BOULDER AFFORDABLE HOUSING RESEARCH INITIATIVE (BAHRI)
REPORT

THISTLE COMMUNITIES

Rental and CLT Residents
Survey Responses
June 2019

Introduction

The Boulder Affordable Housing Research Initiative (BAHRI), CU-Boulder Students, and Thistle Communities drafted and distributed a survey to Thistle residents via email link in both English and Spanish languages. We received 170 responses from residents (157 English, 13 Spanish). The majority of respondents own a computer, tablet or smart phone with Internet access and identified high to moderate comfortability with computer, tablet, smartphone and Internet technologies. While many respondents identified that they pay their rent online or by way of automatic withdrawals, only a small percentage renew their leases online. The majority of respondents who currently do not renew their leases on-line expressed interest in moving toward online renewals.

Residents also identified varying degrees of difficulty finding affordable housing. Most respondents only looked at one or two apartments prior to renting at Thistle. Survey responses indicate that Thistle is well known in Boulder County.

Questions related to neighborhood cohesion indicated moderate to high interest in increasing communication and interaction among community members. While some hesitation was clearly evident, and several respondents identified a lack of interest in community building, there were a significant number of respondents who provided a variety of ideas to increase a sense of community within their neighborhoods.

The vast majority of respondents identified moderate to high levels of comfortability approaching both Thistle office staff and maintenance personnel. Qualitative responses were split between a significant number of respondents relaying positive comments about Thistle Communities staff and maintenance personnel, and others providing complaints and concerns, which are detailed at the end of this report. The remainder of this report provides additional details in the following categories: Internet and Related Technologies, Rental/CLT Payments and Lease Renewals, Searching for Affordable Housing, Neighbors and Community Activities, and Thistle Staff and Maintenance Personnel.

**Internet and Related Technologies**

The majority of respondents have access to a computer in their home or own a tablet, I-pad or smart phone with internet access. Of the small percentage of individuals without access to internet in their homes, a majority (over 70%) identified the ability to access internet within their community. Comfortability with technology was overwhelmingly high, with the vast majority of respondents (97%) identifying within the *very comfortable to somewhat comfortable* range. A small percentage of respondents (3 %) identified a minimal comfortability with the Internet and related technologies.

Most respondents (75%) identified using some form of Social Media. Only 19 individuals identified the specific types of social media they use. Types of social media Included: LinkedIn, Pinterest, Snapchat, WhatsApp, Facebook, and Next-door. Most respondents do not use the neighborhood social media platform: Next Door, just under 20% identified using this form of social media.

Rental/CLT Payments and Lease Renewals

Most respondents identified paying their rent by check through the US mail followed by automatic bank withdrawals (see Graph 1).

