SEPTEMBER 2018

MICA Community Visioning Dialogue

FINDINGS REPORT

Access online: www.mercerislandarts.org/report

phinneybischoff

Thank you!

Dear Mercer Island community:

For the last four months, we have listened and listened more. We wanted to hear what the citizens of Mercer Island envision for the future of arts and culture. We had many goals, including an assessment of demand (or not) for a new arts center, what uses it might serve, and whether there existed any unmet needs. We genuinely went into this process with hopes, but no predetermined outcome. We tried exceptionally hard to reach a cross-section of islanders, knowing that the people who feel passionately for or against the arts would be likeliest to respond. And we believe most Islanders who wanted to express their opinion had a real opportunity to do so. Had the community told us “no thanks,” we would have closed down, but the community's feedback was not ambivalent at all!

We heard from over **200 Islanders in person and nearly 1,000 online**. We also have **over 500 people** (and growing!), who have signed MICA's statement of support. The report that follows from our community listening partner, Phinney Bischoff, is written to you, the Mercer Island community, and tells the full story of what you told us over those 4 months. As always, we invite questions and are glad to meet with anyone. Thank you, Mercer Island, for coming out so strongly and telling us your hopes, passions, concerns, and dreams for the arts!

With deep appreciation,

MICA Board & Staff: Prady Misra, Genevieve Morton, Virl Hill, Elliot Newman, Xixi Shakes, John G Hill, Michelle Peyree, James Rudolf, Bruce Lorig, Sharon Perez and Paul Shoemaker

P.S. — You may read an electronic copy of this report by visiting: www.mercerislandarts.org/report

Creating a Shared Vision

MICA asked us to listen. For the past four months, that's what we've done.

Through small group conversations, in large and dynamic visioning sessions, and an island-wide survey designed to get input from a broad range of neighbors—the Phinney Bischoff team has heard your ideas, concerns, and aspirations.

We began by trying to understand what residents of Mercer Island want—and don't want—for the future of arts and culture on Mercer Island. What ensued was unexpected—a much deeper conversation of clarity, depth, and resonance. A conversation that revealed what you think about the broader significance of art and culture on the island. One that spoke to how you value community, connection, and pride of place. And one that provokes questions about Mercer Island's identity and its future.

This project belongs to you, the Mercer Island community. Everything Phinney Bischoff heard is now being shared with you to help shape a vision for the future of arts and culture in your community.

Sincerely,

The Phinney Bischoff team

About Phinney Bischoff

Phinney Bischoff is a full-service brand strategy, creative and digital agency that has developed some of the most recognized and successful brands in the Pacific Northwest, including BECU, Woodland Park Zoo, Seattle Symphony, 5th Avenue Theatre, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Guided by a “people first” approach, the firm has been developing meaningful, engaging, and strategic solutions for over 35 years.

Leslie Phinney, *CEO and Creative Director*

Leslie oversees strategic branding and award-winning creative for a diverse group of regional, national and international clients. Her 36 years of experience, vision and leadership have turned Phinney Bischoff into one of the top brand strategy and design firms in the Northwest and one of *Puget Sound Business Journal’s* Fastest Growing Private Companies.

Ann Janikowski, *Brand Strategist*

Blending brand and business strategy, Ann leads the research practice, where she translates audience insights into compelling brand stories. She has partnered with many arts and culture organizations like Bloedel Reserve, Seattle Repertory Theatre, Seattle Shakespeare Company and Kirkland Arts Center.

Kevin Patnik, *Senior Brand/Content Strategist*

With more than a decade’s experience as a brand strategist and creative director, Kevin leads the firm’s verbal identity practice, where he helps create resonance through story, language, and voice. His experience in arts and culture includes work with Bumbershoot, Seattle Art Museum, Town Hall Seattle, KEXP, and others.

A Brief History of MICA

MICA set out to create a place for the arts on Mercer Island.

The vision was bold—driven by the idea that an arts center can contribute to a more culturally connected and vital community, forge meaningful collaboration, embrace and celebrate art in all its forms, and contribute to a vibrant town center. There were setbacks. Chief among them was not providing enough of a forum to hear from your community. This created a perception that MICA wasn't hearing—let alone addressing—needs of the community.

On January 1 of this year, MICA hit reset. Installing new leadership, strengthening relationships with the City, and the search for a new site became immediate priorities. But perhaps nothing was more critical than inviting robust and ongoing community input and engagement. MICA has executed on these priorities, highlighted by a summer of listening and feedback from Mercer Island residents.

Engaging the Island Community

ENGAGING THE ISLAND COMMUNITY

Who We Talked To

METHODOLOGY

Input Sessions

8 sessions, with 8-10 participants each

These small, in-depth conversations were designed to give us segment-specific perspectives about the role and purpose of arts and culture. We explored a range of topics, including the needs in the community that such a center can fill and the demand for specific types of arts programming.

We also identified opportunities and challenges associated with this project, as well as various factors that are impacting, or might impact, community support.

We spoke with:

- Artists
- Business owners
- City staff
- Donors
- Educators
- Parents
- Seniors
- Students

METHODOLOGY

Community Visioning Sessions

2 sessions, with 150+ combined attendees

This community-wide dialogue was conducted as a series of small-group discussions on June 11 and July 28 at PEAK and MICEC (respectively), so that everyone's unique points of view could be heard and understood.

This engaging format gave residents a chance to share ideas about their experience with arts and culture on Mercer Island. We also delved into what excites residents and what concerns them about a potential arts and culture center on the Island. And we asked what kind of programming and activities residents would most like to see at a potential arts and culture center.

"The June 11 all-community gathering was a highlight for me. Over 100 islanders sat together, leaned in and fully listened to each other, and showed what is possible when we come together as a community."

