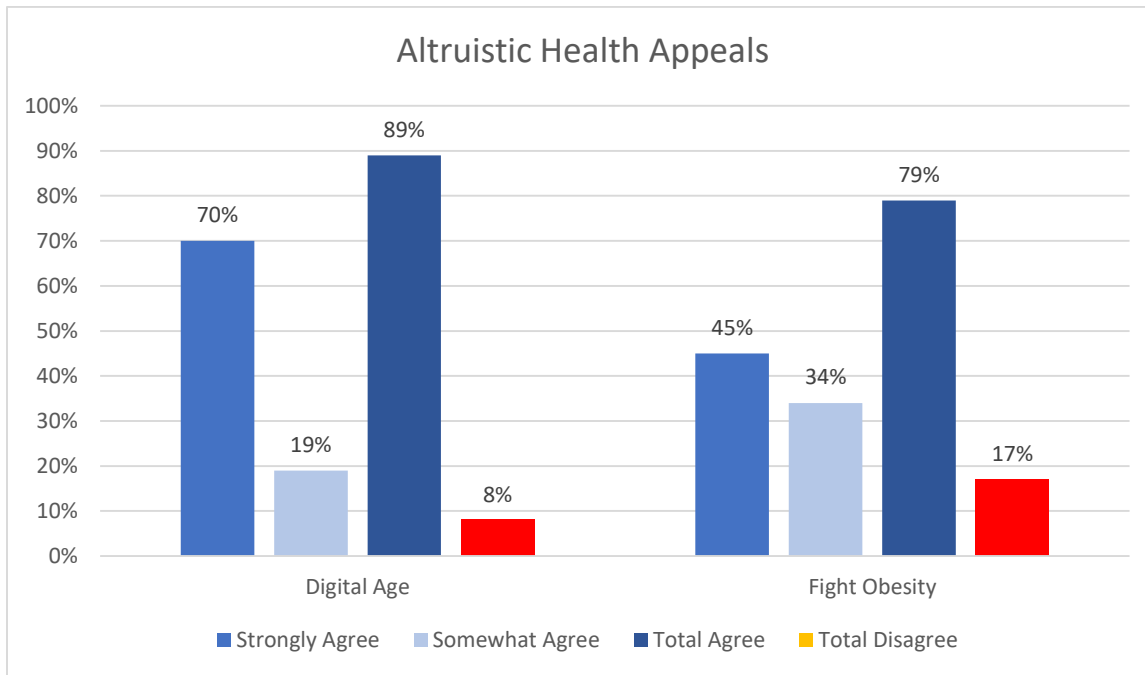
Strong agreement was also particularly high among Millennials (82% Strongly Agree), African Americans (90%), and Mothers (79%).

The second health related altruistic argument was *"Forest Preserves, parks and recreation areas play a vital role in fighting obesity and promoting the physical and mental health of our community."* While overall agreement was almost as high as overall agreement on the previous "digital age" statement, the Strongly Agree response was considerably lower.

Regionally, 79% agreed with this statement, but just 45% **Strongly** Agreed. Among the counties, agreement ranged from 75% in Will County to 86% in Lake County.

Strong Agreement was particularly high among Millennial Men (61% Strongly Agree), Democrats (54%), African Americans (64%) and Hispanics (69%). Curiously, only 50% of Mothers Strongly Agreed with this statement which was only 5% above average.





In short, the “digital age” argument is almost as persuasive as the previous three altruistic arguments discussed in this section. And while the “fight obesity” argument is a very good one, the intensity is not nearly as strong.

