

Budget survey: Lincolmites rank safety, economic opportunity high

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Mayor Chris Beutler on Monday released the results of a survey of 600 Lincoln citizens, and they show people generally have faith in city government — but are resistant to tax increases to bridge budget gaps or fund major projects.

Residents said all city services are important, but their priorities are police and fire protection and economic opportunity.

If forced to choose, parks, trails, recreation and libraries were their lowest priority services.



Mayor Chris Beutler

- **Service importance**

Average score - rated from 1 (little importance) to 10 (extreme importance):

Fire and ambulance service - 9.09

Police - 8.96

Management of sewage and storm water - 7.94

Maintenance and management of traffic flow - 7.79

Health department services - 7.79

Job creation and economic development - 7.75

Libraries - 7.66

Human services - 7.52

Parks, trails and recreation - 7.14

Building permits and safety - 7.14

Zoning and growth planning - 7.05

Public bus and transportation services - 6.88

- **Service priorities** (Ranking of 12 listed above.)
 1. Police
 2. Fire and ambulance services
 11. Libraries
 12. Park, trails and recreation
- **Paying for services**

How would you recommend the City fund your two service priorities?

Make no change in spending - 9.41 %

Increase taxes - 15.16 %

Cut funds from bottom priorities - 33.62 %

Some other approach - 41.81 %
- **Outcome priorities**

Percentages of those wanting to maintain or increase funding and services:

Economic opportunity - maintain 41.2 %, increase 50.2 %

Effective transportation - maintain 52.6 %, increase 43.0 %

Environmental quality - maintain 69.7 %, increase 8.7 %

Equal access and diversity - maintain 59.0 %, increase 17.5 %

Healthy people - maintain 51.4 %, increase 42.4 %

Livable neighborhoods - maintain 62.7 %, increase 28.9 %

Quality of life - maintain 61.3 %, increase 25.5 %

Safety and security - maintain 51.6 %, increase 47.0 %
- **Outcome priorities** (Ranking of eight listed above.)
 1. Safety and security
 2. Economic opportunity
 7. Effective transportation
 8. Equal access and diversity
- **Paying for priorities**

How would you recommend the City fund your top priority goal areas?

Make no change in spending - 16.18 %

Increase taxes - 16.7 %

Cut funds from bottom priorities - 34.25 %

Some other approach - 32.87 %
- **Philanthropy**

To which one of the priority areas should business and community organizations focus their charitable funding?

Economic opportunity - 23.5 %

Health people - 21.6 %

Quality of life - 16.5 %

Other (liveable neighborhoods 11.3 %, safety and security 9.9 %, equal access and diversity 8.8 %, environmental quality 4.1 %, effective transportation 4.1 %)
- **Major new projects**

If the City of Lincoln were to undertake a new, major project, how would you want it funded?

Increase taxes - 12.48 %

Cut funds from other areas - 15.99 %

- No new project - 18.28 %
- Some other approach - 53.25 %
- **Public knowledge**
 - Only 20.6 percent of respondents knew that City government receives less than 15 percent of each dollar collected in property taxes.
 - Public trust and confidence
 - Percentage of respondents who answered “agree” or “strongly agree” with the following statements about Lincoln City government -
 - Officials treat residents with respect. 67.9
 - Officials care about what people like me think. 59.7
 - Local government can usually be trusted to make decisions that are right for residents as a whole. 54.4
 - I am satisfied with local government. 53.5
 - Officials have residents’ best interests in mind when they make decisions. 52.8

The online survey is available on the City Web site at lincoln.ne.gov. The survey is designed to allow citizens to prioritize City services and provide comments on their decisions. Printed copies of the online survey also will be available at all Lincoln libraries.

The city is partnering with Leadership Lincoln on a series of town hall meetings. Doors will open at 5:30 p.m., and the meetings will be from 6 to 8 p.m.:

- Tuesday, Southwest High, 7001 S. 14th St.
- Thursday, LPS District Offices, 5901 O St. (Hosted by the mayor's Youth Advisory Council, geared toward young people)
- April 29, North Star High School, 5801 North 33rd St.
- May 6, Lincoln High, 2229 J St.

The survey and a series of town hall meetings are part of Beutler’s new approach to budgeting, in which the budget is based on what citizens want the city to accomplish, rather than just building on the prior year’s budget.

The scientific phone survey, conducted by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Bureau of Sociological Research, found that, in general, residents want to maintain current spending and services.

But with the city projecting a \$6 million budget shortfall for the next fiscal year, that won’t be possible without cutting spending or increasing revenue.

However, people are not interested in tax increases.

When asked how the city should fund priorities, only 16 percent said increase taxes. More than one-third said cut from lower priority areas and 42 percent said find another way, largely by finding efficiencies.

That doesn't mean a tax increase is off the table, the mayor said.

Of the 600 people surveyed by phone, 51 participated in a day-long "deliberative discussion" that showed when given basic information about the budget and city departments, they were much more open to a tax increase.

Councilman Jon Camp said he wouldn't put too much credence in the fact fewer than half of 51 people were open to a tax increase after a day of talking to city officials.

And he was "very concerned" people would make too much of that, he said.

The survey indicated more than half of the respondents were satisfied with municipal government, and Beutler took some credit, saying people have noticed the council and mayor are working better together.

"Clearly the working relationship between me and the City Council has reversed that," he said. "Confidence is key to making the hard choices that face us."

But council members had questions about the survey.

Councilman Ken Svoboda said he did a similar survey about a year ago, and the results were similar. That's when Svoboda and Beutler were locked in a mayoral race.

"Overall, I'm not surprised by any of it," Svoboda said, but added he wants to study the raw data in detail when it's released later this week.

Camp also intends to look closer at the data, and expressed concern about how questions were asked and how "budget outcomes" were defined.

Phil Young, a local political consultant who often works with Republicans and served in the Reagan White House, was asked by the Beutler administration to help ensure the survey was conducted properly.

He believes it was fairly worded and not skewed toward any particular result.

He didn't see anything terribly surprising in the results, which he said are similar to other surveys.

It's no surprise, for example, that police and fire protection rank high in importance.

But it was somewhat surprising to him to see economic development rank so high. In his opinion, that indicates nervousness in the populace.

In hindsight, Young wishes street repairs had not been grouped with public transportation. Camp expressed the same concern.

In other words, someone might support street improvements but not necessarily increased StarTran bus funding.

Like Camp, Young puts less credence into the one-day discussion in which 51 people were educated about the budget.

At the end of the day, 45 percent of them favored raising taxes to balance the budget over any other alternative. Young said that wasn't as statistically valid as the survey.

The survey offered some insight into how residents feel about a possible new arena.

When asked how the city should fund a big new project, only 13 percent said they would fund it by increasing taxes, 16 percent said they'd cut from other areas, 18 percent didn't want new projects and 53 percent said they're prefer "some other approach."

Respondents often said they'd like the city to explore public-private partnerships.

The survey also showed people overestimate how much of their property tax dollar goes toward city services: Only 21 percent of respondents knew city government gets less than 15 percent of every dollar collected in property taxes.

Beutler said that shows the city must do a better job of educating the public about the budget.

Young was troubled by the fact that when asked how people would fund their top two priorities, 15 percent said raise taxes, 34 percent said cut spending elsewhere and 42 percent said find some other solution. Trouble is, there aren't many other options. To balance the budget you essentially have to cut spending or increase revenue.

Young compared it to the time a man told his father, former interim Mayor Dale Young, not to raise taxes, but instead "use the city's money."

"We can't start printing money in the basement of the city-county building," Young said. "Uncle Sam doesn't like it when you do that."

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