Graph 1: Method of Paying Apartment or CLT Rent
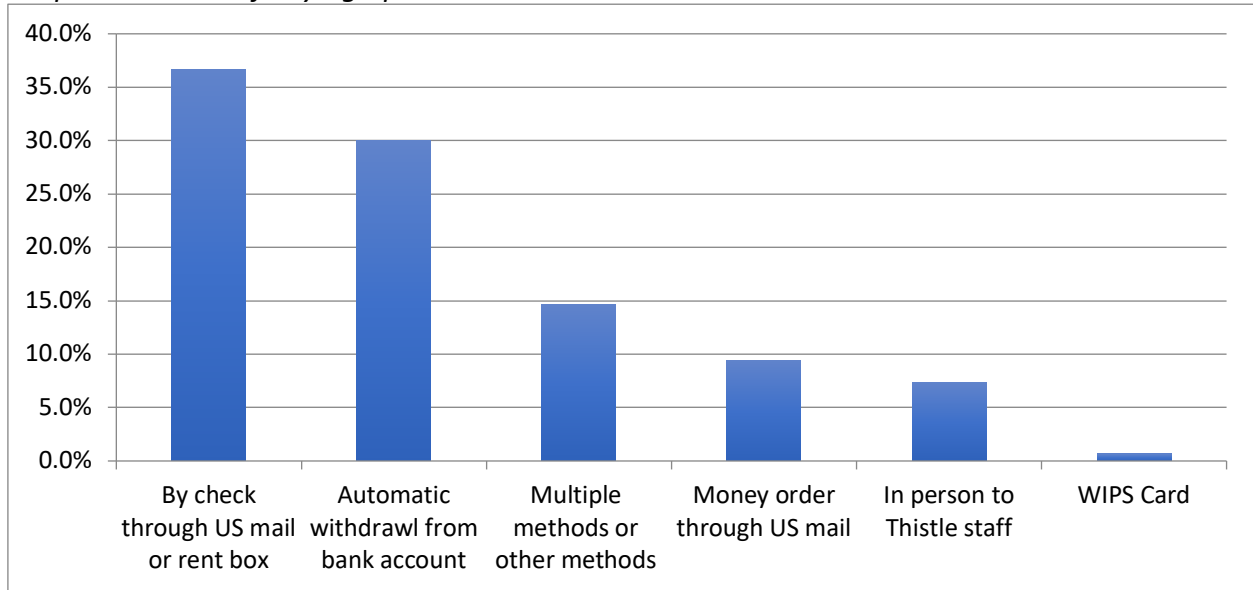
Most respondents who chose not to pay their rent or CLT fees online cited a variety of reasons. Mostly, these residents were either not comfortable with online payments or associated online payments with an automatic withdrawal, which they were uncomfortable using. Other respondents identified a preference for money orders or checks. Additionally, many respondents who identified multiple methods stated that they struggled to pay their rent and therefore would pay a portion in one format such as a check and the remaining portion of the rent by money order.

Among the 30% of respondents who do not currently pay their bill online (or by automatic withdrawal) a majority (56.2%) would prefer to pay online, while a significant percentage (43.8%) were not interested in paying online. The reasons cited for not paying their rent online varied from lack of trust of internet technology to feeling a loss of control over finances with online payments or automatic withdrawals.

The overwhelming majority of respondents do not currently renew their leases online (73.4%), see Graph 1. The majority of respondents who do not currently renew their leases online identified interest in moving to online renewals (77.8%). A small percentage (22.2%) of respondents identified feeling uncomfortable with renewing their leases online for a variety of reasons such as: interest in having hard copies, wanting a paper trail, interest in asking questions face-to-face, frustration with online system, and concerns that the internet will not be as secure as paper-based transactions.

*Graph 2: Do you currently renew your lease online?*
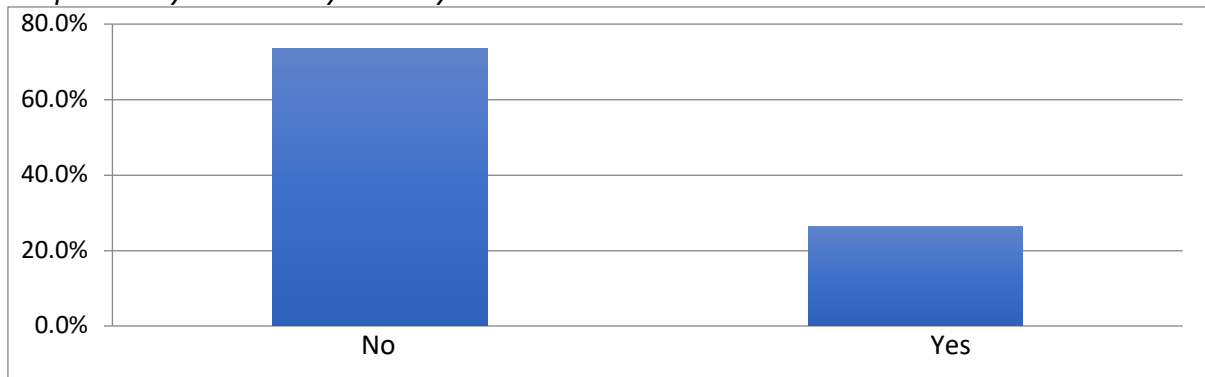
Searching for Affordable Housing

Most respondents selected "other" in response to how they first learned about Thistle Communities, followed by the Thistle Website, Craigslist, word of mouth, and a friend or relative (See Graph 3). Items listed in the "other" category included online searching as the predominant method followed Boulder Housing Partners and Boulder Social Services, or other social services organizations.

