

**CITY OF ALBANY
CITY COUNCIL AGENDA
STAFF REPORT**

Agenda Date: December 19, 2011

Reviewed by: BP

SUBJECT: Follow up regarding budget balancing strategies and proposed public opinion survey

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STAFF RECOMMENDATION

That Council determine its preference for type of public opinion survey to be conducted, and provide direction to staff regarding selection of firm if a random sample is the preferred type, and regarding the draft public opinion survey topics and questions.

BACKGROUND

On November 21, 2011 Council received an update regarding budget balancing strategies as identified from 2011-12 fiscal year discussions. Council provided direction to staff to pursue development of a public opinion survey to gauge voter support for potential ballot measures.

DISCUSSION

Based on comments and guidance received at the November 21, 2011 Council meeting, staff has researched opportunities available to the City to conduct a public opinion survey and potential question topics.

A public opinion survey is utilized as a tool to help gauge the overall support among voters regarding potential funding mechanisms and services provided by the City. The survey could be conducted as a telephone survey of a randomized sample of registered voters, a mail-in survey that would be mailed out citywide or to a subset of the City, or a web-based survey.

- Telephone Survey:
There are a number of professional survey firms that can conduct public opinion surveys via telephone to a representative sample of registered voters. Many jurisdictions have conducted this type of survey in advance of placing items on the ballot. The City retained the services of Godbe Research to conduct its last public opinion survey of this nature in June of 2005.

There are approximately 18,500 residents and 10,000 registered voters within the City. A representative sample would require a survey of 300 – 400 voters. Per staff conversations with prospective survey firms, it is anticipated that approximately 8,400 voters are likely to participate in the November 2012 election. Staff requested proposals from a number of professional firms that specialize in conducting voter surveys, and received proposals from four firms (attached). The cost to conduct the survey ranges per proposal and is dependent upon on survey length (10, 15, or 20 minutes) and sample size (300 or 400). Time needed to complete the project also ranges per proposals, but will likely require 4-8 weeks.

Staff has prepared rough draft survey questions that can be used as a basis for a telephone survey or a mail-in survey for Council review (attached). If Council determines a telephone survey is the preferred method, the selected professional survey firm would refine and effectively frame questions to ensure clarity for survey respondents and survey results.

- Mail-In Survey:

A mail-in survey could be produced that includes the same questions as those discussed in the telephone survey. The mail-in survey could be mailed citywide to gauge public opinions from the community at large. Citywide mail-in surveys have been utilized by the City's Environmental Resources Division in the recent past relating to development of the City's Climate Action Plan that resulted in approximately 550 completed surveys returned to the City. It should be noted that results of a mail-in survey would be subject to those wishing to respond, and would likely hold very little statistical representation as compared to the telephone survey. However, there are opportunities to refine the mail-in survey to add more validity, including use of a coded system with a unique number assigned to each survey form to confirm that respondents reply only once, such as was done during the Voices to Vision waterfront planning.

The City utilizes a local graphic artist to conduct the City's newsletter and related materials including past surveys. It is estimated that it would cost approximately \$6,000 for production of the mail-in survey and citywide mailing.

- Web-based Survey:

A basic web-based survey could be utilized at no cost to the City. Respondents would access the survey by going to a particular website such as Survey Monkey. Several public agencies have utilized this type of tool to conduct surveys on a number of topics. To help add more validity to a web-based survey, users can be asked particular questions in which a unique response is required, thereby helping to ensure that respondents reply only once. Additionally, there are upgrade options for a fee of approximately \$3/survey respondent (equating to approximately \$900-\$1200 for 300-400 responses) that could be utilized to target particular audiences. Survey Monkey also offers an automated phone survey, charged at \$0.10/call.

ANALYSIS

In addition to statistical validity and cost, another factor to consider in deciding between use of a professional firm to conduct a telephone survey as compared to a mail-in survey and/or web-based survey is the amount of staff time involved in these differing approaches. Tallying results from a mail-in survey will require much more staff time than would be required if a professional firm were retained and/or with a web-based survey. Additionally, the professional firms conducting surveys typically also specialize in interpreting the results and advising on how to frame any ballot measures that emerge as a result of the survey.

There currently are no Albany measures scheduled for the June 5, 2012 Direct Primary Election. If none emerge by March, the November 6, 2012 General Election is the next available opportunity for placing measures on the ballot without significant cost. Should this be the case, the City may wish to be strategic in terms of timing the proposed public opinion survey to allow enough time consider the survey outcomes while also reserving some time to learn about ballot measures that may be under consideration by other agencies. Typically, Council authorizes the calling of the General Election by Resolution during the first meeting in June of the General Election year. This provides the City with approximately five months to:

- 1) Formulate and conduct the public opinion survey (January – March)
- 2) Analyze results provided by the public opinion survey (March – April)
- 3) Decide measure(s) to prepare for the November 2012 General Election (April – June)
- 4) Finalize language of any ballot measure(s) (June-July)

Council will be receiving the mid-year budget review in February, and preliminary 2012-14 budget projections in May-June. These reports will help inform the Council about the range of financial needs of the City to potentially address in ballot measure(s).

As directed by Council, staff also contacted the Albany Unified School District about joining efforts on a survey, but they were not inclined to pursue this avenue.

SUSTAINABILITY IMPACT

Identifying opportunities for budget balancing and revenue generation will help sustain City programs and services. Additionally, the proposed public opinion survey will include a number of questions regarding environmental programs such as the City's Climate Action Plan, urban greening, and capital improvement projects intended to help the City gain insight into topics of primary interest to the community.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

Conducting a public opinion survey with a professional survey firm is estimated at \$20,000. Conducting a public opinion survey via mail is estimated at \$6,000 plus staff time, and a basic web-based survey can be conducted without a direct cost for conducting the survey, plus staff time.

Attachments

1. Proposals received from professional survey firms and evaluation matrix
2. Draft public opinion survey questions/topics