- Paul Shoemaker

METHODOLOGY

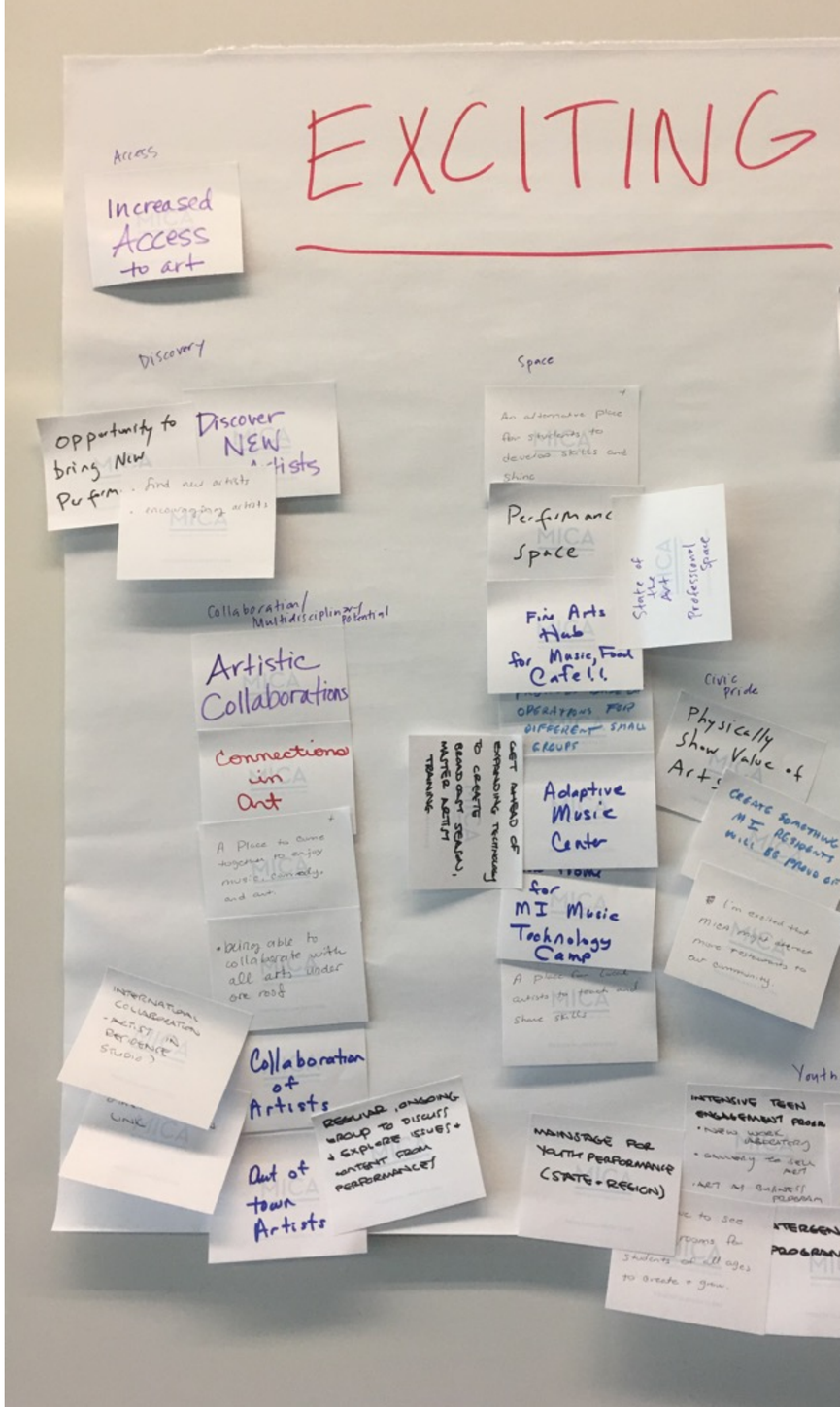
Online Survey

1 public survey, held open for 3 weeks

To further ensure that a range of voices could be heard, an island-wide survey was launched, which gathered perspectives about people's current and future engagement with the arts, their perceptions of the existing Mercer Island arts community, and their unmet needs relative to arts and culture. There were nearly 1,000 respondents from Mercer Island.

The survey was distributed in the following ways:

- MICA newsletter and Facebook page
- NextDoor
- City of Mercer Island newsletter
- My MI newsletter
- YTN mailing list
- Community partner mailing lists
- Chamber of Commerce
- Word of mouth



