



## In end, budget questions can't be ducked

Editorial

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*Don't tax you, don't tax me, tax that man behind the tree.* — former U.S. Sen. Russell Long

A phone survey of Lincoln residents unfortunately offered respondents an illusionary option for paying for city government services.

It implied there was some way of funding priority services other than raising taxes or cutting funds elsewhere.

Not surprisingly, almost half the respondents ducked the tough choices. Almost 42 percent said that some other approach should be found to pay for priority services.

It would have been illuminating to find out which of the real-world options those respondents preferred.

Would they have joined the 15.2 percent who were willing to raise taxes? Or would they have joined the 33.6 percent who said funds should be cut from lower priorities?

Also provoking additional questions was the survey finding that only 20.6 percent of respondents knew that the city collects less than 15 cents of every property tax dollar.

If respondents had been aware of that fact, would it have changed their answers?

Not surprisingly, police, fire and ambulance services ranked highest in priority of the scientifically designed phone survey of 600 Lincoln residents.

Over the years, elected city officials have reflected those priorities by consistently devoting an increasing proportion of the city's budget to the police and fire departments.

In fact, since 1990 those departments are the only ones that have added personnel. Mayor Chris Beutler and the City Council eliminated 60 positions last year, cutting back the number of employees outside the police and fire departments to 1,435, the same number as in 1990.

The survey is part of an innovative attempt by the Beutler administration to focus spending decisions on what Lincoln residents want most to keep in the city budget, rather than on what to cut. Known as “outcome budgeting,” the process was described by David Osborne and Peter Hutchinson in their book, “The Price of Government.”

The outreach to residents should further improve a reasonably positive attitude residents have toward City Hall. Officials justifiably were pleased to find that 53.5 percent of respondents were “satisfied” with local government and that 54.5 percent of respondents thought that officials “can be trusted to make decisions that are right for the community as a whole.”

It’s a good thing that residents have that level of faith in their elected officials.

With city government facing a budget shortfall next year of \$5.9 million, the mayor and City Council face tough decisions.

Unlike respondents in the survey, elected officials can’t choose “some other approach” to solve their budget problems.