## USES FOR FUNDS

### Rankings

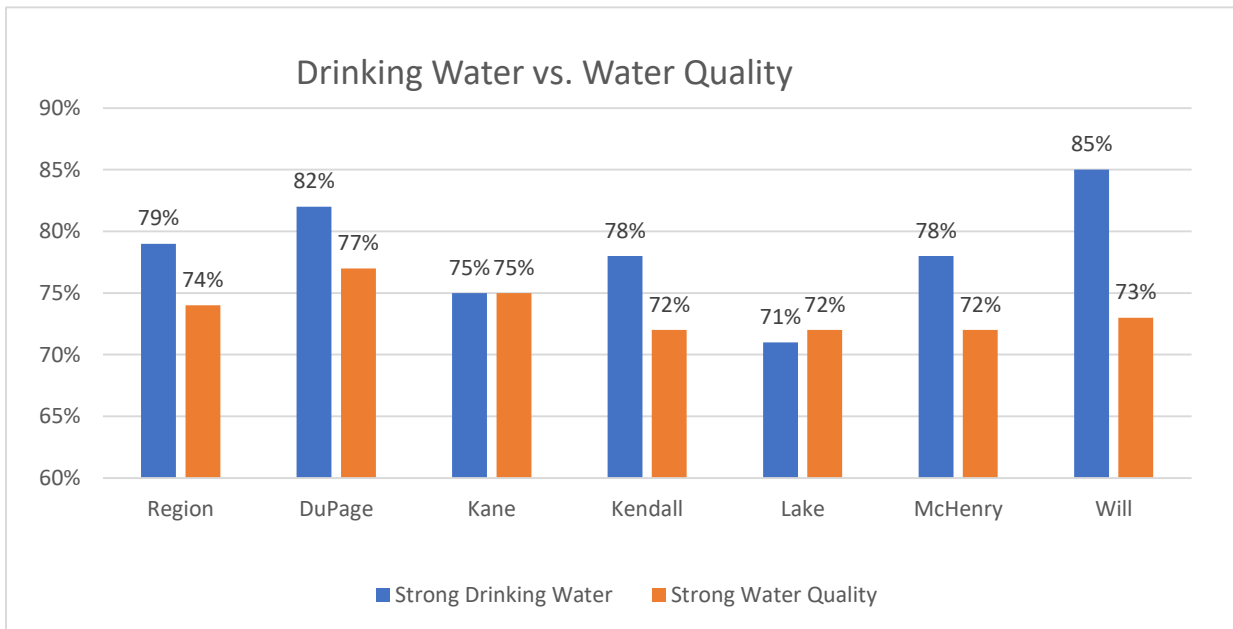
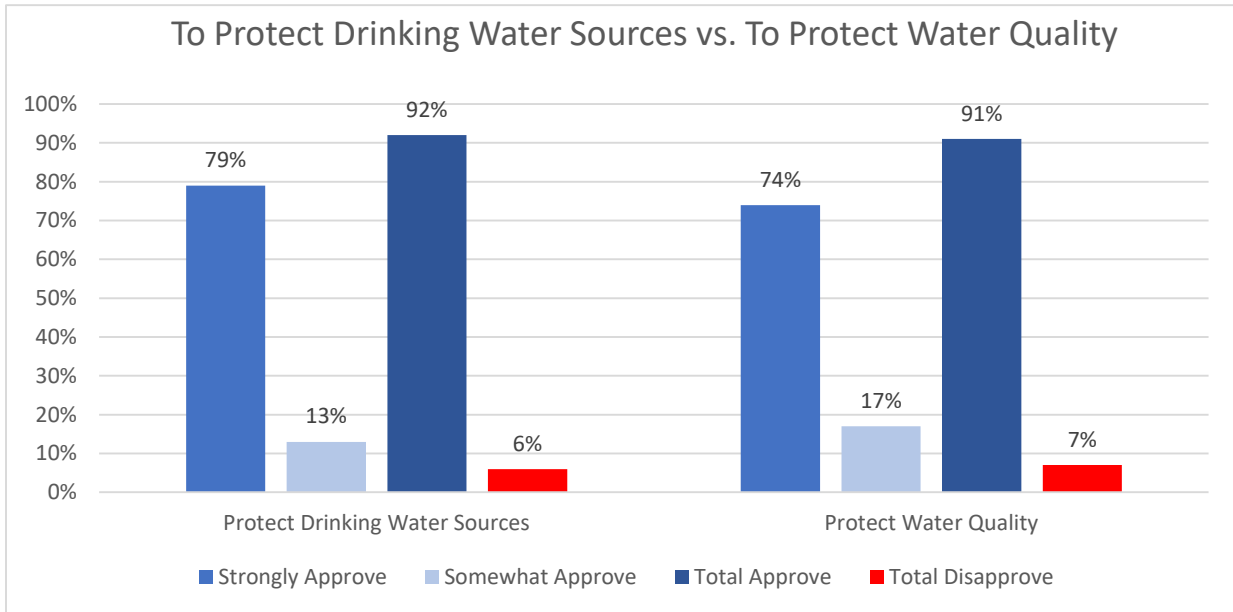
Uses for Funds typically receive a high approval rating, but that doesn't mean that voters find them important enough to justify a tax increase. For that reason, Uses for Funds are generally examined in terms of which ones received the highest **Strongly Approve** response. As a rule of thumb, the Uses for Funds with a Strongly Approve response of 60% or higher (especially among key demographic groups) are considered to be the Uses for Funds that are most likely to connect and motivate voters.

The survey tested several Uses for Funds and the **Strongly Approve** response among all voters are as follows:

<b>Uses for Funds Ranked By "Strongly Approve"</b>	<b>Total</b>
To Protect <b>Drinking Water Sources</b>	79%
To Protect <b>Water Quality</b>	74%
To Protect <b>Watersheds</b> to Improve Water Quality of Rivers, Lakes and Streams	70%
To Help Reduce <b>Flooding</b>	69%
To Improve <b>Air Quality</b> by Planting Trees	68%
To Create and Maintain Resilient and <b>Sustainable Ecosystems</b>	65%
To Provide <b>Nature Education for Children</b>	65%
To Purchase and Protect <b>Natural Lands</b>	63%
To Develop and Maintain <b>Recreational Trails</b> for Walking and Biking	63%
To Provide Outdoor <b>Recreational Opportunities</b> Such as Fishing, Hiking and Picnicking	60%
To Purchase and Protect <b>Wildlife Habitat</b>	60%
To Protect <b>Wetlands</b>	59%
To Protect <b>Endangered Plant and Animal Species</b>	59%
To Provide <b>Nature Education For Children And Families</b>	56%
To Mitigate the Effects of <b>Climate Change</b>	54%

Typically, the Uses for Funds that impact everyone, regardless of whether they visit the parks and recreation areas or not, are the Uses for Funds that receive the highest ratings. These include water quality, air quality and flooding. In addition, Nature Education for Children gets very high ratings.

Words and phrases are important. The survey half-sampled “To protect drinking water sources” versus “To protect water quality”. Both Uses for Funds receive very high approval ratings and *Strongly Approve* ratings in excess of 70%. The results are as follows:

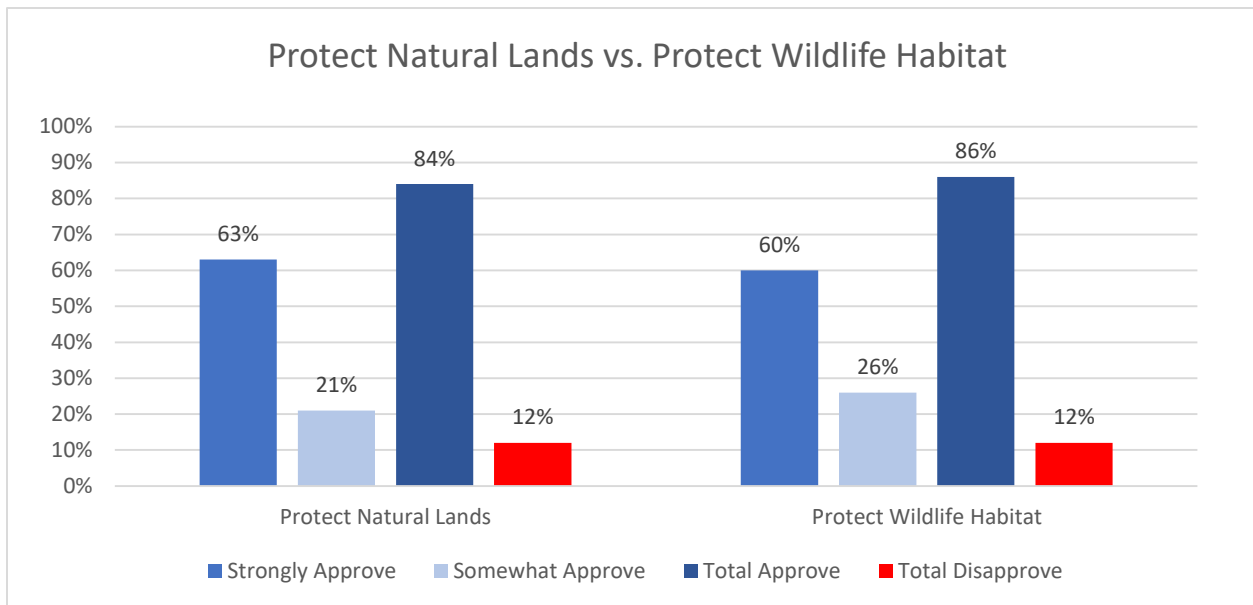


The Strongly Approve rating for Drinking Water is over 80% in DuPage and Will County. Drinking Water also has a small advantage over Water Quality in Kendall and McHenry County, but there is virtually no difference in the Strongly Approve Rating in Kane and Lake Counties.