Online Survey

1,074 total respondents

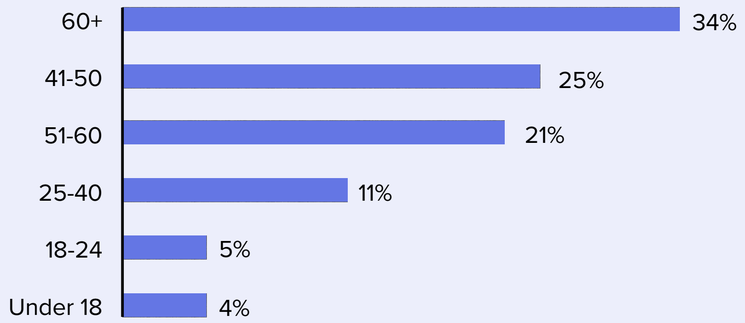
932
Islanders

142
Off-islanders

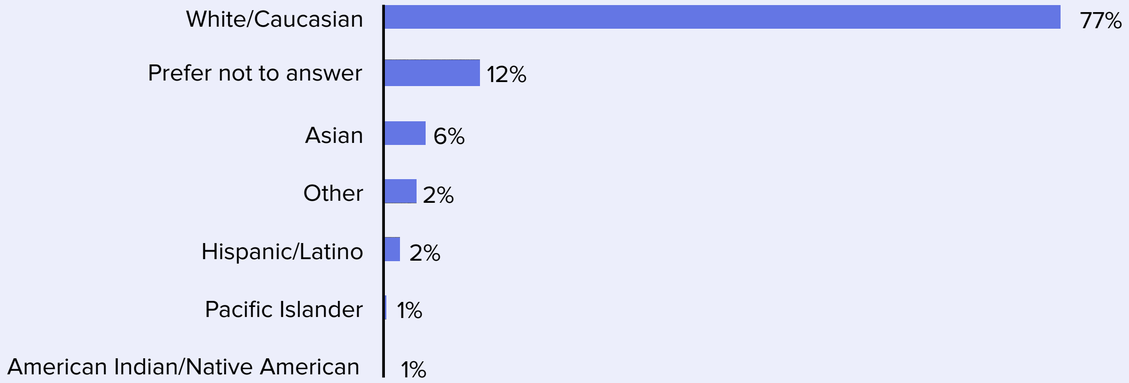
(Unless noted, takeaways have been filtered to the 932 resident responses)

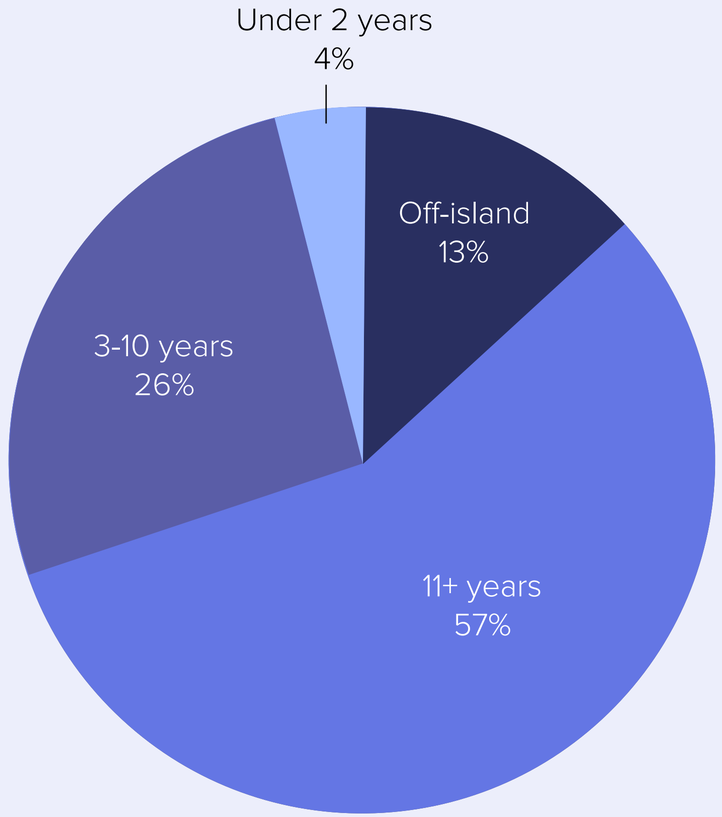
Online Survey Demographics

Age



Ethnicity





Length of time on island

To see how age and ethnicity compares to overall island demographics, please visit: https://datausa.io/profile/geo/mercer-island-wa/

ENGAGING THE ISLAND COMMUNITY

What We Heard

KEY TAKEAWAY

Residents are proud of their community

We heard residents voicing a strong sense of community and a deep sense of pride in calling Mercer Island home.

Their pride was also reflected in a desire for Mercer Island to become known for something defining and magnetic; to debunk the myth that the island is an insular bedroom community only for the rich.

The residents we talked to shared enthusiasm around the idea that an arts and culture center has the potential to bolster that sense of community and pride in the place they call home.

> *“Something like MICA could transform our reputation as a bedroom community into a destination.”*

