

Citizens give high marks to county services, quality of life

Almost nine out of 10 Sarasota County residents (86 percent) give high marks to the overall quality of life in Sarasota County – 40 percent rate it as “excellent,” 46 percent as “good.”

That’s one of the top findings of the 17th annual Citizens Opinion survey conducted for Sarasota County by Dr. Susan MacManus, Distinguished University Professor in the Department of Government & International Affairs at the University of South Florida.

One aspect of the survey asked citizens if they’re thinking of leaving the county. Four of the most commonly cited reasons among citizens who are considering leaving the county are finance-related – cost of living (21 percent), lack of jobs (19 percent), property taxes/insurance rates (15 percent), and the economy (6 percent).

Those who are thinking about leaving (10 percent) are most likely to be 18-29 years of age, African-American, with annual household incomes below \$30,000, and are currently unemployed or working part-time.

Those contemplating moving cite places where the cost of living is lower than in Sarasota County.

The most important issue facing Sarasota County

No single issue is cited by a majority of the survey respondents. However, almost two-thirds (64 percent) mention one of four issues:

- Economy/jobs – 22 percent
- Population growth/new development – 17 percent
- Taxes – 15 percent
- Traffic/transportation – 10 percent

Half (50 percent) of the respondents mention an issue that has a direct impact on personal economic well-being – economy/jobs, taxes, affordable housing, health care, energy costs, property/home insurance, declining property values.

Fiscal stress is the common element in the recent years’ top rankings. From 2002-2006, population growth/new development was the top-ranked issue. In 2007, it was taxes.

Public transportation

Like most Floridians, Sarasota County residents most often travel by car – 91 percent usually drive alone; 5 percent carpool or ride with someone else. About 2 percent ride the bus or use a van service.

Over 70 percent of the residents surveyed believe it is “very important” for Sarasota County to offer public transportation services to county residents. Another 18 percent regard it as “somewhat important.” Support is strong for public transportation even though a high percentage of residents don’t use it very much.

Over one-fifth (22 percent) of those surveyed say they have used public transportation services at some time. But over three-fourths (78 percent) have not.

Of the survey respondents who report they have ever used public transportation in Sarasota County, 54 percent acknowledge they have used it only a couple of times. Of the rest, 17 percent use it less than once a month, 11 percent at least once a month, and 18 percent weekly (10 percent three or more times a week).

The major reason residents give for using public transit is they don't own a car or drive (36 percent). For 29 percent, it's because of rising gas prices. Another 19 percent say they ride because a disability prohibits them from driving and 16 percent believe mass transit is faster than driving. Seven percent admit if they owned a car, they wouldn't ride. For 3 percent, riding mass transit is less stressful than driving.

By far the most common reason for not using public transportation is that the respondent can get where he/she needs to go quicker by car (71 percent).

Housing and neighborhood preferences

Almost one-fifth (18 percent) say they would move to a different type of area if they could swing it financially – 38 percent to an urban/city area, 38 percent to suburbia and 24 percent to a rural area.

An overwhelming majority (74 percent) of those surveyed are either “very” or “somewhat” concerned about the cost of housing in the area where they live, while only 26 percent are “not at all concerned.” Property taxes, job insecurity, homeowners insurance and the lack of low cost housing are the most commonly cited factors contributing to unaffordable housing.

Rating county government services and communication

Among the survey respondents, 20 percent are “very satisfied,” 59 percent are “somewhat satisfied,” 11 percent are “somewhat dissatisfied,” and 8 percent are “very dissatisfied” with most of the county's services today (excluding schools). Nearly three times as many citizens are “very satisfied” as those who are “very dissatisfied” (20 percent and 8 percent respectively).

Sarasota County citizens are nearly evenly divided when it comes to their assessments of how well the county communicates its actions/issue positions to the public. Half describe the county's communication with the public as “good” or “excellent” while 47 percent rate it as “fair” or “poor.”

Preferred county service area cuts

Citizen priorities for which county services to cut back first in the event of fiscal shortfalls vary considerably:

- Parks – 17 percent
- Beaches – 14 percent
- Roads – 10 percent

Residents are the least supportive of cutbacks in transit/bus services (4 percent) and law enforcement (5 percent).

The most common response was to cut “none” of the services (19 percent).

The responses to what services areas to reduce first differ from those reported in the 2007 survey. The 2008 survey reveals:

- Increased support for first cutting back roads, social programs for the needy, and libraries.
- Reduced support for paring back law enforcement, transit/bus service, and parks.

- A significant decline in the percentage saying “none” of the services should be cut.

Methodology

The 2008 Citizens Survey used a random sample of 800 Sarasota County residents 18 years of age and older. It was conducted from July 18-Aug. 5, 2008 by Susan Schuler & Associates, Inc. The margin of error for the survey is +/- 3.5 percent at the 95 percent confidence level. The sample drawn by Schuler & Associates was representative of the age group, gender, and racial/ethnic make-up of Sarasota County.