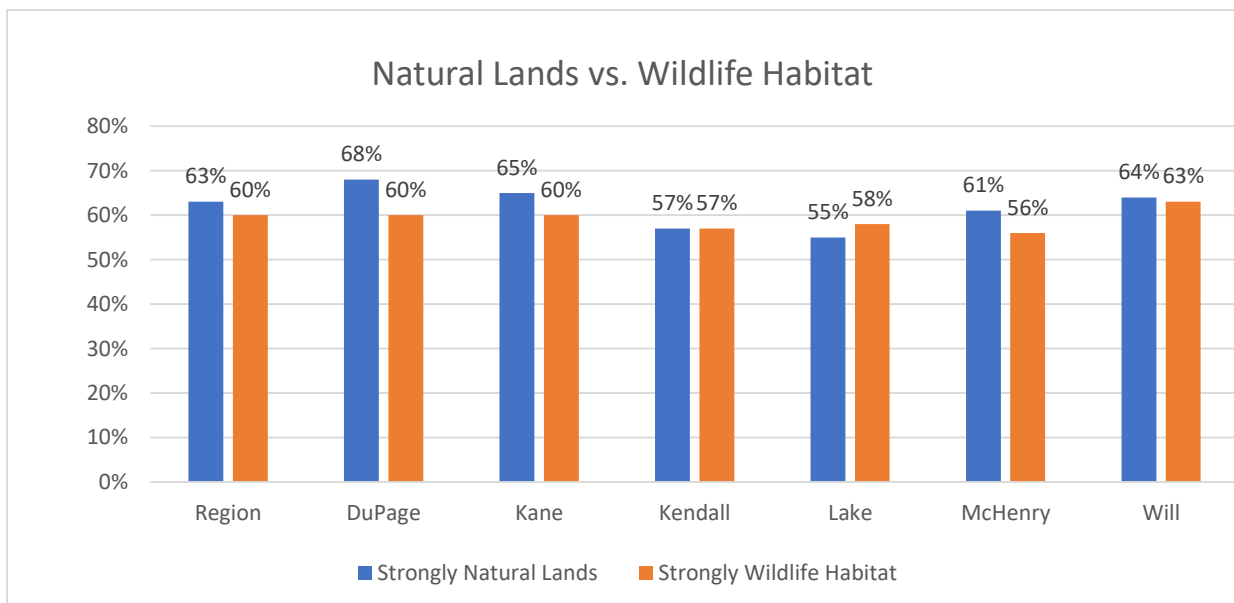
The Strongly Approve response for Drinking Water was at least 10% above average among Mothers, Female Millennials and Democrat Women and the Strongly Approve rating for Water Quality was significantly above average among African Americans.

All in all, both of these Uses for Funds are very positive and Drinking Water only has a slight advantage over Water Quality.

The second half-sample pitted “Purchasing and Protecting Natural Lands” versus “Purchasing and Protecting Wildlife Habitat”. Overall, Natural Lands had a slightly higher Strongly Approve while Wildlife Habitat had a slightly higher overall Approval rating.



Among the counties there are no significant differences in the Strongly Approve Ratings.