Comments and concerns about the difficulty of finding and renting an apartment were mostly focused on the extensive amount of time it takes to complete the necessary paperwork to qualify for affordable housing (see Graph 4). Focusing on these two concerns—time and paperwork—some respondents were more concerned about time and others on the difficulty of completing the paperwork. Other criticisms focused on regulations, rules, and lack of communication. While time was a concern for some respondents, 41.2% identified time—from initial application to approval—within the somewhat slow to slow range, 58.8% identified the time between the somewhat quick to very quick range (See Graph 5). Additionally, the majority of respondents, 57.1% viewed one other place prior to choosing their current Thistle home, and only 16.8% viewed two other places, and 12.6% viewed three other places (See Graph 6).
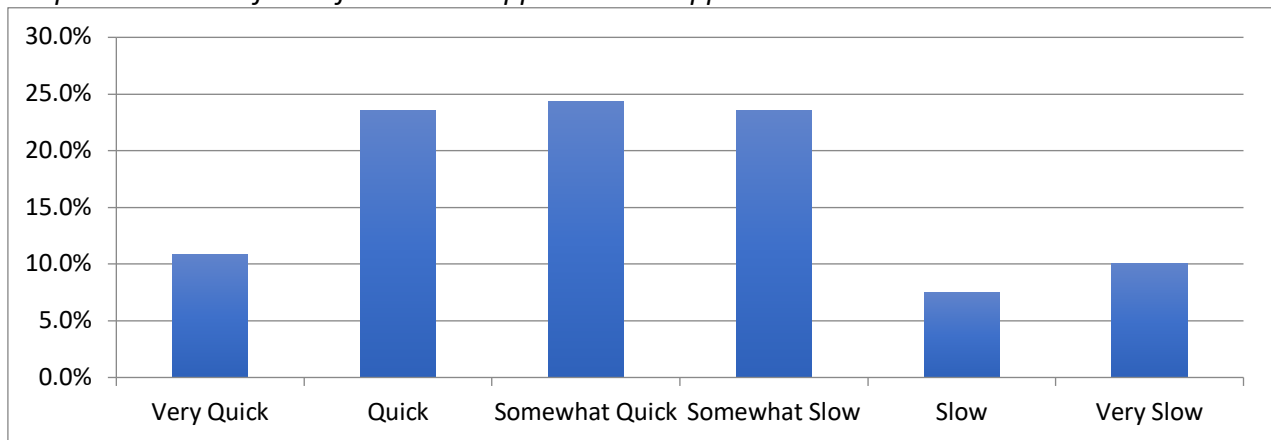
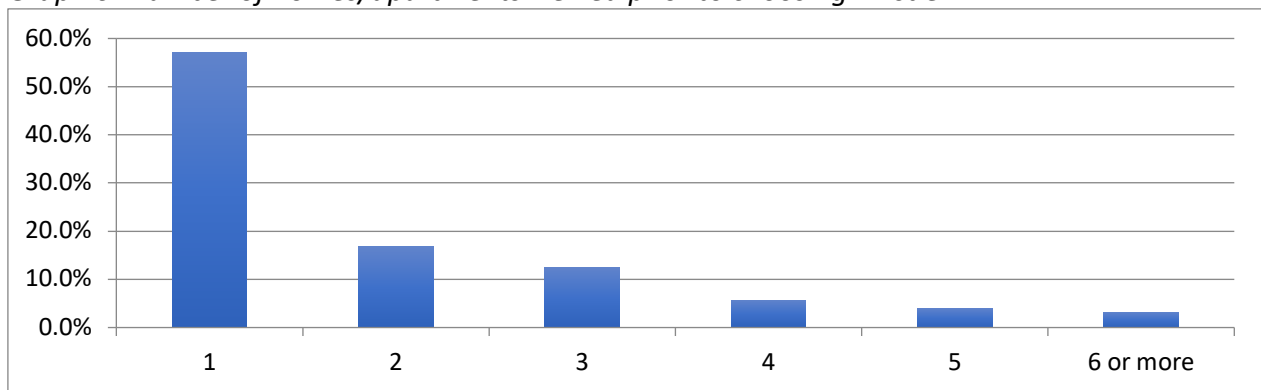*Graph 3: How did you first learn about Thistle Communities?*
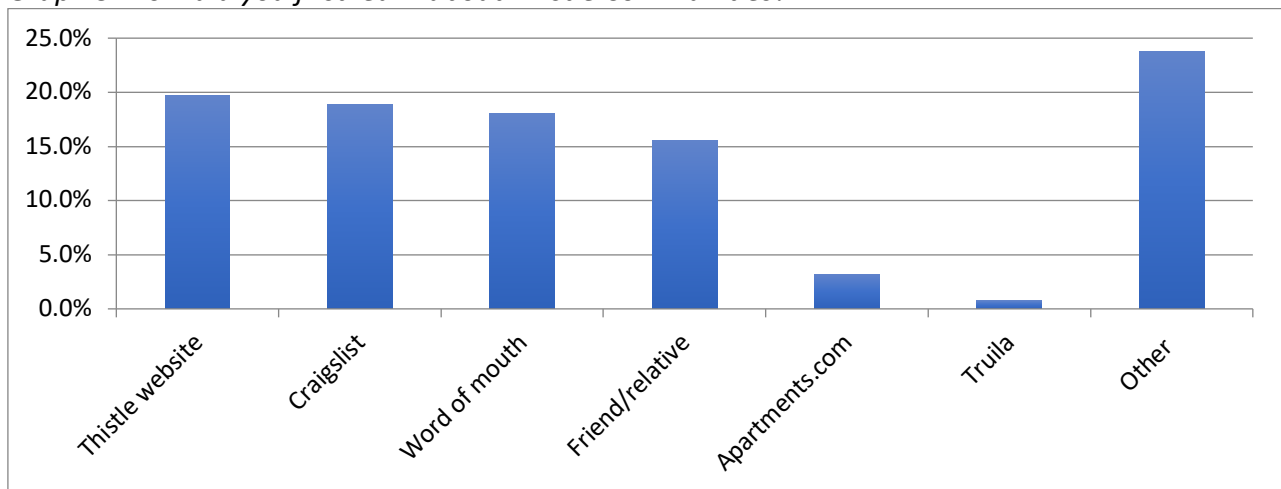
Graph 4: Level of Easy or Difficulty Finding Current Home
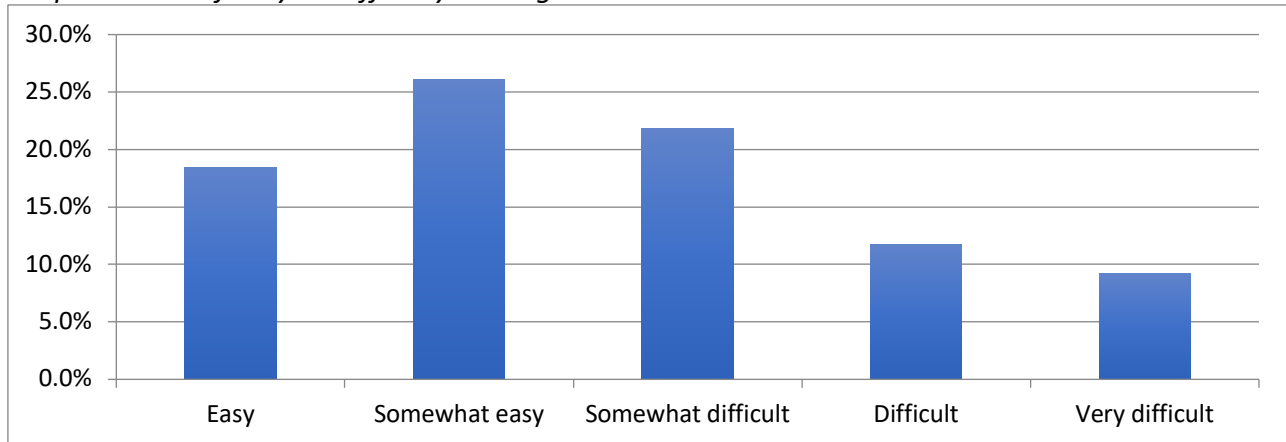
Graph 5: Amount of time from initial application to approval

