



# HIGHLANDS RANCH

## COMMUNITY ASSOCIATION

### COMMUNITY SURVEY

## Executive Summary

November 2012

Prepared by:



## Executive Summary

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The Highlands Ranch Community Association (HRCA) is a non-profit organization comprised of nearly 30,000 homeowners in the Highlands Ranch area. It maintains four recreation centers, in addition to an 8,200 acre conservation area known as the Backcountry Wilderness Area. In 2010 and 2011, the Backcountry Planning Areas Committee created the Community Involvement Process (CIP) to ensure that homeowners' voices are heard in the process of planning new development projects in the Backcountry.

To facilitate this goal, the HRCA contracted with National Research Center, Inc. (NRC) to design and administer the 2012 Community Survey using scientifically sound survey methods. Dovetailing with the community survey that the HRCA conducted in 2008, the 2012 Community Survey provided homeowners the opportunity to rate the quality of services and amenities currently provided by the HRCA. The survey also permitted homeowners to provide feedback to the HRCA regarding their priorities and preferences for the development of the Backcountry. The results of this investigation may help guide the HRCA and the Backcountry Planning Areas Committee in their decisions regarding future changes in the community.

## Survey Methods

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The mail survey was administered using scientifically sound, rigorous methods to ensure unbiased, statistically valid, representative results for the HRCA. The best survey research practices were used for the resources spent to reduce possible sources of error (e.g., sampling error and non-response error). These practices included selecting households at random to participate, contacting potential respondents multiple times and weighting the data to reflect the demographics of HRCA homeowners.

A randomly selected sample of 3,000 Highlands Ranch homeowners was mailed the 2012 Highlands Ranch Community Association Community Survey. The survey included a URL for respondents to complete the survey online if preferred. Of the 3,000 surveys mailed, 38 were returned because the housing unit was vacant or the postal service was unable to deliver the survey as addressed. Of the 2,962 households that received a survey, 1,222 completed the survey via mail and 85 completed the survey via the Internet for a total for 1,307 completed surveys, providing a response rate of 44%. Responses were tracked by area of Highlands Ranch so that the responses from the homes closest to the Backcountry (Delegate Districts 111 and 114) could be compared to the homes in the rest of the community to determine whether proximity to the Backcountry made a difference in opinions. Districts 50, 70 and 79 were excluded from the sample since they do not pay for recreation amenities (and therefore cannot use the Backcountry).

Survey results were weighted so that respondent characteristics were represented in the proportions reflective of HRCA homeowners according to the 2010 Census.

It is customary to describe the precision of estimates made from surveys by a "level of confidence" and accompanying "confidence interval" (or margin of error). A traditional level of confidence, and the one used here, is 95%. The confidence interval is no greater than or plus or minus three percentage points around any given percent for the entire sample (1,307 completed surveys) and larger for comparisons for subgroups, including plus or minus eight percentage points for comparisons by Backcountry proximity.

# Survey Findings

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## Quality of Community

Overall, homeowners rated most aspects of the Highlands Ranch community quite favorably:

- Over 9 in 10 rated the quality of neighborhood/community parks and recreational areas and the quality of public services (e.g., library, police, fire, water and trash) as “excellent” or “good.”
- About 8 in 10 rated the overall mix of commercial, residential and recreational areas and the appropriate mix of housing choices as “excellent” or “good.”
- In contrast, half or more of homeowners felt that the quality of restaurants, the mix of restaurant choices or opportunities to work in the community were “fair” or “poor.”

Similarly, most homeowners felt positively about the performance of the HRCA:

- About 9 in 10 homeowners felt the HRCA did an “excellent” or “good” job of managing the four recreation centers and the Backcountry Wilderness Area.
- Over 8 in 10 felt the HRCA did an “excellent” or “good” job of planning and operating community events.
- However, about one-third felt the HRCA did a “fair” or “poor” job of making assessments for the HRCA services fair and reasonable, providing services that enhance property values or enforcing architectural covenants.
- Homeowners who supported development in the Backcountry, supported changes to existing recreational amenities or were familiar with HRCA Planning Areas rated the performance of the HRCA more favorably than their counterparts.

## Recreation Centers

Many homeowners reported frequent participation in many of the HRCA’s recreational activities and programs:

- About one-third of homeowners reported visiting a recreation center at least once per month.
- Homeowners familiar with the HRCA Planning Areas and supportive of development in the Backcountry reported using the recreation centers more often than their counterparts.
- Community and special events such as the Rodeo, July 4th celebration and Home Town Holiday were also popular among homeowners.
- Child-related programs were used less often; just 4% to 5% of homeowners reported using child care, preschool or nursery programs in the last year.

Across all of these activities and programs, the majority of respondents gave favorable ratings of quality:

- About 9 in 10 homeowners gave a rating of “excellent” or “good” to the Southridge, Westridge and Eastridge recreation centers. About 7 in 10 gave such a rating to the Northridge recreation center.
- Nine in 10 homeowners rated the quality of the Backcountry Wilderness Area programs as “excellent” or “good.”
- In general, those programs that were less often utilized by residents, such as child-related programs, tended to receive lower quality ratings.