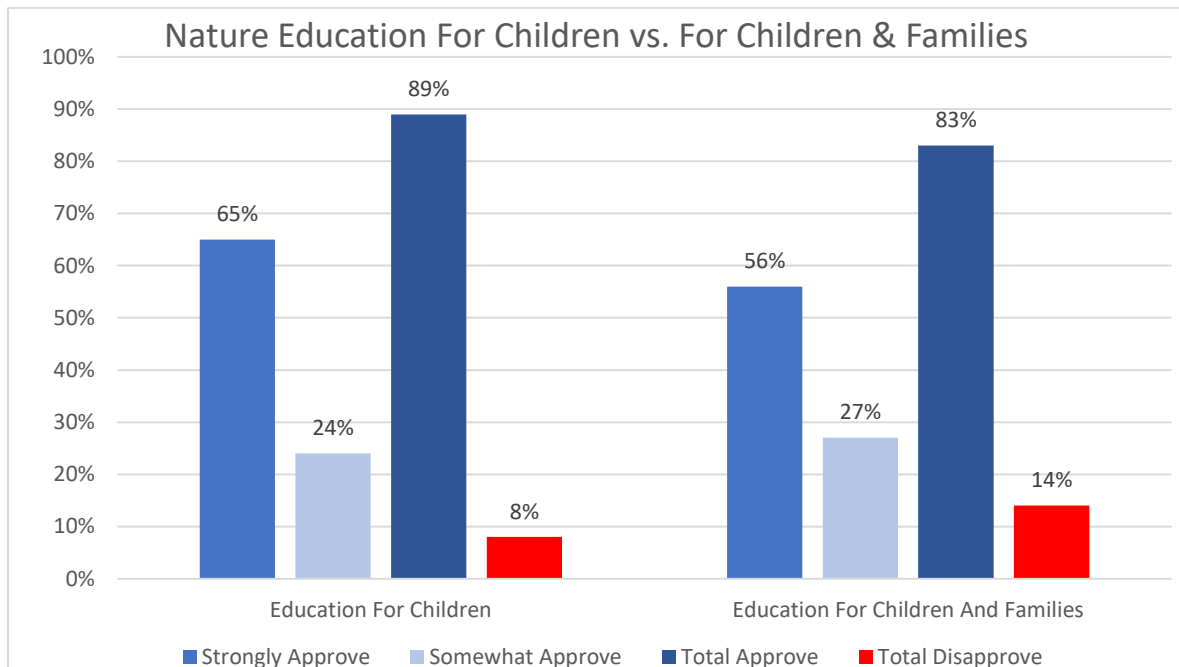


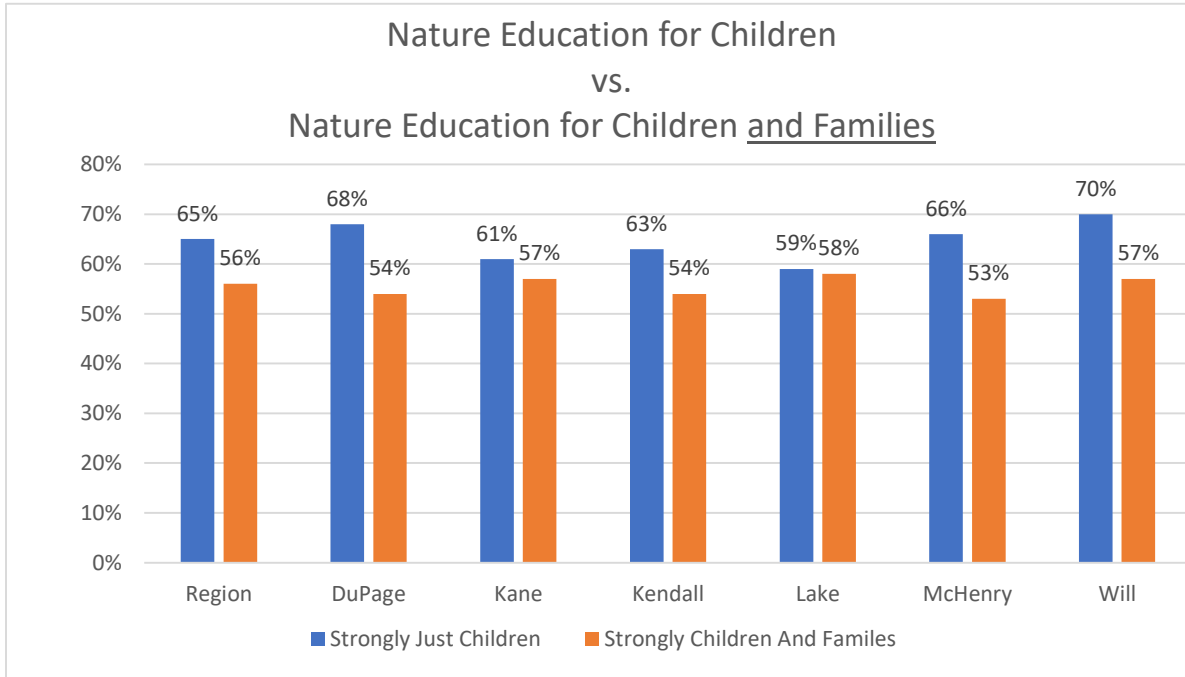
There are several groups among which the Strongly Approve response for Natural Lands was significantly higher than the Strongly Approve response for Wildlife Habitat. These included Gen-X (66% v. 56%), African Americans (72% v. 61%), Mothers (77% v. 59%), Women (71% v. 59%) Republican Women (69% v. 49%), Democrat Women (80% v. 67%), Democrats 18-54 (82% v. 65%), Female Millennials (86% v. 71%), Female Gen-X (75% v. 53%) and Female Baby Boomers (71% v. 61%).

Conversely, there are several groups among which the Strongly Approve for Wildlife Habitat is significantly higher than the Strongly Approve response for Natural Lands. These include Hispanics (80% v. 71%), Male Baby Boomers (68% v. 53%) and Independents (59% v. 48%).

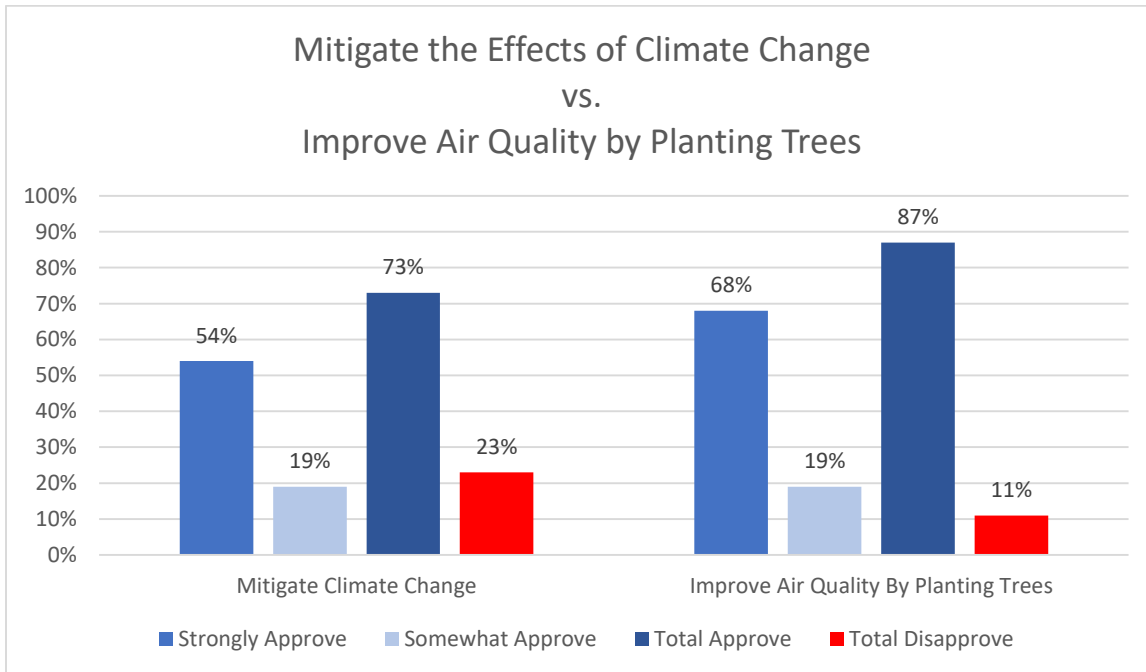
In short, the approval ratings for these two Use for Funds are virtually the same.