SURVEY EXCERPT

81% said they are proud to be a Mercer Island resident

72% said they feel a strong sense of community

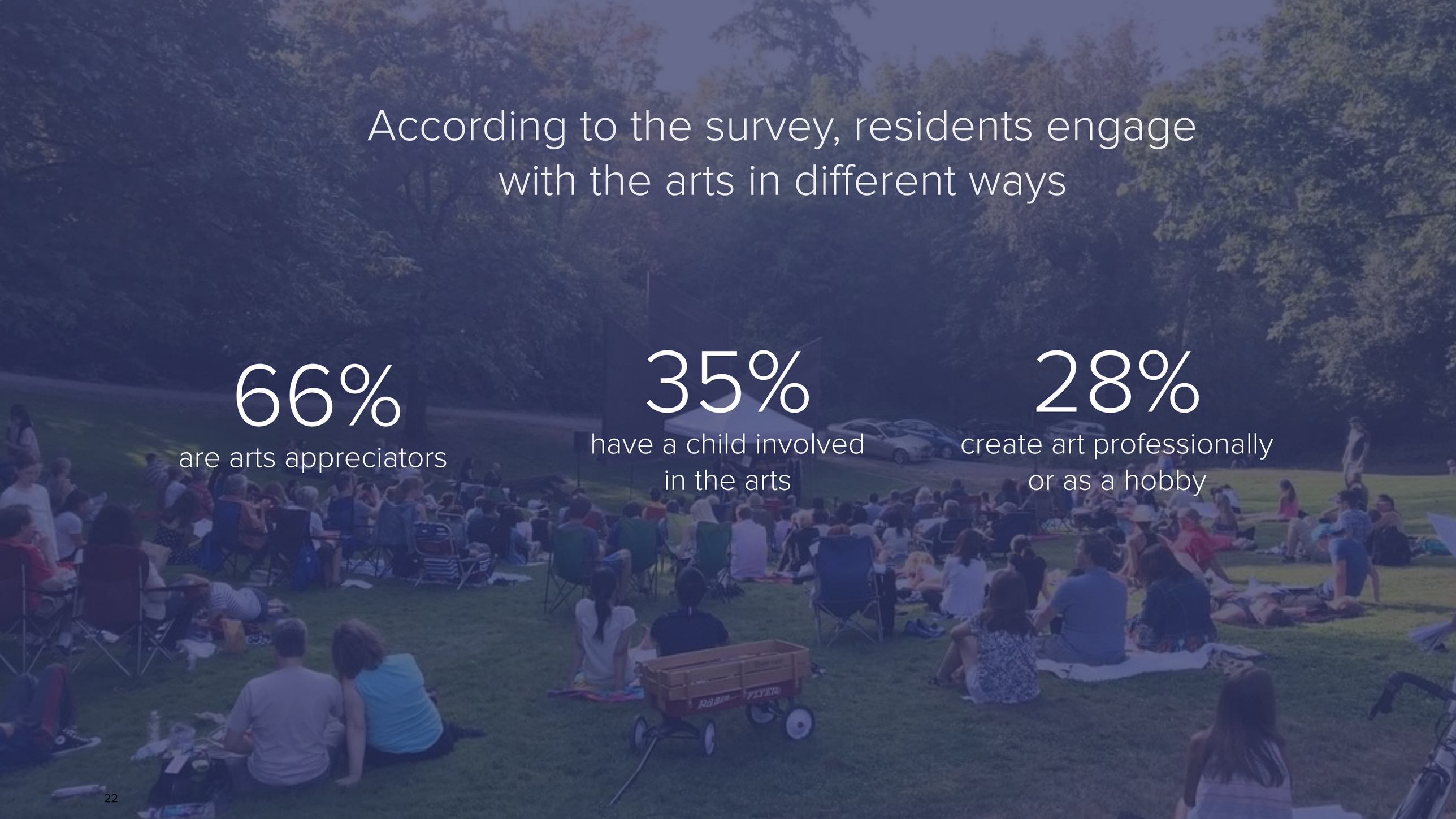
KEY TAKEAWAY

Arts are an important part of everyday life

A majority of Islanders engage with the arts regularly—as observers, appreciators, and creators.

Aside from taking advantage of the abundance of offerings on the Island—YTN, MIVAL, the Russian Chamber Music Foundation, Musical Minds Studio, Island Youth Ballet and others—many residents regularly travel off island to attend arts and culture events in Seattle, Bellevue, and beyond. And nearly a third of the people we heard from create art, either professionally or as a hobby. Creativity is deeply rooted in the identity and day-to-day lives of many Islanders, no matter their age or length of time as a resident.

> *“Art is so important to our lives. It helps with all aspects of life and learning.”*



According to the survey, residents engage with the arts in different ways

66%
are arts appreciators

35%
have a child involved in the arts

28%
create art professionally or as a hobby

According to the survey, within the last 6 months...

85%
have done something creative
on their own or with a child

75%
have attended an arts event
on the island

69%
have donated to an
arts organization or cause

68%
have gone off-island to
an arts event 3+ times

KEY TAKEAWAY

There are valid concerns

Despite overarching support for and excitement about the arts on Mercer Island, a handful of specific concerns did emerge — all of which are now being proactively addressed as MICA looks toward its future.

And despite the comments we heard, very few people expressed outright opposition to an arts center on Mercer Island.

Common themes around concerns:

- Location (park/no park)
- Cost & sustainability (public/private funds)
- Size & scope (too big/too small)
- Parking & access (central/further located)
- A clear purpose (why it exists and who it serves)
- Competing facilities (in Seattle and other neighboring areas)
- Political will (among city leaders, MICA leaders, and citizens)

KEY TAKEAWAY

Securing a home for Youth Theatre Northwest is vital

Youth Theatre Northwest—a beloved mainstay of the Mercer Island arts community—is in search of a permanent home with adequate facilities and infrastructure to fulfill their educational and performance needs.

Keeping YTN on the island became a common thread in nearly every conversation. Residents are excited about the potential for YTN to become an anchor tenant of a new arts and culture facility. And while some residents see YTN as elemental to MICA's success, most are also optimistic about MICA's potential to fulfill the needs of other individuals and organizations.

71% of survey respondents **strongly** or **somewhat** agreed that YTN should have a permanent home on the island.

Student perspective

89% said in the survey that live theatre, concert or performances would be the most compelling benefit of an arts center

85% strongly or **somewhat agreed** in the survey that YTN should have a permanent home on the island

"I have been part of YTN for many years and it's changed my life."