Although homeowners were relatively unanimous in appreciating the quality of existing recreation facilities, they differed in their views of potential improvements to these facilities:

- About 8 in 10 respondents agreed that the HRCA should maintain state of the art recreation centers that are the equal of private facilities in the area.
- Two-thirds felt that the Eastridge weight and cardio areas should be remodeled and expanded.
- Most homeowners opposed building a new outdoor pool/aquatics center, a new arts/cultural center or a new recreation center in Highlands Ranch.
- Homeowners who supported Backcountry development and changes to existing recreational amenities were more supportive of enhancements to HRCA's recreation centers, whereas homeowners who opposed such development felt the HRCA should focus on operating recreation facilities at the lowest possible cost.

When it came to funding enhancements to the existing facilities, most homeowners favored a conservative approach:

- About 6 in 10 endorsed a 10-year increase of 1-2% (\$4-9/year).
- Slightly over half of homeowners did not support any of the proposed projects and felt that there should be no assessment increase.
- All other proposed assessment increase plans received marked opposition.

## The Backcountry Wilderness Area

Homeowners varied in their initial level of familiarity with the Backcountry Planning Areas:

- Most homeowners were “very” or “somewhat” familiar with the trail systems in both the Backcountry and Douglas County East/West.
- About two in five homeowners were at least somewhat familiar with the HRCA Planning Areas.
- However, just one in five homeowners was familiar with the Community Involvement Process (CIP) for Backcountry planning areas.

Likewise, homeowners varied in their level of familiarity with the many activities offered in the Backcountry Wilderness Area:

- About half of homeowners were “very” or “somewhat” familiar with the nature hikes, horseback trail rides and hay rides offered in the Backcountry.
- One-quarter were familiar with the archery range, archery lessons, elk hunting and elk bugling/photo hunts.
- In contrast, only one in five homeowners was familiar with the firearms classes offered in the Backcountry.

Currently, the use of HRCA Backcountry trails is restricted to members of the HRCA recreation centers and their guests. Homeowners voiced their opinions regarding potential changes to this policy:

- Three-quarters of homeowners felt that the trails should remain private, accessed only by members and their guests.
- Just over half felt that the trails should be open to any non-member who pays a fee.
- The majority of homeowners were strongly opposed to opening the trails to the general public for no fee.

## Development in the Backcountry

Beyond the many recreational opportunities already available to residents, the HRCA is considering expanding recreational opportunities in the Backcountry. Homeowners appeared to favor certain projects over others:

- About 9 in 10 homeowners supported trails for hiking, biking, running and horseback riding.
- Three-quarters supported fishing ponds, while about two-thirds supported a ropes/challenge course or concerts, weddings and special events in the Backcountry.
- Homeowners largely opposed projects such as a golf course, an off road bike park or skate park.
- Notably, over one-third of homeowners preferred that the Backcountry be left as is, with no additional recreational amenities of any kind.

In addition to these recreational projects, a variety of non-recreation development opportunities are possible in the Backcountry Planning Areas. However, HRCA homeowner greeted these projects more cautiously:

- Just over half of homeowners supported no development of any kind, preferring that the Planning Areas be left as they are.
- Homeowners were most amenable to the prospect of a nature center, with three-quarters expressing support.
- About 6 in 10 at least “somewhat” supported an outdoor amphitheater or a tree farm.
- Most homeowners were strongly opposed to the cemetery/memorial gardens.

Any one of these development projects must adhere to HRCA zoning requirements before it is put into action. Current zoning allows for some types of uses in the HRCA Planning Areas but not others. Once again, homeowners approached new zoning options with caution:

- Just over half of homeowners at least “somewhat” supported leaving the Planning Areas as they are, with no other uses of any kind.
- Among the possible uses noted on the survey, a fire/police station was most popular, with 56% of homeowners indicating that they at least “somewhat” support this project.
- About half supported animal rescue/rehabilitation facilities, soccer fields, a library and baseball/softball fields.
- In contrast, about 7 in 10 homeowners “somewhat” or “strongly” opposed houses of worship, a college/university and private sports training facilities.

The pursuit of new development projects in the Backcountry will require additional funding from homeowner assessments. When presented with a number of funding options, homeowners appeared to prefer a conservative approach:

- Just over half preferred that there be no increase at all, indicating opposition to new development in the Planning Areas.
- Among the five possible assessment increase plans, about 6 in 10 homeowners supported a 10-year recreational assessment increase of 1-2% (\$4-\$9/year).
- All other proposed assessment plans received substantial opposition, particularly the short-term special assessments.

Whether or not the HRCA chooses to pursue new development projects, existing operations in the Backcountry must be kept afloat. Currently, Backcountry operations are supported by homeowner assessments; however, a few homeowners were open to considering new sources of funding:

- About 7 in 10 “somewhat” or “strongly” supported developing user fees and revenues from new recreation programs.
- However, most homeowners “somewhat” or “strongly” opposed selling or leasing Backcountry property to private entities for either public or private uses.
- Many prefer the system that is already in place, with 8 in 10 homeowners supporting the continued use of homeowner assessments.

## Conclusion

The results of this survey provide key insights into homeowners’ opinions of and priorities for the HRCA. While most lauded the high quality of current recreational programs and facilities, many homeowners also endorsed plans for improvements and new development. As the HRCA prepares to move forward with such projects, resident opinion should be used in combination with additional data sources, so that the voice of the public can be balanced against the realities of budgeting, population demographics, politics and community resources. Survey results may answer certain questions, but they also raise new ones, motivating additional investigation as a community charts its course of action.