The third half-sample pitted “Provide nature education for children” versus “Provide nature education for children and families”. While both are very popular Uses for Funds, Nature Education for Children has a slight advantage over Nature Education for Children and Families. This is generally true everywhere, but is especially true in DuPage, McHenry and Will Counties.

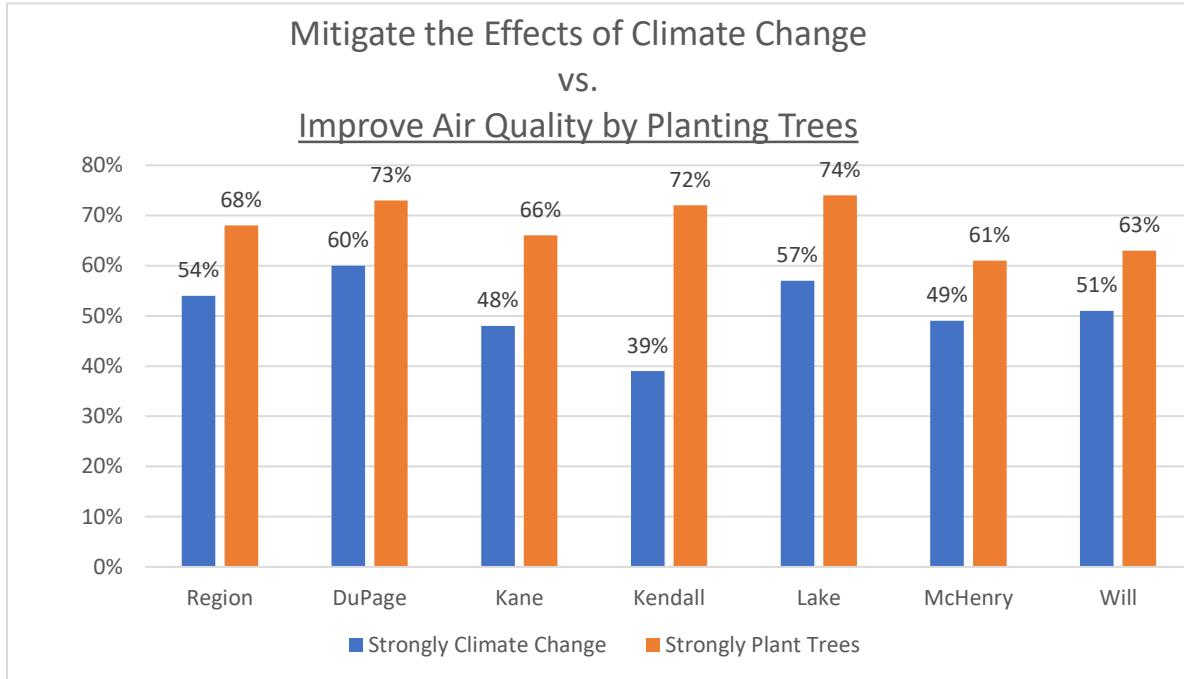




The final half-sample pitted “To mitigate the effects of climate change” versus “To improve air quality by planting trees.” Region-wide Planting Trees had a clear advantage over Mitigating Climate Change.



Planting Trees also has a clear advantage over Mitigating Climate Change in all six counties and in Kane, Kendall and McHenry Counties the Strongly Approve for Mitigating Climate Change drops below 50%. This appears to reflect the rural nature of these three counties as the Strongly Approve rating is just 45% among voters who live in Small Towns and Rural Areas.



There are also several other demographic groups among which the Strongly Approve rating for Mitigating Climate Change drops to 45% or less. These include Pre-Boomers (42%), African Americans (45%), Fathers (45%), Republicans (**29%**), Male Baby Boomers (42%) and Female Pre-Boomers (37%).

Among Independents, the Strongly Approve rating declines with age from 55% among those 18-55, to 47% among Independents 55-69 and to just 40% among Independents age 70 and over.

In short, Planting Trees to Improve Air Quality receives a higher approval rating than To Mitigate the Effects of Climate Change among all six counties and among several key demographic groups.

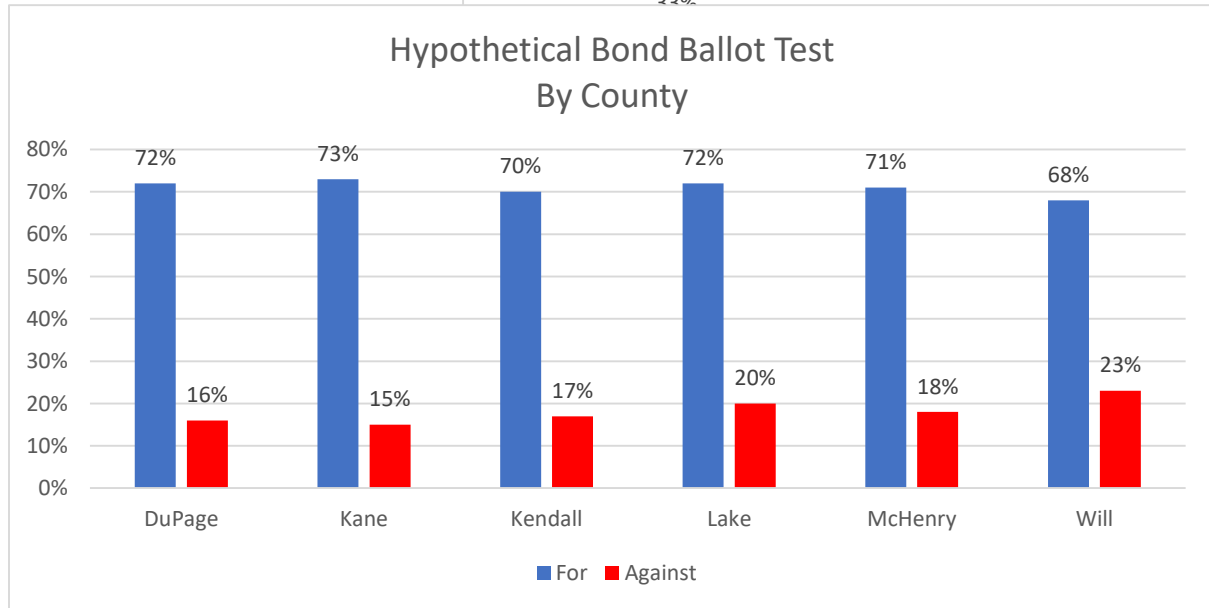
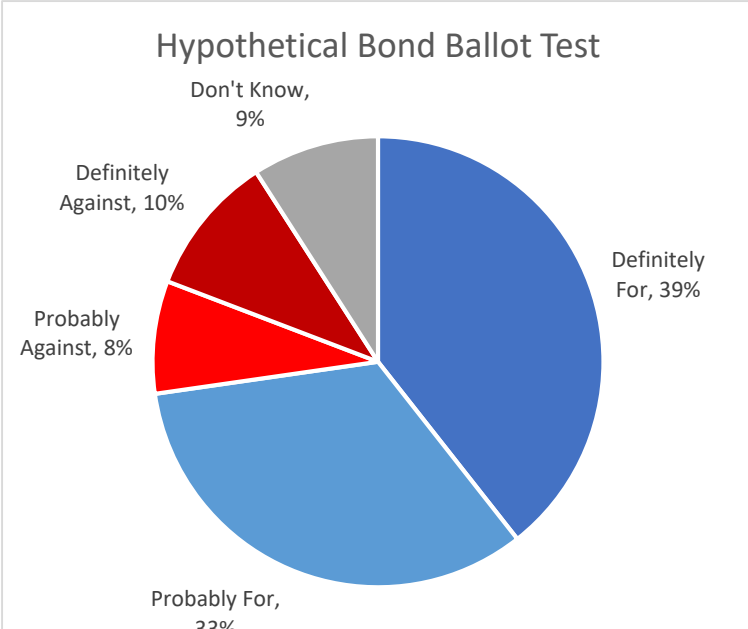
### HYPOTHETICAL BOND REFERENDUM SUPPORT

