

Residents polled on growth in San Diego

By **Lori Weisberg**
 STAFF WRITER

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As San Diego continues to grow, so too do its urban woes, fueling dissatisfaction among residents who complain about congested freeways, fouled water and escalating housing costs.

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It should come as no surprise then that in a recent survey of more than 2,300 San Diego residents, respondents gave the city failing grades in a number of areas, including traffic, affordable housing, water pollution, education and poverty.

They're more ambivalent, though, about the city's progress in conserving energy and water and cutting the crime rate, but feel fairly sanguine about San Diego's air quality and use of public transit, even though the vast majority of people eschew buses and trolleys, preferring to drive in their own cars.

The survey, dubbed "Which Way Do We Grow?" was an outgrowth of an effort launched in 1998 through the San Diego Natural History Museum to come up with ways to measure the "sustainability" of the region.

When the project later was taken over by the city of San Diego, it was expanded to include additional barometers for measuring quality of life, which were adopted by the City Council two years ago. Although nearly 300 people participated in the process, city officials felt more public input was needed.

The survey, which was mailed to 3,000 randomly selected residents throughout the city, elicited more than 600 responses. The poll also was made available online, which drew 1,700 more responses.

Not surprisingly, reducing traffic congestion emerged as the overall top concern out of the 11 issues covered in the survey. However, affordable housing, which has become a growing concern in the city in the face of rapidly rising prices, was ranked seventh, behind such issues as water pollution, crime, water and energy conservation and air pollution.

That could be explained, in part, by the demographics of those who responded to the survey. With the online poll, there were no controls on who could fill it out. The result was that a much larger percentage of the respondents earned higher incomes compared to those responding to the mail-in survey.

Top concerns of San Diegans

Here is a listing of issues facing the region and the percentage of those who ranked them as "very important" or "somewhat important" in a mail-in survey conducted by the city of San Diego that drew more than 600 responses.

Reduce traffic congestion 89%
 Reduce crime rate 86%
 Reduce beach/bay pollution 86%
 Conserve water 81%
 Conserve energy 80%
 Improve air quality 79%
 Create affordable housing 74%
 Improve local K012 education 71 %
 Increase public transit use 68%

Just 3 percent of those who filled out the survey on the Internet earn less than \$20,000 a year, while more than 27 percent make more than \$100,000 annually. The ethnic makeup of those responding also did not mirror that of the city as a whole, with a much smaller percentage of minorities participating, compared to their representation in the overall population.

Decrease local poverty 63%
Access to transit stops/retail 58%
Source: City of San Diego

The survey did find that, not surprisingly, the lower the income level, the greater the concern there was about the need for more affordable housing. In addition, an overwhelming majority of the respondents agreed that the availability of lower cost housing has worsened in the last five years.

"For people who can't afford housing, it's No. 1," said City Councilwoman Donna Frye. "It depends on who you ask. The perceptions are always connected very strongly to the experience. These surveys are always a snapshot at a moment in time."

What some found surprising about the survey were the occasional disparities between people's perceptions about a particular problem and where the city is in terms of addressing those problems.

For instance, nearly 40 percent of San Diegans said they had no strong feelings one way or another about how satisfied they are with the current level of energy conservation, despite a major energy crisis more than three years ago, pointed out Linda Gianelli Pratt, a program manager with the city's environmental services department.

"A lot of people said there was no change even though we just came out of a huge energy crisis," observed Pratt. "People were concerned about it but didn't know enough to know how to be concerned about it and didn't know how to translate that concern into appropriate action because our energy and water usage continues to go up.

"And everyone complains about traffic but if you look at the data, between 1997 and 2001, we drove more miles per person and had more vehicles per person. That's where the personal responsibility comes in."

But that's probably related, in part, to people's increasing willingness to drive long distances, often outside the county, in search of affordable housing, Pratt acknowledged.

Interestingly, where people saw the most improvement over the last five years was in public transit, which the vast majority of people do not even use. More than 1 in 3 respondents said they thought public transit use had improved.

While daily ridership on the Coaster and San Diego Trolley has increased over the years, bus usage has declined. And despite the continued pleas of city and transit planners to get more workers to use mass transit, patronage of rail and buses generally remained static during the last decade, according to the 2000 census.

Just 3.4 percent of San Diego County's workers used mass transit in 2000, virtually the same percentage as in 1990.

Environmental activist Carolyn Chase says she is pleased that the city has finally come up with criteria for gauging the city's livability.

"You can't fix what you don't measure, so I'm excited to see that this has come out," said Chase, a San Diego planning commissioner. "(The survey) is a great educational tool. If we can find the right way to compare it year after year, maybe we can help people understand how to change things."

Pratt said the city's plan is to follow up with a series of public forums to educate residents about the major issues facing San Diego and possible solutions they can undertake, such as water and energy conservation.

Also planned are two more surveys – one in 2005 that would focus on energy and water issues and one more the following year, although no theme has been selected for that one.

"In order to create a more sustainable city, there are roles for government and business, but individuals need to take responsibility as well," Pratt said.

While it may be interesting to learn San Diegans' opinions about urban issues, the city needs to do far more to address growth-related concerns than simply taking the pulse of the community, believes Frye.

"What I'd like to see is an honest analysis of the cost of growth and development, not just how we feel about things," she said. "What I'd like is some ground-truthing. It's good to know this but I don't know how it necessarily solves any problems."

■Lori Weisberg: (619) 293-2251; lori.weisberg@uniontrib.com

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