

COMMUNITY PLANNING SURVEYS

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The community planning survey is widely recognized as an effective method for gathering citizen input. While the work and monetary costs associated with a survey can be high, your planning commission may find that it complements and supports your overall citizen participation scheme very well. This factsheet and its *Technical Appendix* pull together information from various sources, including community planning surveys conducted in 2001 in Waterbury and Worcester, VT, to touch upon the primary issues that need to be addressed to design and conduct a community survey and make it an effective piece of your community's planning process. You will also find suggestions or additional resources to pursue.

A. Anticipated Outcomes

As with any citizen participation technique, a survey has its strengths and weaknesses. In fact, many communities combine surveys with other input techniques (e.g., public hearings or community visioning events) in their municipal planning process to capitalize upon their varying strengths.

Many aspects of community survey work need to be addressed:

- research,
- design,
- testing,
- sampling,
- implementation,
- collection,
- data entry,
- analysis, and
- reporting.

These steps are all touched upon in some way in this factsheet and its *Technical Appendix*.

A Quick Look

- A. Anticipated Outcomes:** *Personal preferences*—below
- B. Flow of Information:** *One-way (respondent to planning commission)*—page 2
- C. Scope of Work:** *Extensive*—page 2
- D. Degree of Participant Interaction:** *None to minimal (depends on survey method)*—page 3
- E. Degree of Citizen Empowerment:** *Minimal: consultation*—page 4

It is possible for a survey to collect input on a broader range of issues from a larger group of people than a public hearing or other interactive participation event. Research by one planner shows that up to 85% of community survey respondents have not attended any community meetings within the preceding year. (*Source: Miller, 1999.*) Thus, community surveys can be used to complement any number of participation techniques in a number of ways.

A survey is best suited for measuring how opinions vary on community issues. While not as suitable as more interactive participation events for assessing the whys of those opinions, a survey can address a limitless range of planning topics. (See boxes on pages 3 and 4 for the topics covered by the Worcester and Waterbury surveys.) Even questions that would be embarrassing in a public setting can be asked within the relative confidentiality of a survey.

One of the first and most important outcome issues your planning commission will have to consider is whose opinions you want to collect. Your commission may desire information from the entire community, but if certain subgroups are important, they need to be identified

now. Your planning commission should be sure to have access to current demographic information on your community to identify these subgroups. (See the *Technical Appendix* for more information on sampling.)

B. Flow of Information

A survey is a vehicle for gathering public opinion. The bulk of the information exchange is one-way, from respondent to planning commission. Some information should be conveyed to the respondents through a cover letter that states the following:

- why filling out the survey is important,
- how to find out about the final survey data once it is analyzed, and
- how to get involved in other aspects of the community planning process.

Due to space restrictions, the inclusion of anything more than general information pertinent to the survey is not recommended.

C. Scope of Work

The work involved in conducting a survey can extend for months. Your planning commission will have to account for the time, staff, and money available to conduct a community survey. Depending on

The response rate

Your planning commission may be able to get a survey response of 50% or more, depending on how much work is put into encouraging survey returns. Nevertheless, any return rate can be useful. While representation of the entire community is limited by a low response rate, many researchers feel that having some data is better than no information at all. For example, Waterbury, VT, received a 56% response to their 2001 survey mail-out, and Worcester, VT, only received 19%. However, both planning commissions were able to use their survey data as vital parts of their municipal planning processes. Read on in this factsheet and its *Technical Appendix* for tips on encouraging a good return.

(Sources: CRS, 2001; Sawyer, 2001.)

the survey method used (see the *Technical Appendix*), the data entry phase can be the most time-consuming factor. Many planning commissions pay other parties to do data entry. Some even contract the entire survey process out to a research consultant.

Using Consultants

It is highly recommended that you explore working with consultants for your survey. Depending on the size of your town, the resources your commission has, and what you want the survey to accomplish, hiring a consultant to do much of the technical work may be the best course of action. On the other hand, you may decide that the survey effort can be implemented by the commission with or without help from additional volunteers. Whatever your strategy, your first priority should be to assess the ability of your commission to effectively guide the survey effort and ensure its contribution to the planning process.

The use of a consultant will give your commission more time to deal with the survey in a community planning context, but normally results in a higher cost. A survey designed and performed by a consultant can cost from \$2,000 to tens of thousands dollars, depending on what your commission's needs are. A large sample size, which increases the statistical significance of the survey, will also increase the cost. Miller likens survey pricing to "a compromise between precision and possibility." (Source: Miller, 1999.) (See the "Resources for Citizen Planners" section on page 4 for a list of consultants.)

