

Local View: Mayor's survey unprofessional

By Linda Rohman

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After reading the Journal Star's report concerning the results of the mayor's budget survey, subtitled "[Many willing to pay](#)," that appeared in the June 4 edition, I felt compelled to weigh in on the discussion of the proper value or worth of the survey results.

I have first-hand knowledge because I directly participated in the survey and have a particular insight based on my education in social psychology and certification in public policy analysis, involving the design and interpretation of research surveys.

I agree with the concerns the Lincoln Independent Business Association discussed regarding the unscientific nature of the polling process. Obtaining respondents to participate in the survey by posting a questionnaire on the Internet introduces an unfair preference for people who own computers with Internet access.

Even more disturbing to me, however, was the totally inappropriate way in which many of the individual survey questions were drafted. It is universally understood that, by manipulating the wording of a questions, the person conducting a survey can change how a respondent answers that question.

The mayor's "Taking Charge" survey was rife with such questions. The most egregious example of this practice concerned the question of whether a city Health Department-sponsored bike safety program should be continued. To answer "yes," the choice was "increase property taxes about four cents per month for the average household in order to continue the program that has helped reduce injuries by 40%." To answer "no," the choice was "not to increase taxes and eliminate the program, allowing injury rates to return to the previous level."

This question was clearly phrased in a biased manner designed to lead those of us who participated to select the option expressing a willingness to pay increased property taxes.

Although the "yes" option asserts the program has reduced injuries by 40 percent, the director of the city's Health Department admitted to me the statistical relationship between the program and the accident data is a correlation only, not cause-and-effect.

I suggested that other factors, instead of the city's program, could explain the decrease in such accidents over time. I pointed out that the city has spent a significant amount of money developing a trails system during the same period, which has led to a decrease in children riding their bikes on streets and sidewalks. This factor alone could explain the reduction in accidents, and it was apparent that the existence of other factors had not occurred to the director. Yet, the option to discontinue the program explicitly stated that, if the program is eliminated, accident rates necessarily will return to previous levels.

In light of the error introduced by the unscientific nature of the sample and the way in which the survey questions were crafted, it is not surprising that, even in these difficult economic times, two-thirds of the participants in the mayor's survey indicated a willingness to raise their property taxes to some degree to save certain city programs.

From the perspective of social science, the "Taking Charge" initiative seemed designed to elicit a consensus in favor of increased property taxes. The issues we were asked about largely involved services provided by the city to children and low-income families, which are groups most likely to appeal to the sympathies and, consequently, be most difficult to "deprive."

Most of the costs associated with the programs that were candidates for elimination were quoted as pennies per month per average household rather than the sum total. As a result, in most instances, we were diverted from the actual cost of the program as a whole during discussions.

Clearly, it is more difficult to say "no" to spending pennies than it is to spending thousands of dollars. There were both pre- and post-questionnaires to detect any change in our opinions during the discussions. Why do both a pre- and a post-questionnaire assessment unless the material presented during the discussions was intended more to persuade us rather than to inform the city leadership?

Linda Rohman lives in Lincoln.

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