

Be wary of survey results

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In general, nobody but a Luddite would challenge the communications potential and value of message boards, online surveys and other types of electronic information gathering.

Snapshots of public opinion are interesting, at least, and sometimes enlightening — so long as they are not abused or misrepresented. There's a lot of that going on, usually for commercial purposes. Let the buyer beware.

When public policy makers start using open-ended unscientific surveys, we get a little more uneasy.

The mayor has put up such a survey called "Taking Charge" on the city's Web site. It's a budget and program priorities survey.

It follows up Priority Lincoln, the phone surveys and series of discussions that drove some of the decisions in the 2007-08 budget cycle.

The new survey says the Mayor's Office engaged more than 2,000 city residents in Priority Lincoln.

We have no reason to doubt the good faith of the Chris Beutler administration or the University of Nebraska Public Policy Center, which developed the new survey with the city.

But as the city government says in its own invitation to participate: "Trade-offs must be considered."

The city's budget situation is as grim as it has been in recent history. Harsh decisions are going to be made. People's livelihoods and Lincoln's well-being depend on these decisions.

Inevitably, some people will try all kinds of methods to influence any system of public decision-making, whether they pay a lobbyist or a programmer to do it.

What guarantees are there this survey can't be manipulated to favor one budget priority over another?

How do we know someone isn't paying someone else to participate? How do we know there isn't a computer farm in the Cayman Islands manufacturing responses? Will we get to see the results of the questions about people's confidence in their city government?

How about the ones that test the participants' knowledge of local government?

The survey includes questions asking the participants to identify themselves by gender, race/ethnicity, education level, age and ZIP code. They may choose not to answer any question they wish.

This survey is intriguing and certainly has a place in the local budget deliberations.

But ultimately, after all the hearings and surveys, we are left to the humanity, sobriety, integrity and good judgment of our mayor, his staff and the City Council.

That is why we have representative government and why we don't have data-processing equipment dictating or rationalizing budget decisions.