

Local View: Public opinion survey results will be valuable

By Mayor Chris Beutler

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The Journal Star editorial board was correct in its [Sunday editorial](#) on the city's budget survey: Online resident surveys are not a perfect tool for determining public opinion. But isn't this the case in any public process? Are the City Council Chambers during a public hearing less immune to paid advocates? Are town hall meetings less susceptible to being packed by supporters of a particular cause?

The important point is that we are asking and listening. We are giving residents the opportunity to be part of the city budget process in a way they have not been before until last year's Priority Lincoln initiative.

This year, we are conducting an online survey along with an in-depth discussion on May 16. We chose these instead of a telephone survey for three reasons:

-- Only a small number of randomly selected people can participate in a phone survey.

-- Telephone survey questions must be simple and brief, and the survey involves direct contact, sometimes leading to limited or superficial information.

-- Scientific polling is expensive. The survey and discussion provide a greater return on the dollar. (This year's effort is funded through a grant from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation.)

The 2009-10 budget will force challenges upon the community like none we have seen in the past. More than ever, we need a wider range of public input to find a community consensus on what kind of Lincoln we want to be. The online survey opens up the process to those who have family and work obligations that made it difficult to attend council meetings. It opens up government to those who don't feel comfortable expressing their opinions in public settings.

Our budget situation also dictates that residents know what the choices mean to the future of Lincoln. Our survey allows us to better educate Lincoln residents. The questions themselves provide in-depth information about the city's budget and programs. It's important to know participants' opinions after they have been exposed to a wider range of facts.

In addition to soliciting opinions, our goal is to encourage a dialogue about budget issues among residents. Already, the survey is sparking conversations at coffee

houses, water coolers and church functions, on talk radio and across backyard fences.

We've taken several steps to ensure the survey process is as fair as possible:

-- The questions are based on real choices in the 2009-10 budget. Reductions in Antelope Valley funding, for example, were not included as an option because the vast majority of that project is being covered by federal funds, and the local dollars being used have restrictions on how they can be spent.

Another example is the question on the five neighborhood pools. We did not include an option of increasing admission fees to cover the costs because that would have doubled the fee, thereby cutting attendance and revenue. If it isn't economically feasible, we didn't offer it as an option.

-- We attempted to provide a fair assessment of the consequences of eliminating the service. An example is the question on youth smoking. We can estimate from past data how many more young people may start smoking if the tobacco prevention program is eliminated. For other issues not as easy to quantify, we tried to give the respondent an idea of what "may" happen. An example is stormwater review for private development. We have no way of quantifying the impact of eliminating the program, but we do know that it "may potentially increase flood hazards."

-- I've asked the University of Nebraska Public Policy Center to check for multiple surveys coming from the same computer, responses from outside the city and identical surveys. There is not a perfect solution to the concerns that some will try to slant the results. But we don't want to exclude input from those who use the same library, church or home computer or those who take the survey while away on business.

-- When completed, ALL the results of the survey will be made available to the public to ensure transparency and allow residents to thoroughly scrutinize the outcome. We released all the data a year ago with Priority Lincoln, and we will do so again.

In the end, the Taking Charge public input project is as imperfect as the representative democracy that is our city government. The results should not substitute for the good judgment of the officials elected to make the city's budget decisions. But there is much to be gained by allowing the people to have a say in how they are governed.

Please visit lincoln.ne.gov and click on the "Taking Charge Survey." Copies also are available at the mayor's office and city libraries, and you can request a copy by calling 441-7511. We hope you'll also consider signing up for the May 16 discussion. We're listening.

Chris Beutler was elected mayor of Lincoln in 2007.

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