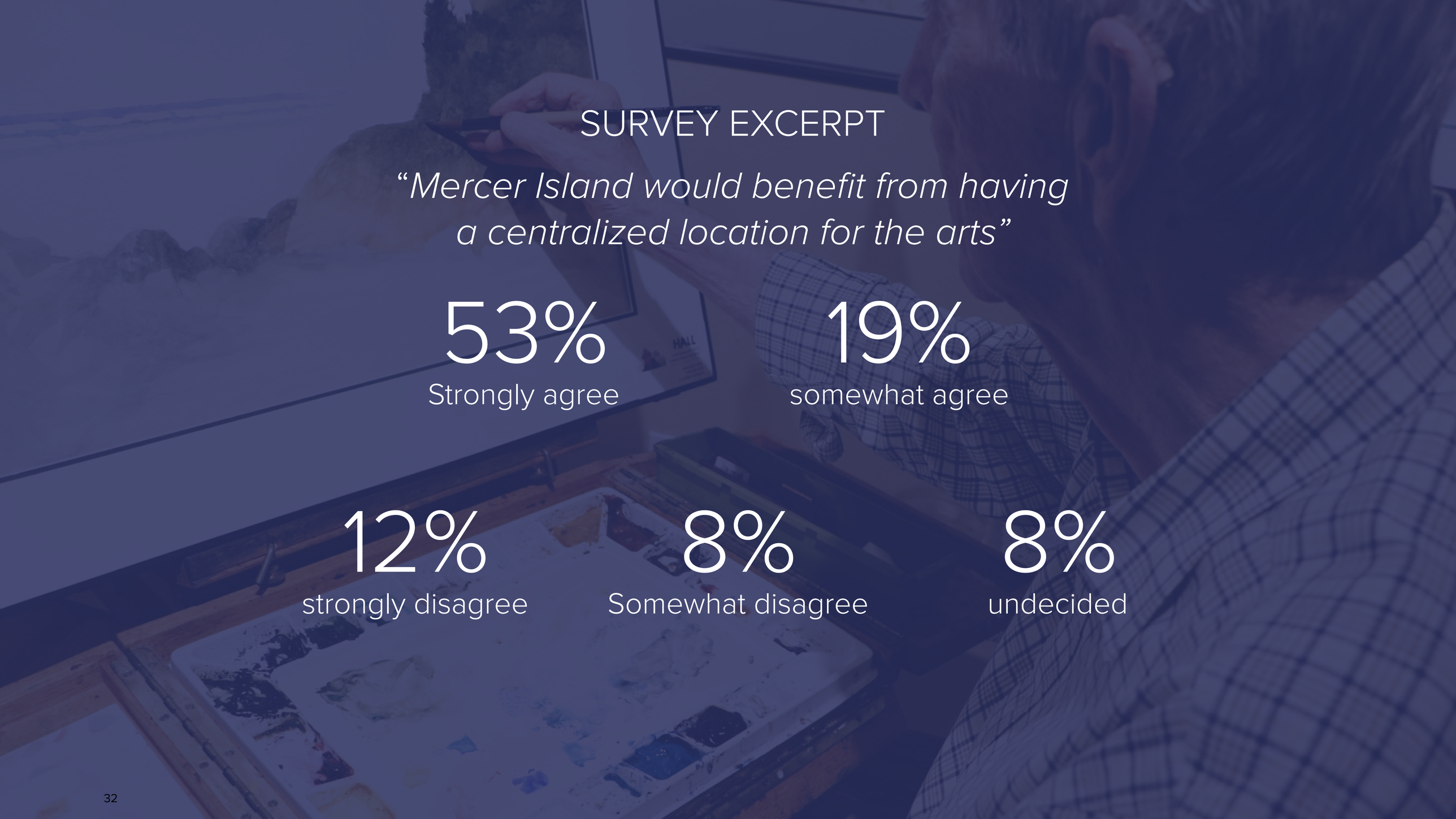
“I can’t imagine who I would be now if
I didn’t have YTN to express myself.”

KEY TAKEAWAY

Strong desire to have a central space for the arts

There’s an abundance of art and culture on Mercer Island, yet we heard a strong desire for a central place where arts resources could meld together. The current arts community, according to residents, is siloed, fragmented, and disconnected. Having a central place for the arts would not only increase overall awareness of the arts, but would provide a place where people might have experiences they might not otherwise. And it would serve as a vital pathway for existing arts organizations to share resources and collaborate with one another.

69% of survey respondents want more opportunities to experience arts and culture on the island.



SURVEY EXCERPT

“Mercer Island would benefit from having a centralized location for the arts”

53%
Strongly agree

19%
somewhat agree

12%
strongly disagree

8%
Somewhat disagree

8%
undecided

“MICA would serve a great purpose *if it helped* pull together *all the disparate art and culture on the island.”*

“There are numerous creative groups *needing locations to gather and many others* looking to connect.”

KEY TAKEAWAY

Islanders want to actively engage in the arts

Many told us they want a place to engage, to be more than passive consumers of art and performance. People want a place to create and express themselves—to participate and explore. Students in particular crave a safe space to try new things and just be. So, while performances, recitals, and visual art installations are important, so are flexible, informal spaces to attend classes, workshops, and to create.

> *“Keep it flexible and open to cutting edge arts, with strong reach to diverse and especially young people at greater risk.”*

Less than half of key segments **strongly** or **somewhat agreed** in the survey that they are satisfied with the current selection of arts and culture activities on the island:

- Seniors: 47%
- Brand new residents: 45%
- Parents: 40%
- Diverse audiences: 40%
- Students: 32%

“We need a place on the island for children who are creative in the arts and not sports.”

KEY TAKEAWAY

Access to quality arts education is important

Quality arts classes emerged as one of the most compelling benefits of an arts center, right behind live theatre and performances.

There's a strong desire for opportunities for individuals of all ages and different skill levels to learn from professional artists across a range of disciplines—painting, photography, illustration, music, dance, acting, and on and on.

59% of survey respondents said that quality arts classes were the most compelling benefit of MICA.

Students, parents, and newer residents were even more enthusiastic

Brand new residents even more enthusiastic about potential programming in the survey:

	All	Brand New Residents (<2 yrs on island)
Performing arts	78%	85%
Visual arts	61%	81%
Drama/theatre classes	58%	72%
Fine arts exhibits	44%	69%
Non-traditional arts classes	42%	59%

“All programs seem to be devoted to children or seniors, no art classes at the community center in the evening or weekend hours, so working adults cannot attend.”

