

Nov. 26, 2007

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Residents like county's quality of life, cite taxes as top issue

Residents ranked "taxes" as the most important issue facing Sarasota County for the first time in six years of annual Citizens Surveys. Taxes edged out population growth/new development, traffic and affordable housing as the main issues for residents in the 2007 survey.

In rating the overall quality of life in Sarasota County, a significant majority (85 percent) say the quality is "excellent" or "good."

Results from the survey were presented to the County Commission by Susan MacManus of the Department of Government & International Affairs at the University of South Florida. MacManus has conducted the annual survey for the county for 16 years.

The county asks citizens about the issues that are important to them and asks them to evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of county government performance. County officials use the results to guide decisions, plan programs and improve the delivery of services.

"These citizen surveys are a very important way for Sarasota County to stay in touch with public concerns and the issues that people think are important," MacManus said.

About eight out of 10 residents say they are "very" or "somewhat" satisfied with services provided by Sarasota County. The county's service satisfaction ratings have been increasing. The percentage giving a "very satisfied" response increased from 18 percent to 26 percent from 2006 to 2007.

"People love to live in Sarasota County and they believe county government is very responsive," MacManus said. "They're also worried about their pocketbook and are interested in how government is spending their money."

The 2007 Citizens Survey asked residents about how often they've contacted the county. Nearly one-third of the citizens surveyed report contacting a county office or official in the past year.

Most people report contacting Sarasota County either to "get information" (36 percent) or to "ask for help" (24 percent). One-third say they contacted to advise county officials about something that needed attention – 18 percent "to voice a concern" and 16 percent to "report something."

Among residents who have contacted Sarasota County during the past year, about 75 percent said they are satisfied with the county's responsiveness to their request, concern, or problem. The highest responsiveness ratings are from citizens who contacted the county to "get information."

When asked how long it took them to get to the right person or office for assistance, 50 percent said they got to the right place immediately, 24 percent had to be transferred a few times.

More than half (55 percent) of the residents say local government is the most responsive to citizens needs compared to state and federal governments.

In the 2007 survey, the most frequently-cited pressures on citizens' pocketbooks are homeowner-related: property taxes (29 percent), homeowner insurance costs (24 percent) and personal debt, including mortgages (11 percent). Compared to 2006, there has been a sharp increase (from 18 percent to 29 percent) in the proportion citing property taxes as the greatest pressure point.

When residents are asked about which level of government should play the lead role in setting limits on local property taxes that ultimately affect the services a locality can offer, the overwhelming majority (66 percent) of county residents believe it should be the cities and counties rather than the state legislature.

When residents are asked a more direct question about which legislative body should have the direct responsibility for setting the county's property tax rate – the state legislature or the Sarasota County Commission – 69 percent favor local control and tax rate setting by the Sarasota County Commission.

Nearly half (45 percent) of respondents believe local government is the most effective at spending tax dollars, just 18 percent say it's state government and only 6 percent say it's the federal government. There has been an increase in the proportion citing local government since the 2006 survey (40 percent to 45 percent) and a decline in the percentage citing state government (23 percent to 18 percent).

When residents were asked about what services should be cut first in the event that Sarasota County government has to reduce spending significantly, the top two choices are recreational-related – parks (18 percent) and beaches (14 percent). However, 29 percent of residents wouldn't recommend any reduction in services. The survey found little consensus on what residents believe should be cut first or second.

The 2007 public opinion poll, a telephone survey of a random sample of 800 Sarasota County residents 18 years of age and older, was conducted from Sept. 5-18, 2007 by Susan Schuler & Associates, Inc.

The margin of error for the survey is +/- 3.5% at the 95% confidence level. The sample drawn by Schuler & Associates was representative of the age group, gender, and racial/ethnic make-up of Sarasota County.

For more information about the 2007 Citizens Survey, visit the Sarasota County Web site at www.scgov.net or contact the Call Center at 941-861-5000.