#### Hypothetical Bond Referendum

Support for a hypothetical bond referendum for the Districts is very high. Not only is overall support 71%, but support ranged between 68% and 73% in every county in the survey. The rule of thumb is that a bond referendum needs at least 55% support in order to be considered viable. From this perspective it appears every county in the survey could potentially pass a referendum in 2020 assuming that the bond amount was reasonable and backed by a solid educational campaign.

It is also significant that those who would *Definitely Vote For* the bond outnumber those who would *Definitely Vote Against* it by almost a 4:1 margin (39% Definite For / 10% Definite Against).

Support for a hypothetical bond referendum is not only high, it is also very broad. While there are some groups among which support is remarkably high, what is even more remarkable is the fact that support is so broad. In fact, even among Republicans support is solid.





### COST CONSIDERATIONS

While it is clear that voters are concerned about rising property taxes in general, there is reason to believe that most voters aren't terribly concerned about the cost of preserving open space and natural lands.

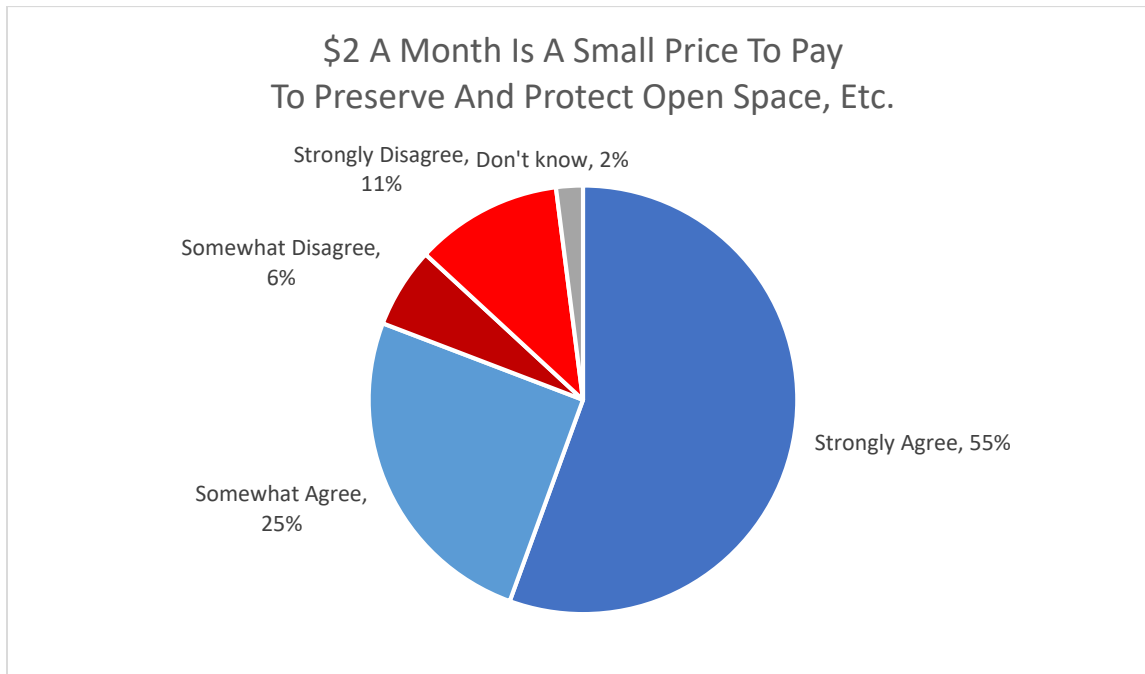
It is worth noting that among those who give Property Taxes and Government Spending as the most important local issues, support dropped just 3% when informed of the cost and among Republicans support actually rose by 2%.

Other than the obvious fact that voters support open space preservation what does this all mean? Among other things it must mean that, in the mostly affluent suburbs of Illinois where property taxes are already high, a \$24 increase is not a significant increase.

#### Cost Per Month

Not only do voters appear willing to pay an extra \$24 per year for the hypothetical bond referendum, they also overwhelmingly agree that, *"An additional \$2 a month is a small price to pay to preserve and protect open space, natural areas and parkland."*

Not only do 80% agree with this statement, but a majority (55%) *Strongly Agree* with it.