Using volunteers

Whether or not your planning commission makes use of a consultant, survey costs can be controlled by welcoming volunteer work. Often local residents have survey research skills. Volunteers can contribute to almost all aspects of the survey:

- research for issues and questions,
- survey testing,
- mailing,
- interviewing,
- follow-ups and encouraging returns,
- data entry, and
- publicity.

If using volunteers, your commission will want to ensure that the experience is meaningful and even fun. The quality of a survey is only as good as the quality of the work. Extra encouragement and attention will be necessary to motivate and retain volunteers.

Assemble a subcommittee

Another area where volunteer work can have a significant impact is as a special subcommittee to guide the entire life of the survey and serve as liaison with any consultants involved. A consistent group of people, constantly mindful of the context and goals of the community survey, will help produce a valuable collection of data in an effective manner. To further enrich the impact of the survey upon community planning, your commission could ask dependable non-commission members to join the subcommittee. (Source: Miller, 1999.) This will help add broad community insight to the entire process and allow planning commissioners to maintain an overview of the survey process while retaining time for normal commission business. (See factsheet #6, *Citizen Advisory Groups*, for more information on placing citizens on a planning committee.)

Do your homework

A clear purpose for the survey—knowing what you want it to accomplish—will benefit you greatly in performing the design tasks. You may also find that a little research helps out as well, especially if you want to add comparability to the features of the resulting data. In both Waterbury and Worcester, VT, the first resources the planning commissions looked to for question ideas were previous surveys, including work from other Vermont communities. This not only allowed them to apply the survey experiences of the past to the questions of the future, but it enabled them to properly compare survey data from one year to previous years and look for some important trends in community preferences.

D. Degree of Participant Interaction

Logically there is very little, if any, participant interaction during the completion of a survey. Phone surveys and face-to-face interviews present some possibilities for interaction between respondents and interviewers. This is one of the reasons why these two methods garner better response rates. Even so, comparability and consistency from one respondent to the next requires that everyone is asked the same questions in a similar manner. The interviewer must ensure that any interaction does not detract from the careful controls that may be placed on the survey. This should not be an immediate concern for your commission if you contract with a consultant for interviewing; however, the professionalism of interviewers employed by the consultant should be a factor in your hiring decision.

Mail surveys present no possibilities for interac-

tion. In this case, with no interviewer present to maintain the respondent's focus and interest in the survey, careful question design and a meaningful community

Community Planning Survey Example: Worcester, VT

In October 2001, the Worcester Planning Commission mailed a planning survey to every household in the town. The 342 addresses were acquired from the Town Clerk's property tax records. Sixty-five surveys were returned for a response rate of 19%.

The survey consisted of four pages. Question themes included Demographics, Vision of Worcester, Growth and Development, Recreation and Natural Resources, Roads and Transportation, and Land Use Planning with both open-ended and multiple-choice questions. Respondents were directed to return the survey to an upcoming public meeting to be eligible for a Thanksgiving turkey raffle. Only one mail-out of the survey was conducted.

The survey responses were summarized in a final report that includes frequencies and the valid percentages of answers to each question. The answers to open-ended questions are presented in their entirety. The report includes a special comparison of survey demographic data to 2000 U.S. Census data on the community. Despite the low response rate, there were few demographic differences between the survey response and the Census data, lending some strength to the effort to be representative.

The data collected from the survey was used to complement a series of three public meetings held on topics that had been prioritized with an earlier mail survey. That past survey was also used to inform the design of this survey. The results of this survey are quoted frequently in Worcester's 2002 revised Town Plan. Despite the disappointing return rate, Worcester planning commissioners felt the survey offered residents an opportunity to participate and give their input.

(Source: Sawyer, 2001.)

Community Planning Survey Example: Waterbury, VT

In 2001, the Waterbury Planning Commission mailed a planning survey to a simple random sample of 585 citizens selected from the town's voter registration list. The list equaled 2,525 residents, 51% of the total town population. Three hundred thirty-seven surveys were returned for a rate of 58%, equaling 13% of Waterbury's voting population.