Graph 6: Number of homes/apartments viewed prior to choosing Thistle


Only 20% of respondents have had prior experiences with affordable housing, with 80% identifying Thistle as their first time living in affordable housing. Other affordable housing experiences were predominantly through Boulder Housing Partners, Section 8 housing programs, or the Veteran's Administration.

Neighbors and Community Activities
Responses to questions about neighbors and building community were diverse. Just over 30% of respondents identified regularly interacting with their neighbors, followed by sometimes, occasionally, rarely and never (see Graph 7). Interest in getting to know other Thistle residents was mixed with most, (48.8%) selecting maybe followed by 27.9% selecting *yes*, and 23.3 selecting *no*. Therefore, 76.7% of respondents identified some interest in increasing connections with their Thistle neighbors (See Graph 8).

Qualitatively, respondents identified a variety of reasons for not wanting to interact with other residents/neighbors. These ranged from social anxiety or wanting privacy or to keep to oneself to avoiding rude or obnoxious neighbors. Other respondents identified busy life styles because of minding children or working that made it difficult for them to interact with neighbors.

Graph 7: How often do you interact with your neighbors?
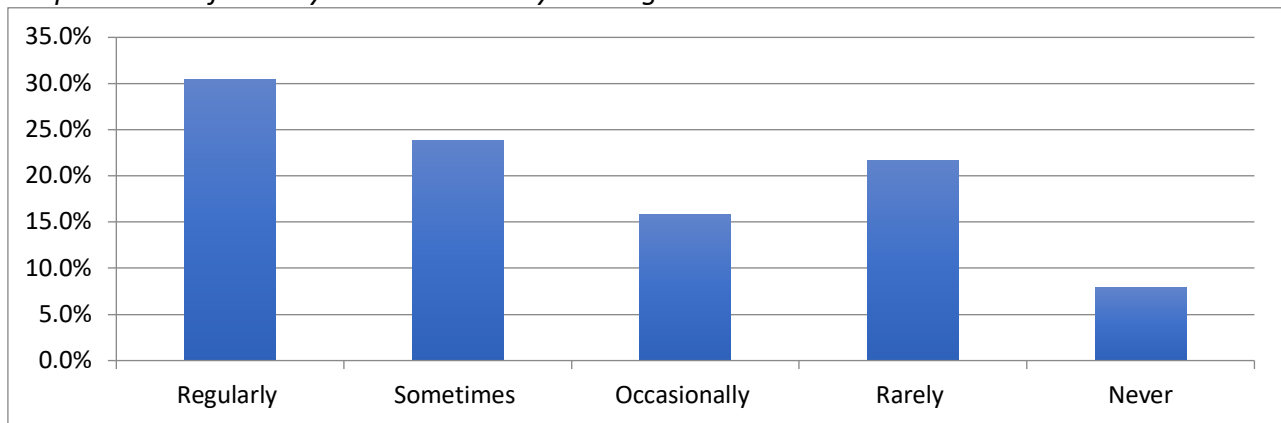
Graph 8: Interest in Getting to Know Other Thistle Residents
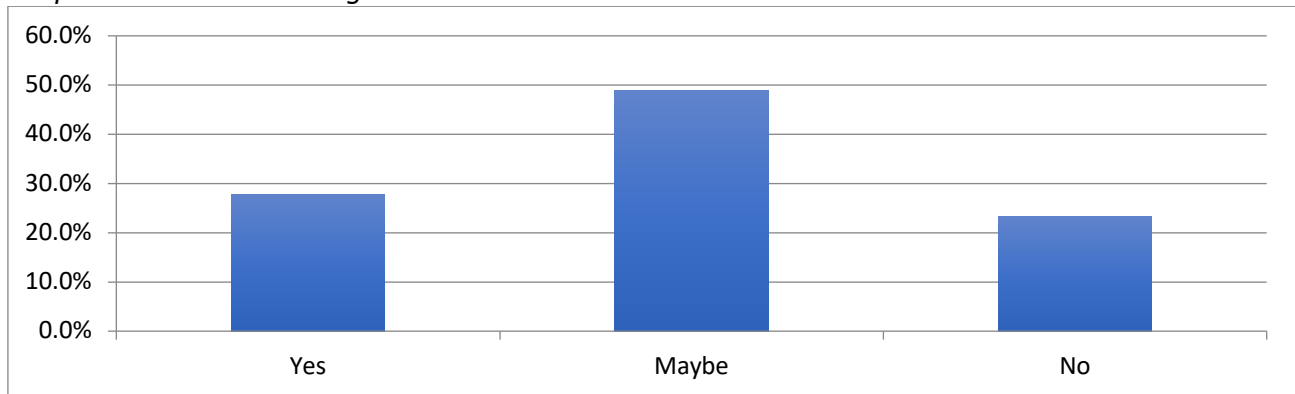
Ideas for bringing communities together
some of the most common suggestions for bringing communities together included more park areas or improving parks within housing communities, installing a pool, dog parks, music/concerts, movie nights, and assistance with language barriers among residents. Other ideas included roller skating, coffee meet-ups, pizza meetings, game nights, and community gardens.

