

Residents uninformed about city budget

By Rachel Albin
Daily Nebraskan
April 22, 2008

Lincolnites - inquiring city government minds want to know.

On Monday, Mayor Chris Beutler and the University of Nebraska Public Policy Center released the results of a scientific survey that asked residents to speak up about the city's budget.

Respondents ranked security and economic opportunities as their highest priorities, while transportation, equal access and diversity efforts were ranked lowest.

Police and emergency services were the most highly valued city services, whereas libraries, parks, trails and recreation were given low priority.

About a third of respondents felt the city should cut funds from low-priority areas then reallocate the money to high-priority areas.

The Public Policy Center contacted about 1,600 Lincolnites, 605 of which completed the survey.

Elizabeth Neeley, the center's senior research manager, said in a news release that after seeing the survey results, Lincoln residents appear to value many city services with fairly high importance.

The city has said the survey is not designed to be scientific, but is instead intended to garner information policy makers can factor into their final decisions.

A group of 51 of the 605 survey respondents chose to participate in a day-long study earlier this month. About 90 percent of this group were white, and 65 percent were male.

At the event, research survey administrators found many participants overestimated what percentage of property taxes go to the city and could not identify which area the city spends the most money on.

Government needs to do a better job communicating the budget to citizens, Beutler said at a press conference Monday.

Participants ranked general areas of importance the same before and after they were given information about the budget by the mayor and discussed budget preferences in small groups. But some attitudes about how the city funds items changed dramatically after participants obtained the additional information.

By the end of the day, the number of participants who recommended the city raise taxes to cover costs nearly doubled from 22 percent to just more than 40 percent. Cutting funds from lower priorities was 6 percent less popular with citizens after the information session, and about 2 percent more wanted to keep spending the same after the session.

Almost 14 percent fewer participants said they didn't know how the city should acquire funding.

The mayor's office is considering taking similar surveys every few years, or partial surveys annually.

So far, this study has cost about \$84,000 - \$10,000 of which was paid by the city and the remainder was paid by Leadership Lincoln.

The study is ongoing - citizens can still take the Priority Lincoln survey online at lincoln.ne.gov or attend upcoming town hall meetings, where public opinion will be recorded via audience response clickers. This Thursday's meeting at Lincoln Public School's District Offices, 5901 O St., is aimed especially at young citizens looking to voice concerns to city government.

"We need (citizens') input to have consensus," Beutler said.

rachelalbin@dailynebraskan.com

Lincolniters who participated in a day-long discussion of the city budget divided a hypothetical budget of \$100 among areas of city efforts according to their preferences.

\$30.00: safety and security

\$15.57: economic opportunity

\$12.13: effective transportation

\$11.91: livable neighborhoods

\$10.03: quality of life

\$9.78: healthy people

\$8.61: environmental quality

\$6.46: equal access and diversity