

## Local View: Survey about making a difference

By MAYOR CHRIS BEUTLER

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Every August, about two dozen people you probably don't know stand before the City Council to try to influence the plan for what city services you'll receive and the taxes you'll pay. A few others send letters or e-mails.

They may or may not understand the "big picture" in terms of Lincoln's future. Some may be part of a relatively small but well organized special interest group. They could be paid representatives of parties with a financial interest in budget decisions. In general, it's easier to make your views known if you have the time and money to do so.

Because the demands of jobs and families keep many from attending public hearings, we've opened up the lines of communications.

For the past two years, we've allowed residents to participate in the budget process at a time and place that are convenient for them. The Internet has given us new ways to connect with those we serve and new ways for residents to make a difference.

Both last year and this year, more than 1,800 people have taken advantage of the opportunity to provide input on the city budget using tools such as online surveys. We involved more residents in the budget process, balancing the influence of the special interests with the voices of others in our community.

In his recent column ("[Don't depend too much on Taking Charge survey](#)"), it appears that KLIN talk show host Coby Mach, president and CEO of the Lincoln Independent Business Association, prefers the old, narrow influence system over one that increases access and input. Mach argues that a "scientific survey" of several hundred randomly selected people is a better way to generate input. While I respect his opinion, he's missing the point. Engaging the public in a meaningful way is about more than pollsters and demographics.

The questions on this year's Taking Charge survey were the result of a process that started with the Priority Lincoln project a year ago. We did use a random sample survey method at that time to find out what residents expected from city government. Since then, we've worked to prioritize programs and make tough choices.

The Taking Charge survey focused on those programs that are in danger of being cut in the 2009-10 budget. We wanted citizens to have a realistic look at the choices before us and offered only the options that the city could actually implement.

Mach is critical that most decisions boil down to either paying for or cutting services, but that's reality. In the past two years, I've cut 115 jobs, led re-organizations and found efficiencies. We've made the difficult decisions necessary to right the budget.

But the national recession is squeezing revenues, with sales tax more than \$1 million behind projections. For the first time in anyone's memory, property valuation will decrease. In short, Mach's criticism perpetuates the false notion that we can continue to provide services without the funds to pay for them.

We share Mach's concern that the Taking Charge survey be as free as possible from undue influence by groups promoting a narrow agenda. That's why we worked with the University of Nebraska Public Policy Center to develop the survey and analyze the responses.

The questions were randomized so no one could predict the ones they might receive.

The PPC also assessed the responses. They looked at whether surveys submitted from the same computer were more likely a matter of different people taking the survey (people using libraries or families sharing a computer) or whether it might be an example of “ballot stuffing.”

Answers were compared to see if patterns existed that would indicate manipulation. Analyses were run with and without questionable surveys to see if the results changed, but the outcomes were within percentage points of one another. The PPC is confident the survey results are not skewed.

I also share Mach’s belief that survey data should be used with discretion. I am fully aware of the strengths and limitations of the approach we’ve chosen. But should we really disregard all forms of input that can’t be scientifically validated? Should we ignore Mach’s testimony at City Council meetings on behalf of LIBA unless he can prove that his membership has been scientifically surveyed on the topic?

We understand that the survey does not represent the opinions of all residents. But we will not discount the opinions of those who made the effort to complete the survey and give city leaders valuable insight on their priorities for the future.

I remain committed to opening up the budget process to build consensus for the tough choices ahead. And this commitment was reflected in our invitations to LIBA. We encouraged Mach to invite his membership to take the survey.

We also invited him to make a presentation at the Taking Charge Community Conversation, where more than 100 citizens met with city leaders for an in-depth discussion. We listen to LIBA’s input, just as we listen to the input of all residents who care about our city.

In Lincoln, individuals can still make a difference in their government. That’s what Taking Charge is all about.

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