Time was also identified as a factor for many residents, both not having enough time to socialize and asking for social events to happen after 5pm when more people are likely to be home from work. Also, several respondents identified the importance of regularly scheduled events for planning purposes. Interestingly most respondents (62%) stated that regularly scheduled events **would not** influence their attendance, with only 38% stated that regularly scheduled events would make them more likely to attend.

Some residents identified having more dogs or more places for dogs and humans to interact such as a dog park. While, other residents identified dogs as a problem or barrier to communication and connection among residents.
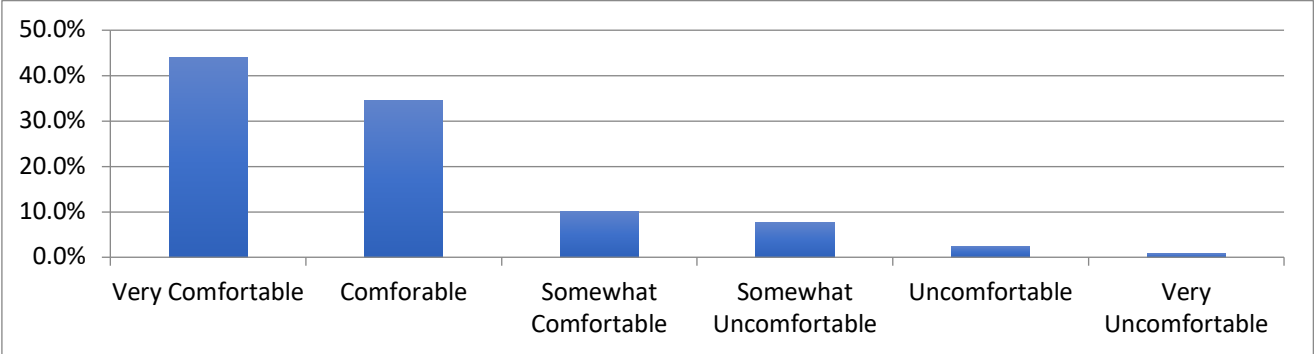
Interactions with Thistle Staff and Maintenance Personnel
The majority of respondents (88.8%) identified their comfortability approaching Thistle Staff members with in the very to somewhat comfortable range, with just under 40% identifying very comfortable (see Graph 9). Similarly, the majority of respondents (88%) identified within the very and somewhat comfortable range approaching Thistle Maintenance Staff (See Graph 10). Most respondents (65%) also identified they would be comfortable with providing an online review of Thistle.

