
OFFICE OF THE INDEPENDENT BUDGET ANALYST REPORT

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Status of Citizen Survey

OVERVIEW

At the Budget and Finance Committee meeting of January 6, 2010, the IBA presented “Developing a Structural Budget Deficit Elimination Plan” (IBA Report 10-01). One of the elements of this plan includes administering a citizen survey consistent with City Council direction as part of the FY 2010 budget adoption and the adopted City Council fiscal reforms. This survey aims to gauge citizen opinions on the priority of and satisfaction with services being provided by the city and willingness to pay more to maintain city service levels.

This report provides an update on the status of the Citizen Survey. Also, a draft of the survey is provided as Attachment 1 in order to solicit input before the survey is initiated. We would like to note that the Mayor’s Office was consulted during the development of this draft and a few technical changes were made based on their input. However, they would like to defer to the Council’s interests regarding the substance of the survey.

FISCAL AND POLICY DISCUSSION

Behavior Research Center, Inc.

The IBA has begun work with the Behavior Research Center, Inc. (BRC), which is the company that has been selected by the Mayor’s Office to administer the survey. In the past, BRC was commissioned by the City to complete citywide resident satisfaction

surveys for a period of ten years, with the results of the last survey issued in January 2005. The City's Business Office had begun work in September 2008 to utilize BRC once again to complete a citywide resident satisfaction survey. Due to the City Council's interest in soliciting citizen input on service levels and priorities in light of the City's financial challenges, the Mayor's Office offered to redirect the work of BRC under the current contract for this purpose, with the Office of the IBA overseeing the project.

The Citizen Survey will differ somewhat from prior year citywide resident satisfaction surveys. In addition to gauging citizen satisfaction with existing service levels, questions have been added regarding service prioritization, willingness to pay more to maintain city services as well as general perceptions of the City.

Based on the existing agreement, the cost of the survey is \$24,000 and includes a total of 600 in-depth interviews by telephone with a random cross-section of San Diego heads of households. BRC's work plan describes the method in determining which households will be selected. It explains that "The method will utilize a computer-generated pure unweighted random digit dial telephone sample, which selects households on the basis of telephone prefix." This method ensures a randomly selected sample of area households proportionately allocated throughout the City. It also ensures that all unlisted and newly listed telephone households are included in the sample. Results of the survey are expected to be available in spring 2010.

In working to develop the content of the survey, the IBA relied heavily on the survey utilized last year during the "San Diego Speaks" process, which is provided as Attachment 2. For background, we provided BRC with various news articles and reports that discuss the financial challenges the City is facing; and we reviewed citizen surveys administered in other cities such as Phoenix, Austin, Dallas, Houston, San Francisco, and San Jose. The IBA worked with BRC to identify the questions which would best capture the opinions of our residents with respect to our financial situation and the provision of city services.

"San Diego Speaks" Survey

Last year, a citizen survey was designed to be completed in person at "San Diego Speaks" community meetings held throughout the City. The survey was also available on the City's website.

Input on the content of the survey was received by members of the public as well as members of the Budget and Finance Committee. The final survey was designed to allow respondents to prioritize City services and display preferences for specific services. It also allowed individuals to indicate which services they felt could be reduced or eliminated, and asked them to note for which services they may be willing to pay more. The Social Science Research Laboratory, a research survey organization at San Diego

State University (SDSU), assisted the City of San Diego in compiling and analyzing all on-line and paper-and-pencil surveys.

While the results were informative, SDSU recommended for the future that the City work with professionals in the field to conduct a random scientific survey in order to ensure results are representative of the community as a whole. Utilizing BRC with the randomly selected telephone methodology is expected to address this.

Citizens Revenue Review and Economic Competitiveness Commission

The Citizens Revenue Review and Economic Competitiveness Commission (CRRECC), recently created by the City Council, is also providing input on the Citizen Survey. One of its four Council charges is to “receive findings from a city-wide survey on optimum city service levels desired by the public, and make recommendations to the Mayor and Council for their review and consideration.” A Commission member, Dr. Gangaram Singh, Professor, SDSU, has volunteered to work with the IBA to offer input and report back to the Commission on progress of the survey.

An issue raised by the Commission at a recent meeting was whether a focus group would produce more useful, in-depth data for the City as opposed to a telephone survey. Our office discussed this suggestion with BRC, who also provides focus group services. They responded that, for the City’s purposes, a telephone survey would provide more useful, quantitative data as it would include a larger pool of respondents. BRC explained that a telephone survey allows the collection of information from a representative cross section of citizens. Focus groups cannot achieve this goal since they simply represent the views of the 8-10 individuals who participate in the group.

Another issue raised was whether the telephone survey can include cell phones. A member of the Commission expressed concerns that many younger residents no longer have a landline and therefore, a specific demographic may not be properly represented in the survey results. We contacted BRC on this issue as well. Including cell phones would create various obstacles that would not occur when calling only landlines. For example, the cell phone sample would include *county-wide* residents. Therefore, BRC would need to screen for *city* residents, which would increase the number of callbacks that occurred. Also, callbacks would need to be made if the cell phone users, when contacted, were involved in a task that may not lend itself to being interviewed, such as driving. The cost of administering the survey would therefore increase from \$24,000 to \$33,000. It would also expand the firm’s scope of work which would not be consistent with the original Request for Proposal.

GFOA Best Practices

In February 2009, the Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA) issued a new recommended practice, “Public Participation in Planning, Budgeting, and Performance Budgeting.” GFOA notes that public participation efforts can be extremely valuable, and

care needs to be taken to ensure these efforts are sincere, well-managed and timely, and that the information gathered needs to be incorporated into decision making. It also describes the importance of communication to the public regarding how the information collected will be or was used. Without these elements, public cynicism can increase, and the public may perceive that their input was not taken seriously. In addition to presenting the findings to the full City Council, it is recommended that the survey results be featured prominently on the City's website to allow survey participants, citizens and all interested parties the opportunity to review the results.

CONCLUSION

A Citizen Survey can be a valuable tool in informing the City Council, Mayor, as well as the public, on the needs, priorities and opinions of the citizens. This is particularly important during this financially challenging time as the City faces difficult decisions regarding finally eliminating its structural budget deficit.

Survey administration is expected to take twelve weeks and results should be available in the spring of 2010. As there are numerous and varied viewpoints on this matter, we welcome feedback on the attached survey instrument from the members of the Budget and Finance Committee as well as other Council members. We will work to incorporate suggestions, staying mindful of budget restrictions and the professional advice of our pollster regarding survey effectiveness.

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Attachments:

1. Proposed Survey Instrument
2. "San Diego Speaks" Survey