

Staff Report

ANNUAL RESIDENT SATISFACTION SURVEY

March 3, 2009

Background

The City of Ames has conducted an annual Resident Satisfaction Report for 26 years. While various organizations have been engaged to help with the report, in 2004 the City contracted with Iowa State University Extension's CD-DIAL staff to provide expert assistance for the preparation and distribution of our survey.

It should be remembered that a survey is a technique used by cities to obtain information or gauge opinions from a subset of the population with the confidence that the findings from those surveys actually represent the feelings of the total population.

Why Survey?

The annual survey is used for two purposes. First, for the city management staff, a satisfaction survey can be a means to evaluate the effectiveness of the various services that are provided by City employees to our residents. Follow-up questions can allow staff to better understand where service is lacking or what is needed to improve to better serve our citizens. This is very important information for the staff to determine how well our customers feel we are doing each year. By having an annual survey, input can be charted over time to determine significant trends in the data.

Second, for elected officials, a survey can provide meaningful information as to how residents feel about certain important policy issues. In the past, we have included questions about the following policy issues: tax increase levels, capital improvements, wireless internet service, a new aquatics center, property maintenance code, fare-free CyRide, utility rates, and recreational facilities. The survey results are one piece of valuable information that the City Council members can use before making important policy decisions, but not the only source to be relied upon.

How We Determine Sample Size Utilized In Our Surveying?

Following their assistance with the 2004 survey, Iowa State University consultants suggested a large increase in sample size to decrease the margin of error rate. They indicated that the survey could achieve a 95% confidence level with survey responses within +/- 5% of the results that would have occurred if everyone in the City participated in the survey.

Based on our population, it was recommended that we send out approximately 1350 surveys, with the goal of receiving approximately 30 percent of the surveys returned (or around 380). In 2005, 449 surveys were returned. However, that number has declined

over the following years. In 2008, for example, only 340 surveys were returned. For the 2009 survey, our consultants may recommend increasing the mailing in an effort to increase the return rate.

How Do We Accomplish Random Distribution Of The Survey?

In order to be meaningful, survey results must be received from a random sampling of our population. The City utilizes custom software that generates random numbers for whatever sample size is desired. Once the numbers are generated randomly, they are applied to residential customer names from our list of City utility customers.

Additionally, we have been advised to over-sample the student population to generate data that more accurately represents our community. Therefore, in addition to utilizing our utility list, the CD-DIAL staff requests a random list of 400 student names and addresses from the ISU Registrar's Office, and surveys are also sent to this sampling. The anticipated return rate on student surveys is 25 percent (or 100 surveys).

Information from the U.S. Census allows us to compare the demographics of those who ultimately respond on the surveys with the demographics of those who live in Ames to determine how representative the responding sample is.

What Improvements Have We Made To The Survey Over The Years?

In 2005, the survey underwent several significant changes in format and in distribution methods in an effort to increase the number of respondents and decrease potential bias. First, the "bubble sheet" (requiring a No. 2 pencil to fill in small dots on a separate answer key) was eliminated, and respondents were allowed to write directly on the eight-page survey. Second, the survey format was altered to include more tables for easier use and open-ended questions for more accurate data. The third major change was the number of Ames residents who receive the survey. Increasing the number of surveys significantly boosted the return rate. As a result, the margin of error for each survey question improved from +/- 8% to +/- 5%.

What Is Next?

This year's survey marks a change in our relationship with CD-DIAL. The organization is in transition after their director retired. The City has been assigned to work with two professors from the Department of Sociology who have expertise in survey design and analysis. Our consulting fee has increased from \$775 to approximately \$3,000. This fee covers assistance with the formulation of questions, data inputting, and analysis of the raw data. The Public Relations Officer is responsible for writing the final report. Additional expenses for the survey include materials and copying (\$1,500) and postage (\$3,000).

Are There Any New Policy Questions Council Wants Added To The Survey?

The Public Relations Officer hopes to finalize the 2009 survey by March 11 for distribution in late March. Now is the appropriate time to identify any policy related questions the Council would like to add to the survey. Therefore, we are seeking your direction at this time.