The first round of analysis for the Lithia Park Master Plan survey reveals a number of emerging themes, what locals consider “the heart of the park” and how much the 126-year-old park is being used.

The Ashland Parks and Recreation Department is in the midst of updating the Master Plan for the city’s largest park — the “crown jewel of Ashland.” The parks commission authorized a $230,000 contract last year with Portland consultant firm MIG, Inc. and launched the process in November.

Parks directors have said in previous interviews that the updated plan will help guide maintenance and preservation of the park for a century to come.

The consultant firm reported to the commission Monday night the preliminary results of the first round of its analysis on an online, monthlong survey and public input, as it gears up to its next phase, “Design Week,” in June.

Two hundred and sixty people responded to the online survey — 80 percent of whom reside in Ashland, said Lauren Schmitt, principal of MIG, Inc.

“When we set out to do this survey, we said we want to hear from local residents,” Schmitt said. “And we did.”

The survey surprisingly received a strong response from those in the 35-to-45 age group, historically a hard-to-reach demographic during public input processes, as well as those who are above 65, Schmitt said.

Participants went through a series of questions asking them to identify “the heart of the park, their usage, their problems and the characteristics that define Lithia Park.

“The closer it is to town, the more people pinned it as the heart,” she said of popular locations such as the playground and the duck pond. “It could be because these areas are the busiest or the most-used areas.”

Schmitt also added that people also resonated with areas that have special or iconic features.

Lithia Park is well-utilized throughout its entirety, according to the survey, with the main trail attracting the most users. The survey also reveals that Lithia Park has a steady number of visitors and users year-round, with a slight surge in summer seasons.
Survey participants also pointed out problems at Lithia Park, including places and features not being maintained, inaccessible trails and prohibited behaviors within the parks system, Schmitt said.

Written comments from different forums and focus groups also pointed out concerns about invasive plants, water quality, historic elements, and human use impacts on the park.

The survey reveals that a large number of the respondents and focus group participants identified Ashland Creek, the trail system and the trees as the main characteristics of Lithia Park.

Consultants have planned for two formal workshops, on June 12 and 14, where residents and parks users can help build goals and share ideas about the park.

They will also hold “open door” sessions take place throughout the week of June 12 to 15, at Ashland Community Center, Pioneer Hall, Siskiyou Room and Lithia Park Bandshell.

The commission also directed parks staff to draft a formal proposal to acquire both Pioneer Hall and the Community Center from the city’s ownership for recreational use.

The decision comes after a discussion during a study session on May 14, in which commissioner Rick Landt raised concerns about repairs and operational costs.

Parks Director Michael Black said at the Monday meeting that without changing the use of the building, the department could avoid the $325,000 repairs cost that has been identified by the city.

“We have been approached by a donor, who said they would be interested in donating money for the exterior aspect of the building,” Black said, adding that the donor has not formally committed.

The building, however, will still need to be structurally upgraded for safety reasons, Black said. He hoped Ashland Parks Foundation could help pay for the renovation.

Landt advocated at the meeting that the department request a transfer of ownership without charge.

“I don’t want to see us pay for a building that is in the city’s ownership, especially when we will keep it in community use,” he said. “There shouldn’t be a money transfer”.