



# Georgia Planning Officials Newsletter

July 2008

## **Citizen Surveys: Taking Your Community's Pulse**

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No planning department worth its salt creates or significantly alters a master plan, design guidelines, or zoning without input from the community. Numerous opportunities for input are often provided: forums held in every neighborhood; well-publicized community-wide meetings; call-in radio or cable shows; newspaper clip-outs. Despite the public back patting for having done so well in the citizen input arena, many elected officials and board members are nagged by self-doubt about the real success of their "citizen involvement" efforts.

A growing number of communities are augmenting traditional meetings and forums with citizen surveys. Surveys are far more successful in capturing the typical community resident and making that resident's opinion part of the community calculus. From general to specific, surveys can address topics such as quality of life; attitudes toward growth; transportation habits; park and recreation preferences; and economic development. Here are some tips in putting together a successful citizen survey.

### **IDENTIFY WHY A SURVEY IS NEEDED AND WHAT IT IS INTENDED TO DO**

One of the first things a community must do before it conducts a survey is to agree on the answer to the question: "What do we want to learn?" By developing a statement that clearly explains why the survey is being undertaken, the community will have a much easier time planning the survey, analyzing responses, and disseminating the results.

### **DETERMINE HOW MUCH YOUR COMMUNITY CAN SPEND**

Budgets generally exclude the value of staff or volunteer time but, if you can, it is wise to know the complete cost of doing a survey. These days a scientific survey tends to cost between \$8,000 and \$15,000 for the basics.

### **PUT A TEAM IN PLACE TO ANALYZE THE RESULTS**

Identify a panel of staff and citizens who are charged with making recommendations to the planning director, city manager, or city council about the meaning and use of the results. Let the panel members know that they will be expected to determine if the results merit nothing more than "watchful waiting" or if action is required.

### **IDENTIFY THE TARGET POPULATION AND SAMPLE SIZE**

A representative sample identifies potential respondents in a way that does not systematically exclude any group from the community. For example, if Latinos comprise ten percent of your community's population, they should also make up about ten percent of your survey respondents. A representative sample is drawn from a "sampling frame," which is a complete list or representation of everyone in a target population who could be surveyed.

### **ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS IN THE RIGHT WAY**

The heart of every survey is, of course, the questions it contains. Developing a solid questionnaire (sometimes called a survey "instrument") is not a torturous task, however. All it takes is the application of a little common sense and attention to the principles of consistency, clarity, simplicity, and fairness.

### **TEST THE SURVEY AND ADJUST IF NECESSARY**

Testing a survey instrument is critical if a surveyor is to determine whether the instrument contains questions that are clear and easily understood. A sample of twenty "pretest" respondents can identify questions that may not be explicit enough or that seem to suggest an answer.

### **CONDUCT THE SURVEY, CHECK FOR BIAS, AND INTERPRET THE RESULTS**

For the results of a survey to be valid, the responses on which they are based must reflect the target population. Consequently, before interpreting the results of a survey, a surveyor must calculate the rate of response for the survey, and check and correct for any non-response bias. While it is true that much can be learned from mathematically intensive evaluation of survey results, most citizen surveys do not require fancy statistics.

More and more communities are using surveys to get a better sense of public opinion on a wide range of planning related issues. For surveys to be of value, however, they need to be carefully prepared and administered.

## **Upcoming Events**

### **Southface Sustainable Roundtable**

**July 11, 2008**—Atlanta, GA

For more information visit [www.southface.org](http://www.southface.org)

### **Community Planning Institute 2-Day Training**

**July 14-15, 2008**—Helen, GA

For more information visit [www.georgiaplanning.org](http://www.georgiaplanning.org)

### **Grant Writing Class**

**July 28-29, 2008**—Atlanta, GA

The Atlanta Police Department and Grant Writing USA will present this 2-day grant writing workshop.

For more information visit [www.gmanet.com](http://www.gmanet.com)

### **Community Planning Academy: Water: An Essential Resource**

**August 6, 2008**—Atlanta, GA

This 1-day workshop sponsored by the Atlanta Regional Commission provides planning officials, public works engineers and water supply managers with a better understanding about water supply and conservation management plans that work.

For more information visit

[www.atlantaregional.com/communityplanningacademy](http://www.atlantaregional.com/communityplanningacademy)

### **Georgia Planning Association Fall Conference**

**October 1-3, 2008**—Augusta, GA

Planning Officials Track