Across the region agreement is consistently high ranging from 82% in DuPage and Will Counties to 75% in Kendall County. Similarly, the *Strongly Agree* sentiment is over 50% in all six counties.

Agreement with this statement is also high throughout the demographic groups. The extent to which this is true is underscored by the fact that even among those who give Property Taxes and Government Spending as the most important local problems, 73% agree with this statement and 46% **Strongly Agree** with it.

In short, while voters express increasing concern over rising property taxes in general, the cost of this hypothetical referendum (\$24/year), whether expressed as an annual cost or a monthly cost, is not enough to significantly impact voter support.

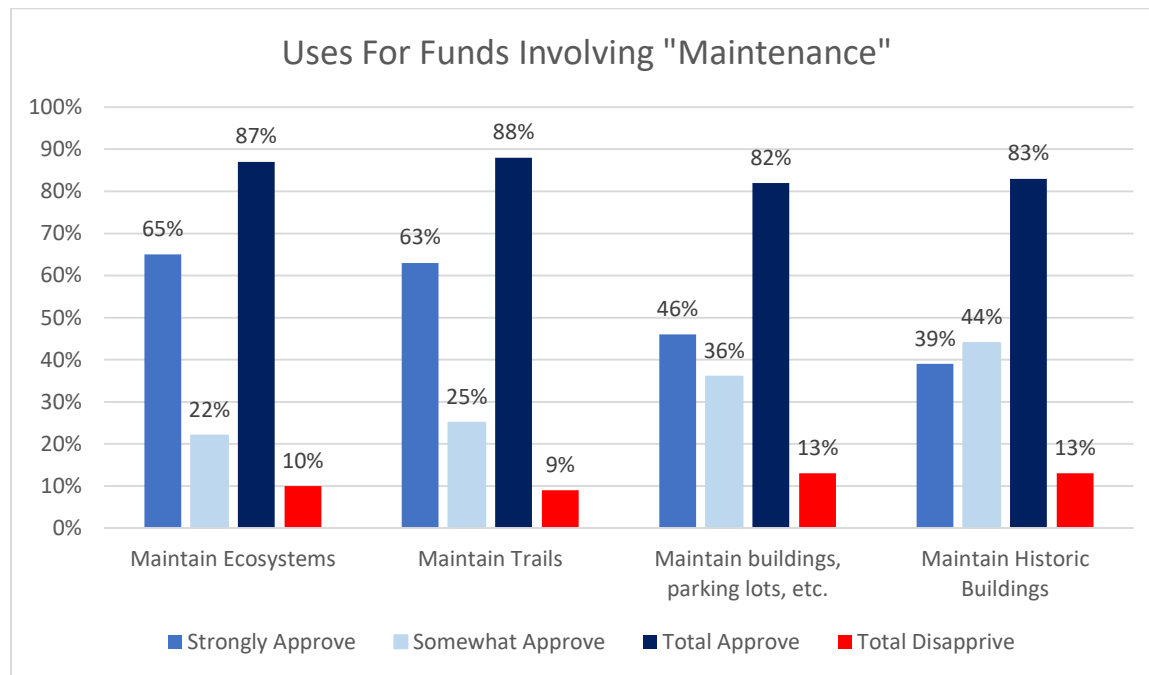
### Support for Funding for Maintenance and Improvements

While it is clear that voters support the Districts' efforts to preserve open space and natural lands, several questions in the poll suggest that voters would also support increased funding for District maintenance.

There were four Uses for Funds that concerned "maintenance" that may shed some light on voter attitudes toward paying for maintenance and improvements. They were as follows:

- To create and *maintain* resilient and sustainable ecosystems.
- To develop and *maintain* recreational trails for walking and biking.
- To *maintain* or improve Forest Preserve buildings, parking lots and facilities.
- To *maintain* or restore historic buildings and structures.

The results were as follows:



Note that while the general approval number is over 80% for all of these Uses for Funds, the **Strongly Approve** percent drops sharply when it comes to what might be called capital improvements. (That is, maintenance that does not directly involve improving open space and natural areas.)

In short, most voters appear to understand the need for the Districts to have more funding to maintain the lands and the programs that they currently have as the amount of land they have increases. At the same time, there is clearly more support for spending that improves existing lands and programs versus spending on buildings, structures, etc.

## POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

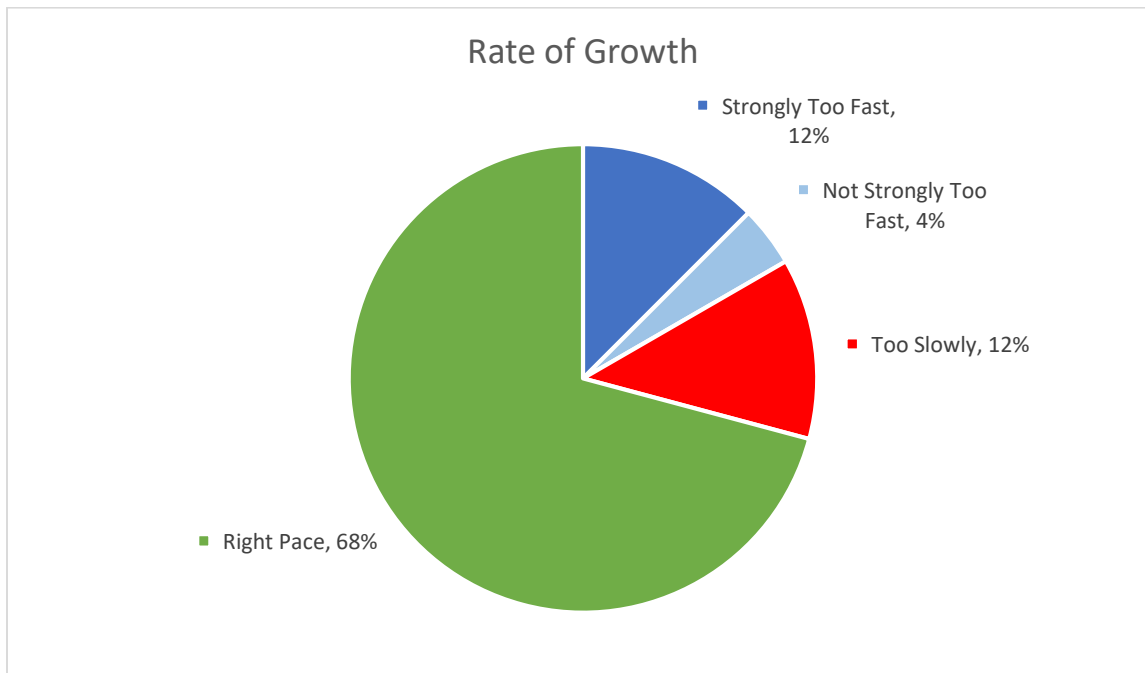
### Most Important Local Problem

When asked for the most important issue facing their local community at the present time, Holding Down Property Taxes and Controlling Government Spending topped the list.

