

Editorial: City attempts to give a voice to all

Chico Enterprise-Record

Article Launched: 12/12/2007 12:00:00 AM PST

As the city of Chico begins to rewrite its roadmap for the future, it decided to first conduct a quick reality check by talking to citizens.

A telephone survey of 400 adults revealed some enlightening results. Though some people are already questioning the methodology and science of the survey, there's one overriding fact we are absolutely thrilled about — that the city even bothered to conduct a survey.

Too often, critical decisions are made by the City Council based on input by the same handful of people who show up at meetings. People who are organized and can orchestrate a show of force get what they want because no councilor will dare stand in front of the train.

But what about the vast majority of citizens, the 99 percent of residents who have never protested at a council meeting or spoken at a community meeting? They count too, yet they're frequently ignored.

What outlet does the silent majority have if they don't have the time or interest to go to long, philosophical "visioning" discussions on the General Plan? How can people weigh in on the city's future if they're working 60 hours a week and too tired to attend a meeting late in the evening or on a rare weekend day off? What opportunity is there for the people who say, "Well, I don't like to write letters to the editor" or "I don't see the point in sending an e-mail to the

City Council"?

The city tried to tap into a representative sampling of that populace with the telephone survey. The city will spend hundreds of thousands of dollars for consultants to write the General Plan, but this could be the most well-spent money of all.

At least it shows residents that the city wants to hear more than just the gadflies who show up to the Council Chambers every other Tuesday night and the contributors who gave money in the last election.

"The idea behind the survey," said Steve Peterson, the city's planning director, "was to reach a broader section of our residents."

Good for them.

People can and will argue over how to interpret the survey results, but a couple of things seem clear enough to us. People still think Chico is a special place, but a lot of residents are worried about the direction the city is headed — and almost all of the problems are related to growth.

Residents were asked, without given a list of possibilities, "What do you feel is the most important issue facing the city of Chico?" Crime and public safety came first, followed by residential development, traffic, city finances and population growth.

It's clear that most people don't want Chico to sprawl into the farmland to the west, and that a large number of people don't want Chico to grow anywhere.

Given a choice, though, most people would prefer growth to occur north and south along Highway 99.

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It's also clear that citizens who dream of buying a home in the next 10 years want a house with a large yard — not a home with a small yard, or a townhouse or condo, and definitely not an apartment or a house above some commercial building.

It's also welcome news that citizens are finally starting to pay attention to the city's budget problems. When asked to categorize the city government's financial situation, 1 percent said excellent, 23 percent said good, 42 percent said fair and 29 percent said poor. (Five percent admitted they don't pay attention; the 24 percent who said "good" or "excellent" should have admitted the same thing.)

To view the survey questions and results, go to www.chicogeneralplan.com.

The survey won't go a long way toward shaping the final General Plan, but at least it serves as a reality check that there are more citizens out there than those who attend public meetings. That's a good thing for the General Plan Advisory Committee to remember throughout the process.

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