The survey consisted of four pages: three pages of questions and a final page with return address information and postage, allowing the entire survey to be folded and mailed back without the need of an envelope or a stamp. The survey contained both open-ended and multiple-choice questions on Economic Development and Land Use, Natural Resources, Cultural and Community Resources, Municipal Services and Resources, General Town/Village Issues, and Demographics. The survey questions were a synthesis of questions from the 1990 Waterbury Community Survey and new questions presented by the Planning Commission.

The survey returns were tracked, and the mail-out consisted of three phases:

1. The survey was sent to the entire sample with cover letter.
2. A reminder "postcard" was sent to the entire sample 1 1/2 weeks later.
3. Three weeks from the first mail-out, a second set of identical surveys was mailed to any sample subjects who had not yet returned a survey. Two weeks were given for any final returns.

The survey responses were summarized in a final report that includes frequencies and the valid percentages of answers to each question. The text answers to open-ended questions are thematically grouped. Special cross-tabulations of data topics highlighted by the Waterbury Planning Commission are included. The report also contains a methodological section and a comparison of survey demographic data to 2000 U.S. Census data on the community.

[Source: CRS, 2001.]

context are the most effective strategies for ensuring good responses.

E. Degree of Citizen Empowerment

The best way to make survey respondents feel empowered is to show them how their efforts have impacted the community planning process. Your planning commission will have spent a lot of resources on the community planning survey. Once the survey is completed, celebrate it:

- Release a survey summary to local news media.
- Set a special public meeting date to discuss the final results.
- Make the final report available at other public meetings and Town Meeting Day.
- Use the data to inform future citizen participation activities.
- Quote the survey results often in any revisions to the municipal plan.

Do not forget about past surveys either. Reminding citizens how past findings affected decisions makes the best case for supporting the current survey process and any future efforts.

With well-publicized and well-used survey data, your planning commission will get the most "bang for its buck," and residents will be assured that the next time a planning survey comes along, their answers truly will make a difference in the future of their community.

The inclusion of priority-issue and open-comment questions that allow respondents to express their feelings and opinions will also contribute to a sense of empowerment. This is an issue that should not be overlooked by your commission. A feeling of empowerment will have a positive effect on the survey return rate.

Resources for Citizen Planners

Organizations/Consultants*:

Your community's Regional Planning Commission (find it at www.vpic.info/rpcs).

The Center for Rural Studies
University of Vermont
Website: <http://crs.uvm.edu>
Phone: (802) 656-3021

Action Research
Burlington, VT
Website: www.actionresearch.com
Phone: (802) 862-4370

Burnt Rock
Waitsfield, VT
Website: www.burntrock.com
Phone: (802) 496-9909

Macro International, Inc.
Burlington, VT
Website: www.macoint.com
Phone: (802) 863-9600

Also check out the Vermont Planning Information
Center at www.vpic.info

*By no means is this a comprehensive list of consultants for community survey research in Vermont. Please contact your regional planning commission for more information on consultants.

Publications:

Citizen Surveys: How to Do Them, How to Use Them, What They Mean by Thomas I. Miller and Michelle A. Miller. Second edition published in 2000 by International City/County Management Association, Washington, D.C.

Designing and Conducting Survey Research: A Comprehensive Guide by Louis M. Rea and Richard A. Parker. Second edition published in 1997 by Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco, CA.

How to Conduct Your Own Survey by Priscilla Salant and Don A. Dillman. Published in 1994 by Wiley, New York, NY.

Survey Research Methods, 3rd Ed. by Floyd J. Fowler, Jr. Published in 2002 by Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Also, consult the primary information source for this factsheet listed under “Reference Information.”

Please refer to this factsheet’s *Technical Appendix*.

Reference Information

Primary information sources for this factsheet and its *Technical Appendix*:

Center for Rural Studies (CRS). 2001. *Waterbury Planning Commission 2001 Community Survey Frequencies and Report*. University of Vermont Center for Rural Studies: Burlington, VT.

Fowler, Floyd J. 2002. *Survey Research Methods, 3rd Ed.* Sage Publications: Thousand Oaks, CA.

Green, Gary Paul, & Gary Korb. unpublished. *Community surveys: When to conduct them and how to choose the appropriate technique*. Department of Rural Sociology, University of Wisconsin: Madison, WI.

Miller, Thomas I. 1999. Citizen surveys: taking your community's pulse. *Planning Commissioners Journal*: 35, pp. 9-15.

Sawyer, William R. 2001. *Worcester 2001 Town Planning Survey Frequencies Report*. University of Vermont Center for Rural Studies: Burlington, VT.

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