These Tax & Spending Voters generally agree with the goals and objectives of the Districts and their support only dropped by 3% when they were informed that the annual cost of the hypothetical bond referendum was \$24.

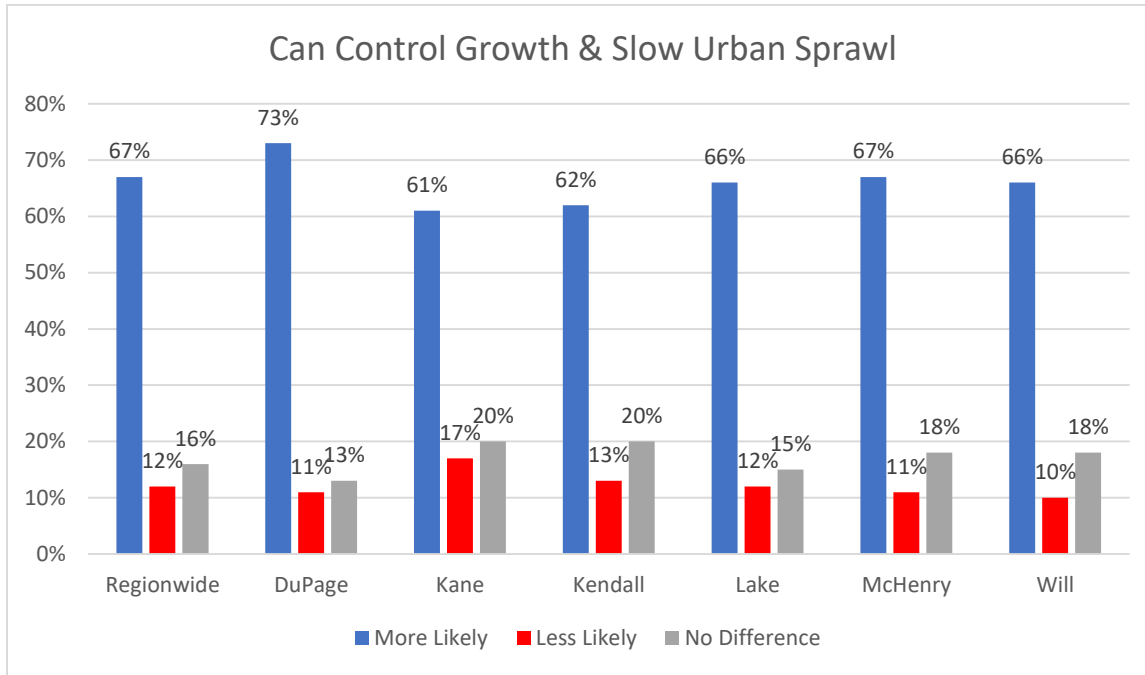
### Rate of Growth

Perceptions concerning the rate of growth and development have decreased over the past 20 years. In the current survey, most voters (68%) feel that their county is growing and developing at about the right pace. Just 16% feel that their county is growing too fast and an almost equal number of voters feel that their county is growing and developing too slowly.



It is somewhat curious that there is virtually **no correlation** between perceptions of the rate of growth and hypothetical bond referendum support. This is important because it means that declines in the percent of voters who feel that their county is growing too fast does not adversely effect support for preserving land.

It is also somewhat curious that, even though 80% feel their county is growing too slowly or at the right pace, information that "preserving open space and parkland can play an important role in controlling over-development and slowing urban sprawl." made about two thirds more likely to support the hypothetical bond referenda.



So even though concern for the rate of growth has diminish significantly over the past ten or twenty years, the information concerning the role open space preservation can play in controlling growth and development is still a very important piece of information for voters.

## FOREST PRESERVE DISTRICT RATINGS

### District Favorability Ratings

The Districts' favorability ratings are very high across the region ranging from 64% to 80%. The regional Unfavorable Rating is just 7% and is under 10% in every county.

Region-wide the Districts' favorability rating is 77% among those who use the parks Daily, Weekly or Frequently, but even among those who Seldom or Never use the parks the favorability rating is 66% (with 10% unfavorable and 23% Don't know).

Naturally there is a correlation between District ratings and hypothetical bond referendum ballot test support, but the correlation is not nearly what one might expect. In fact, even among those who have an unfavorable perception of their District, a majority (52%) would vote for a hypothetical bond referendum. It appears then that voters separate their views of the "organization" from their views of the opportunities and values the Districts provide.

### District Confidence Ratings

Almost three in every four voters (74%) have a Great Deal (21%) or a Fair Amount (53%) of confidence that the Districts will spend bond funds wise. Only 22% have Not Much (15%) or No (6%) confidence.

Confidence in the Districts to spend funds wisely is consistently high among all the counties ranging from 78% to 67%.

Confidence has been steady or rising among all the counties over the past ten or twenty years. Improvements have been most significant in DuPage and Kane Counties. In DuPage County confidence has risen from 66% in 1997 to 77% today. In Kane County confidence has risen from 64% in 2010 to 78%.

It is not surprising to see that confidence is very high among those who use the forest preserves and parks on a Daily, Weekly or Frequent basis (82% Great Deal / Fair Amount) because they are in the best position to actually see how the funds are spent. But even among those who Seldom or Never use the parks, 63% expressed a Great Deal or Fair Amount of confidence, while only 32% felt otherwise.

Confidence in the District to spend bond funds wisely is consistently high throughout the other demographic groups. Even among those who give tax and spending issues as the most important problem facing the area, 65% have a Great Deal or Fair Amount of confidence in the District to spend the funds wisely, while only 31% have little or no confidence.