

Fixing San Diego While City Finances are Top Concern

Analysis by John E. Nienstedt, Sr., President

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With budget and financial issues topping the list of San Diegan's concerns, residents tend to favor putting more power in the hands of the Mayor. A majority favor upping to six the number of votes needed to override a Mayoral veto as well as making the recently adopted "strong Mayor" form of government permanent. How would citizens deal with the financial crisis if they had decision-making power? "Sell, sell, sell" seems to be the current mantra. Most residents believe selling City assets has merit while few would drastically cut city services. Our survey also shows a resurgent crime problem and that pay for public safety is an emerging issue.

City Finances Continue to Draw Attention

Though the number of residents focused on the City's budgetary travails has dropped considerably since 2005 and 2006, it still tops the list as 19% say it is the most important issue facing San Diego. Analysis shows that there is a huge relationship between the financial issue and income. That is, as a resident's income increases, that resident is far more likely to focus on City finances as the top issue. As the chart shows, 42% of those earning more than \$150,000 annually and 35% in the \$100,000 to \$150,000 range are budget-focused, while residents making less than \$40,000 are rarely concerned about the City's finances and much more often concerned with crime. [insert chart]

This income-based "flipping" of the two biggest local issues is intriguing. It suggests that, while crime affects lower income individuals at a disproportionately higher rate, civic financial issues are the province of the affluent.

It is also fascinating to find that – in the current environment – venerable San Diego concerns like traffic (just 5% are focused on it) and growth (3%!) are relegated to diminished status. In their places are immigration (6%) – a favorite among Republicans – "local politics" (5%) – a bigger worry for long-time residents – housing (5%) – and the brand new issue of police and firefighter salaries (5%).

No Wage Freeze for City Employees

Despite the focus on the City's budget and the acknowledgment that San Diego is in dire financial shape, a majority of citizens do not support a wage freeze. Young residents are steadfastly against a freeze while middle-aged folks are less strident in their opposition. Even among those 65 and older, strong support for the freeze amounts to just one-quarter of that segment, while 42% oppose it, though they do so with much less intensity than their younger counterparts. Freezing wages even gets a chilly reception among Republicans. The dagger in the heart of a wage freeze? Even a majority those who consider the current fiscal situation "very bad" are not on board with a wage freeze.

So, What Would You Do?

Given a choice between four much-discussed but difficult options, local residents are clearly attracted to selling off prime city assets as the best way to deal with San Diego's fiscal situation. In fact, the only groups which prefer raising taxes and fees to selling City property are homemakers and students. Together they account for only 15% of the adult population. Declaring bankruptcy and cutting services are both viewed as the best course of action by merely 10%, while 23% and 29%, respectively; rule out each of those options.

Power to the Mayor's Office

Our polling shows that Jerry Sanders is now a popular Mayor and this is one of the central reasons why residents tend to want to make the strong Mayor system permanent. While support for a measure to keep it is not overwhelming, opposition is not intense and limited to just 32% overall. However, among those who approve of Sanders' work, a whopping 60% want to make the change permanent. On the other side of the scale, about half those who think Sanders is doing a bad job oppose the strong Mayor system.

The fact that Sanders' performance figures so heavily in the strong Mayor question is interesting for a number of reasons. First, 2011 (when the system is set to expire) is a long ways off and Sanders might not be in office then. Another Mayor may not have the same pull with the voters and the strong Mayor system could lose favor. Also, if Sanders' popularity dips, this analysis shows it is likely support for making the strong Mayor arrangement permanent will go with it.

The final fascinating finding is that while approval of Sanders "drives" support for strong Mayor, it is largely unrelated to support or opposition to increasing the number of Council votes necessary to override a veto from five to six. Such a change would immediately strengthen the hand of the incumbent Mayor, yet support of it is more related to partisanship and education levels. Residents strongly aligned with the GOP favor increasing the Mayor's veto power, as do those with less education. One interpretation is that only highly partisan folks on either side of the political spectrum really understand the significance of this "inside baseball" topic. Since Sanders' strong crossover appeal puts so many Democrats in his camp, this tends to stunt the relationship of his approval rating to the override question.

About the SDIPR/Competitive Edge Opinion Barometer

This survey was conducted by Competitive Edge Research & Communication (CERC) in conjunction with the San Diego Institute for Policy Research (SDIPR). SDIPR jointly determined the issues to be covered in this survey. SDIPR provided CERC with background information on the issues contained in the questionnaire and both entities discussed the topics in order to produce an effective questionnaire. Final responsibility for all questions, the data collection and the analysis presented herein rests with CERC.

These findings are based on a random sample of 503 City of San Diego residents. The interviewing was conducted January 3rd through the 6th in English and Spanish from CERC's San Diego facility. Professional interviewers were trained for this specific project. The duration of the average interview was 16 minutes. The random digit dial sample was provided by Scientific Telephone Samples of Foothill Ranch, CA. After completing collecting the data, results were weighted on the voter

registration, gender and age variables to CERC's estimates of the overall San Diego City population gathered from the US Census and the San Diego County Registrar of Voters.

Sampling Error

According to statistical theory, the confidence level associated with a sample of this type is such that, with a question where the respondents answer 50% "yes" and 50% "no," 95% of the time the results are within plus or minus $\pm 4.4\%$ of the *true value*, where true value refers to the results obtained if it were possible to interview every possible qualified respondent. The degree of error is reduced when responses have larger (e.g. 60%-40%, 70%-30%) percentage differences. Conversely, the margin of error increases when a subset of the entire 503 responses is analyzed.

In addition to error introduced by sampling variability, there are many other possible sources of bias such as how a question is worded, the question sequence, or individual interviewer techniques. Competitive Edge does everything in its power to minimize these potential sources of bias.

A survey of this type is a good measure of current attitudes that may change over time. This survey should not necessarily serve as an unqualified predictor of events, but, as an indicator to the situation in early January, 2007.

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