Graph 9: Comfortability Approaching Thistle Staff Members
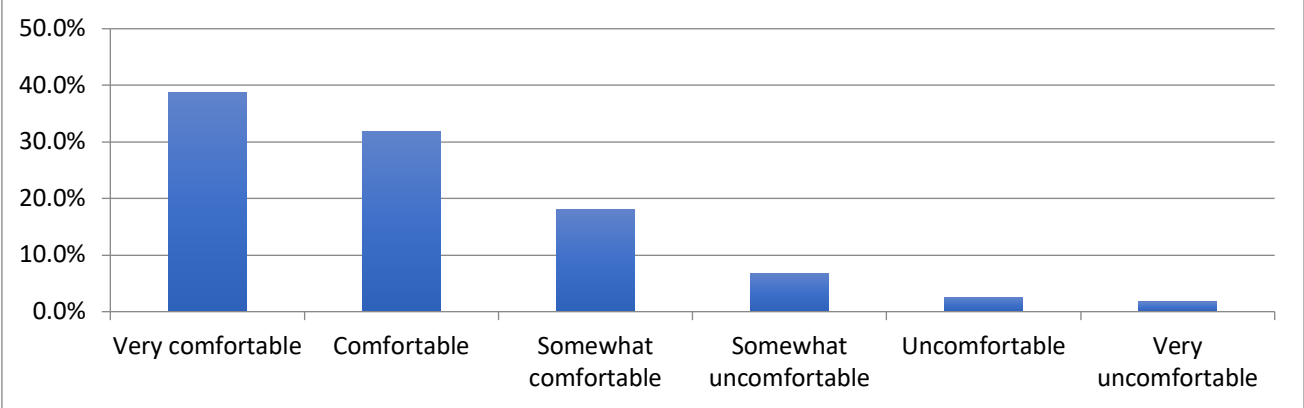
Graph 10: Level of Comfortability Contacting Thistle to Solve Maintenance Problems/Issues

Additional Comments from Respondents about Thistle Staff and Maintenance Personnel

Many respondents spoke positively about Thistle staff and maintenance personnel. Positive responses included thanking staff or maintenance for their care and attention of the properties. Complaints included a variety of concerns such as:

- Quicker response times for maintenance issues and responding to emails.
- More clarity on the appropriate person or department to contact for specific issues.
- Need to improve communication between departments at Thistle.
- Privacy concerns associated with apartment inspections.
- Extermination concerns such as bed bugs.
- Desire for improved insulation to decrease noise pollution.
- Interest in speed-bumps to decrease speeding in community.
- Interest in assigned parking spots for units.
- Better enforcements of community rules, especially parking, pets, and smoking.
- Renovations at Parkville.
- Avoid using chemicals on green spaces.

Conclusions

Despite the concerns identified above from various residents, it is clear that Thistle Communities is a welcome affordable housing option in Boulder County. Suggestions on how the organization can improve were not an indication of disgruntlement by most residents, but rather indicate their own interests in improving their homes and neighborhood communities.

The access to and level of comfortability with communication technologies was quite high among respondents. However, because the survey was available online residents taking the survey may have already been familiar with online technology platforms. Additionally, among the respondents there is significant interest in moving to online lease renewals. However, several residents were concerned about online renewals for a variety of reasons and may choose to optout of such a program. Paying rent online was generally identified as positive, with a significant number of residents pay their rents through multiple methods because of tight financial budgets, which generates anxiety about having their rent automatically withdrawn from their account.

Most respondents were interested in improving communication and connections with neighbors and provided a variety of suggestions for creating community in their neighborhoods.