“The arts here should be community-focused and enriching for all. ”

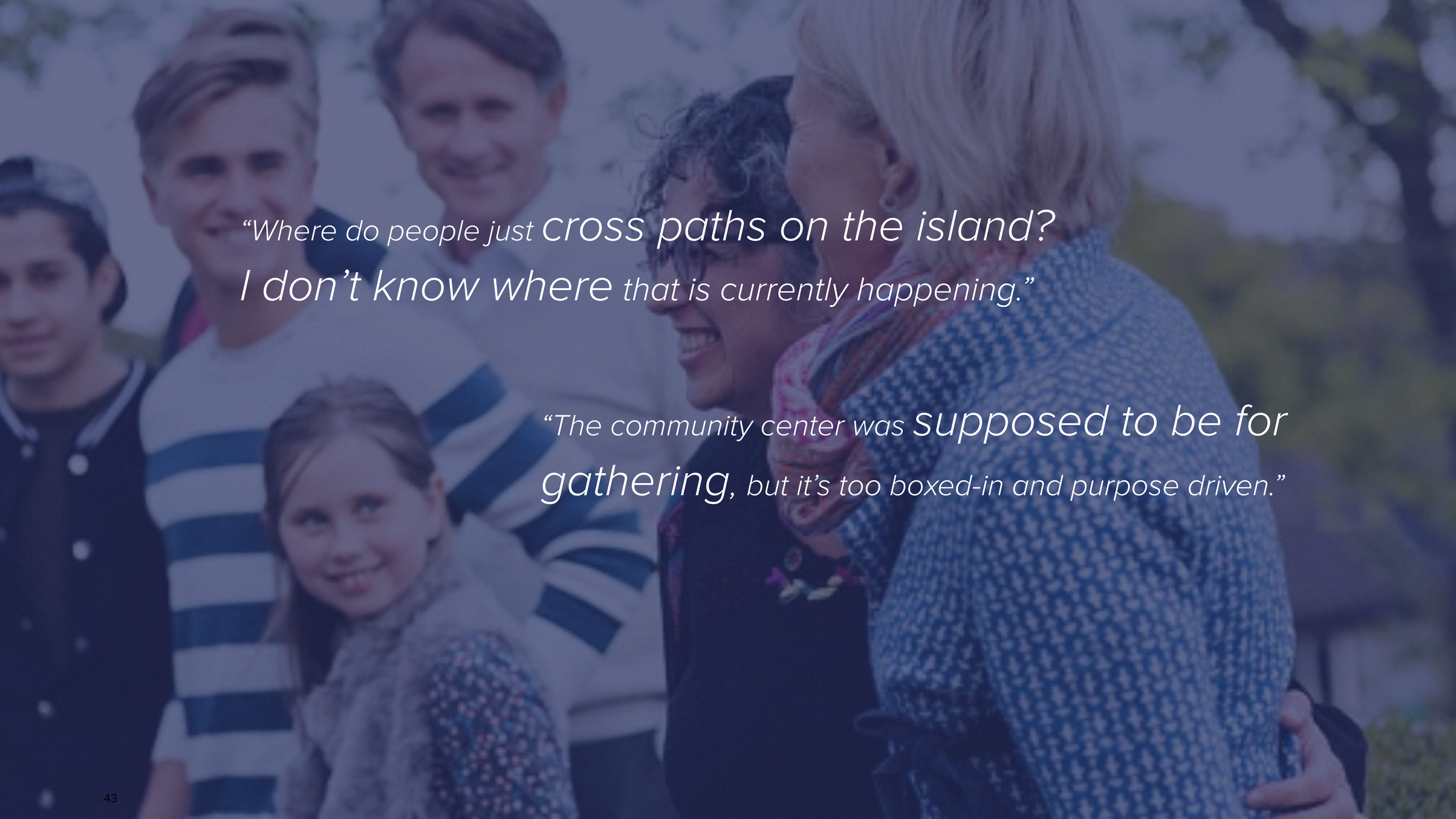
“Having a place for my children to take art classes on a weekly basis would be the most beneficial.”

KEY TAKEAWAY

Residents want to gather and connect around the arts

Residents see another benefit in an arts and culture center—providing a “third place” where people can gather and connect with fellow Islanders around the arts. People imagine a central hub that presents opportunities for the unexpected, whether shared experiences or for personal discovery and reflection.

Many feel a “third place” would help strengthen the sense of community even further by providing a venue to mingle with familiar faces, meet new people, and engage in conversation.

