

Local View: Don't depend too much on survey

By Coby Mach

Tuesday, May 26, 2009 - 12:14:28 am CDT

Last year, as the city faced a difficult budget cycle with seriously limited funds, it conducted a scientific survey to learn what the community's concerns and priorities were.

In what became known as Priority Lincoln, the survey concluded that generally the community's highest priorities were (1) safety and security and (2) economic opportunity.

The Lincoln Independent Business Association believed the scientific telephone survey conducted in the Priority Lincoln survey was reasonably well done and could support the process by which the conclusions were drawn.

A year later, the city finds itself facing another multimillion-dollar shortfall. To address this shortfall, the city has unveiled a follow-up, unscientific online survey, and although the city has admitted this survey method is "unscientific," it indicated it intends to use this flawed data in developing the new budget.

This survey, called the Taking Charge Budget and Program Priorities Survey, is not a legitimate tool to accurately gather public opinions, and we question its need and validity.

First, although the Priority Lincoln survey was conducted last year, there have been few significant changes in Lincoln that would radically change those community opinions gathered in that survey. The only real change is that the economy has worsened and people may be even more opposed to government raising taxes or increasing regulations that might hurt the economy.

Secondly, we are very concerned about the validity of the survey. The online survey often only gives respondents the choice of raising property taxes or completely eliminating a program. Additionally, there are many services left out of the survey. Why are there questions about eliminating police and safety services, but not StarTran or the city's absurd and extravagant 200 percent-match retirement program?

We also are concerned about respondents manipulating the system. For example, if a significant number of respondents choose to raise taxes to save a program, we can be certain this is how the community really feels, right?

Not so fast. There is no guarantee — anywhere — that only Lincolniters are taking the survey once. This means anyone, anywhere, anytime, can take the survey as many times as they want, thus skewing the results. The city says it can track this, but we're unconvinced a random check of Internet service provider numbers is a thorough check.

We also found at least one error in the survey in which one question overstated the cost of a program by more than \$200,000. While anyone can make an error, it is mistakes like these that cause us to question the validity of the questions and the survey itself.

We have been told the survey is not scientific but that it would help officials decide how to mold the 2009-10 budget. Our concern is that if the survey is not scientific, how much credibility should we lend to it? Even the Lincoln Journal Star editorial board stated that citizens should be wary of the survey results. "When public policymakers start using open-ended unscientific surveys, we get a little more uneasy."

In closing, LIBA believes the Priority Lincoln survey conducted last year was a scientific survey that yielded results we could trust. We do not believe the Taking Charge survey was crafted with the same level of diligence and is therefore unreliable. Real budget choices are rarely made with this kind of method, nor should they be.

We appreciate the efforts of the mayor and the City Council — especially the three newly elected council members — for their leadership in these difficult budget times.

Coby Mach is president and CEO of the Lincoln Independent Business Association.

Copyright © 2002-2009 Lincoln Journal Star. All rights reserved.