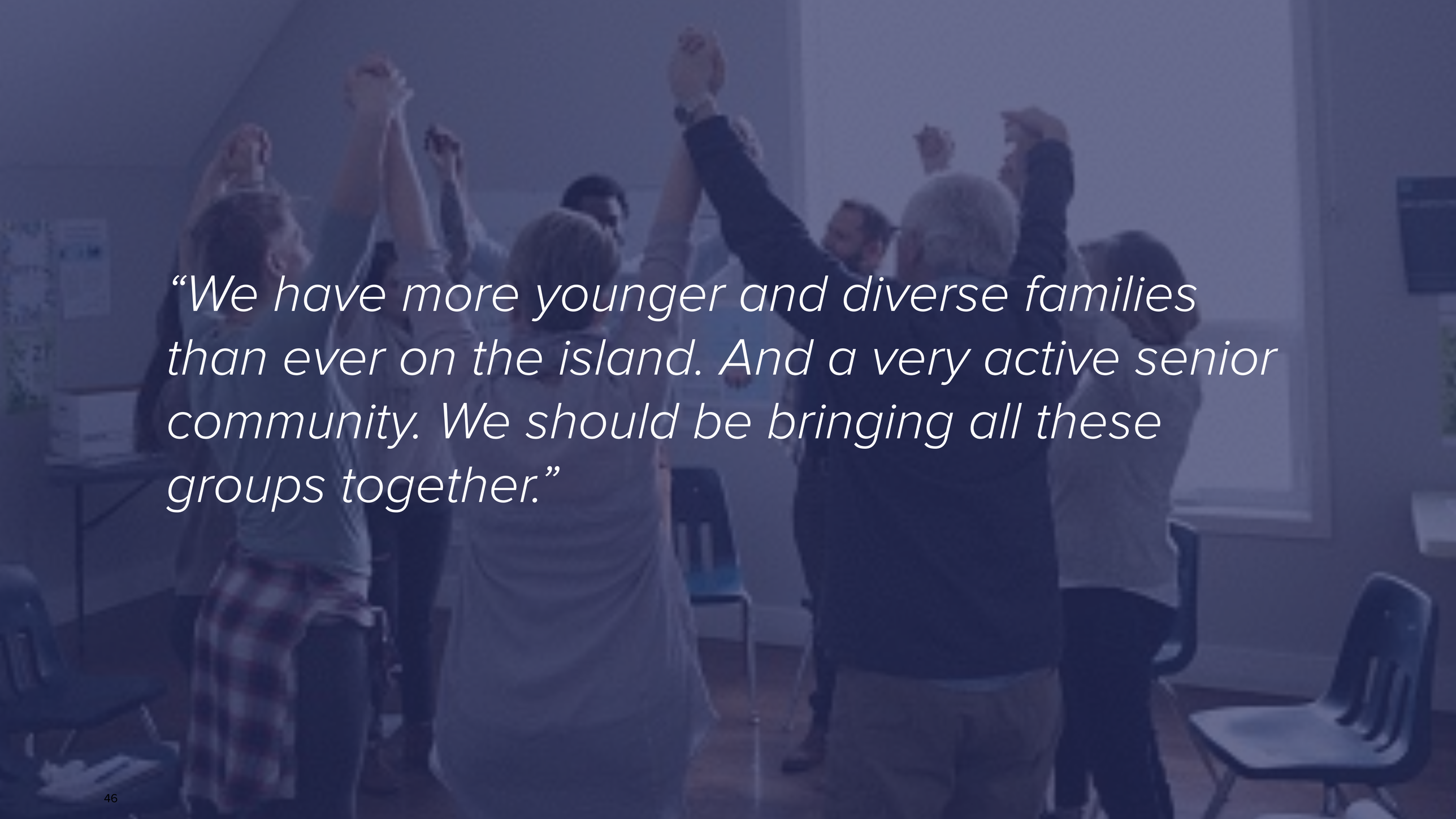

“Where do people just cross paths on the island?
I don’t know where that is currently happening.”
“The community center was supposed to be for gathering, but it’s too boxed-in and purpose driven.”

KEY TAKEAWAY

Arts experiences should be inclusive

Island residents resoundingly want a place that is inviting to everyone, not just focused on youth or experienced artists. We also heard plenty of enthusiasm for a place that encourages intergenerational engagement and connection—a place where people of all ages feel welcome and free to explore and create. And there is an appetite for art and cultural programming that includes a range of diverse culture, voices, and perspectives.

> *“I am particularly interested in activities that cut across generations. Children, parents, and grandparents—the European way”*



“We have more younger and diverse families than ever on the island. And a very active senior community. We should be bringing all these groups together.”

KEY TAKEAWAY

Off-islanders also enthusiastic

While representing a smaller portion of survey respondents, there was plenty of energy and enthusiasm from off-islanders about a potential arts and culture center. Many have children who are involved with YTN, while others are arts appreciators who are former Islanders or live close enough to enjoy island amenities. Whatever their connection, each of these voices represent potential supporters of local businesses.

In general, they expressed similar desires as Islanders relative to securing a home for YTN, quality arts classes, live performances, visual arts, and access to gathering spaces. Many are also excited about the possibility of an arts and culture center making Mercer Island a more inviting and welcoming place.

> *“I make the drive from Newcastle because my kids are involved in YTN. As a result, I spend a lot of time and money at local businesses. If YTN moves off island, my dollars will go with it.”*

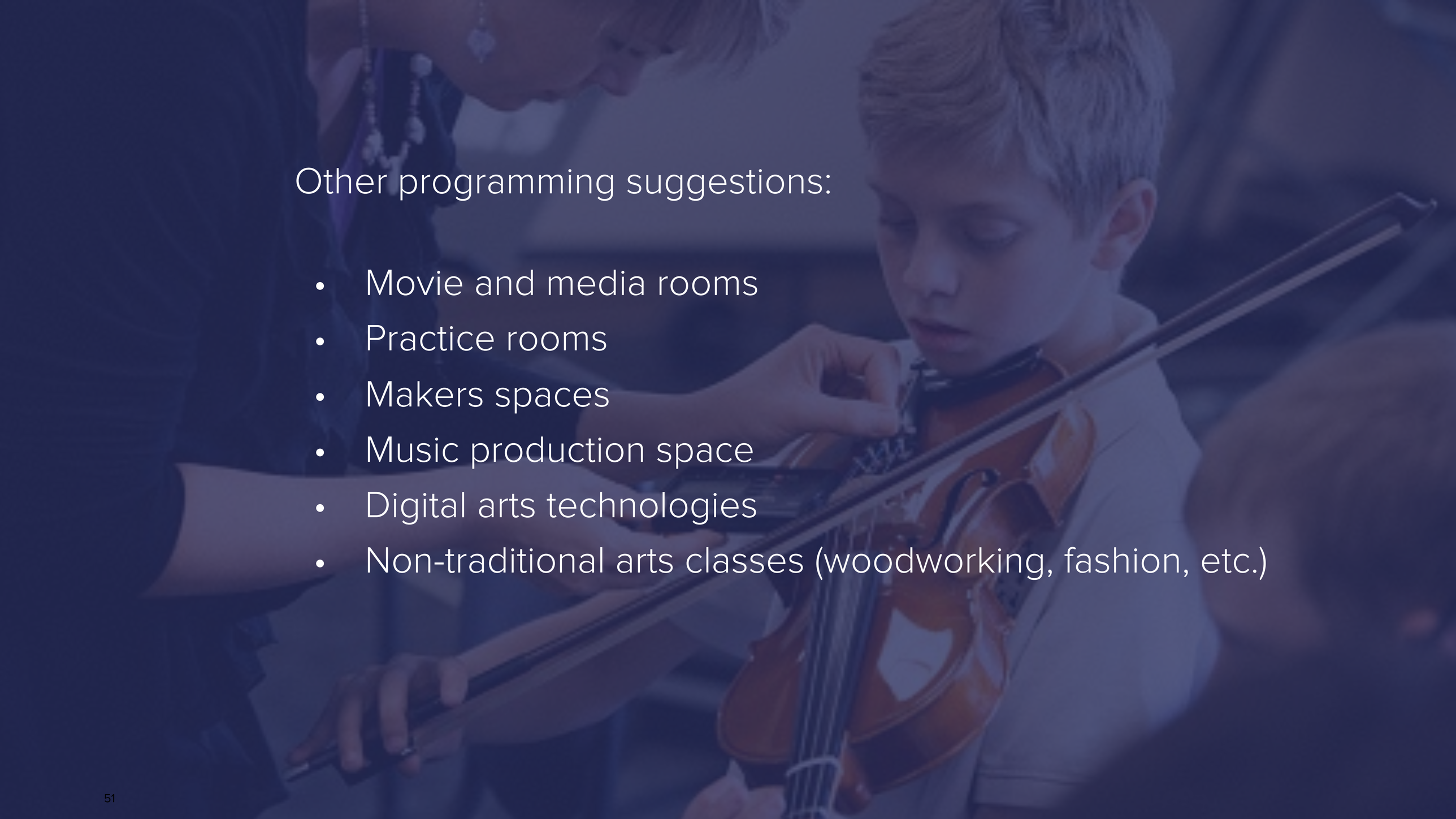
KEY TAKEAWAY

Strong interest in diverse programming and flexible spaces

There were no limits on enthusiasm, imagination, or vision from your island neighbors. You want as many different kinds of art and creation as the physical space can accommodate. Painting, photography, sculpting. Dance, music, theatre. Playwriting, poetry, creative writing. Film, printmaking, and metalwork. The list goes on.

People also expressed a desire for a mix of higher-profile programming alongside homegrown offerings—the former a source of inspiration for island artists and the latter is key to accessibility. And in many of our conversations, we heard an interest in a facility that could incorporate a café or a retail space, to give residents a reason to pop in even if a performance or exhibit isn't happening at the time.

> *"Expand to be the biggest creative umbrella you can. Creativity crosses all disciplines."*



Other programming suggestions:

- Movie and media rooms
- Practice rooms
- Makers spaces
- Music production space
- Digital arts technologies
- Non-traditional arts classes (woodworking, fashion, etc.)

KEY TAKEAWAY

Islanders excited about a vibrant Town Center

Imagine an evening stroll through Town Center. Maybe stopping on the way home for a bite to eat. Or popping into a favorite shop before grabbing a glass of wine with a friend. People's vision for Town Center includes a buzz of activity. We heard from so many participants— across all our listening channels — that there's a hunger for street life and "soul" in Town Center.

In our conversations, Islanders imagined a place where they'd want to pass the time and bump into familiar faces. And many shared their belief that an arts center could likely draw other types of commerce that might help shape and sustain a vibrant Town Center.

SURVEY EXCERPT

75% would spend more time in downtown Mercer Island if there were better retail and dining options

67% said that town center isn't as active and vibrant as they'd like it to be.

59% would stay close to home if there were an arts center on the island

“I think Mercer Island should be doing everything possible to create a more vibrant, interactive, walking downtown area.”

“We need a place for serendipity to happen.”

“There should be more than one reason to stay downtown. Where you can run into people and make connections.”

CREATING A SHARED VISION

Closing Thoughts

Recap of Key Takeaways

- Residents are proud of the community
- Arts are an important part of everyday life
- There are valid concerns
- Securing a home for Youth Theatre Northwest is vital
- Strong desire to have a central space for the arts
- Islanders want to actively engage in the arts
- Access to quality arts education is important
- Residents want to gather and connect around the arts
- Arts experiences should be inclusive
- Off-islanders also enthusiastic
- Strong interest in diverse programming and flexible spaces
- Islanders excited about a vibrant Town Center

Closing Thoughts

Our community visioning dialogue uncovered the following themes:

- Strong support for an arts and culture center
- YTN is a vital resource
- Need for a centralized space for the arts
- Concerns exist and must be addressed
- Desire to unite and strengthen the existing arts community
- Access to quality, diverse arts education is a growing need

More importantly, our conversations revealed a deeper purpose to a potential arts and culture center. Many see it as an opportunity to create an anchor for Town Center—both as an economic driver and a way to improve quality of life. They also see a unique opportunity to redefine Mercer Island's identity for future generations.

Phinney Bischoff had the privilege of sharing select insights with the Mercer Island community at a recent City Council meeting, and there was overwhelming support for the center from attendees. That video is available here: https://bit.ly/2xwIOd7.

Thank you

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