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Residents rate quality of life high, worry about jobs in survey

In spite of the economic downturn, 89 percent of residents say Sarasota County's quality-of-life is "excellent" or "good," an increase since last year.

That's one of the key findings in the 2009 annual Citizens Survey, presented to the Sarasota County Commission by Dr. Susan MacManus, distinguished university professor in the Department of Government & International Affairs at the University of South Florida. The Florida Institute of Government at USF administers the survey.

For the second year in a row, the economy and jobs rank as citizens' most important issue, at 27 percent. That reflects rising unemployment rates and concerns about the outmigration of population and businesses.

Good-paying jobs a concern

The loss of jobs (43 percent) is perceived as the biggest threat to the county's economy. It's followed by government waste and inefficiency (15 percent), property tax rates (13 percent), and people in industry leaving the county (10 percent).

In an indication of the depth of public concern about the local economy, an overwhelming majority (86 percent) favor giving a business a temporary property tax break to bring jobs to the county.

Top spending priorities

Education, roads, economic development are citizens' top spending priorities. Among those who believe more money needs to be spent in some areas, education tops the list (28 percent), followed by roads/transportation (12 percent), economic development (9 percent) and affordable housing (6 percent).

Parks, beaches lead list for cuts

Government and citizens must make tough choices about what things to cut back on first when resources are limited. When asked what two service areas should be reduced first, if necessary, leisure-related services – parks (17 percent) and beaches (13 percent) – led the list.

Asked whether service levels should remain the same, be cut back, or expanded (and if so, how to pay for it), 36 percent favor creating a new revenue source (other than the property tax) and earmarking it to a specific service or project.

Residents feel safe

During periods of economic downturn, personal fears about safety generally increase. When the Citizen Opinion Survey asked Sarasota County residents how safe they feel in their own neighborhood, 70 percent feel very safe and 28 percent feel somewhat safe. Just 3 percent say they do not feel safe.

Support for solar energy

In the future, citizens may be relying more heavily on solar energy. To gauge citizens' interest in speeding up that transition, the survey asked respondents whether they would be willing to pay a small amount more on their electric bill if it were used to produce solar energy. Even in these tough times, over half (53 percent) say "yes" while 42 percent say "no."

Citizens treated with respect

The overwhelming majority (86 percent) of citizen contactors say they were treated with respect by county officials and employees. Eighty-two percent say they were given correct information. Over three-fourths acknowledge they were helped in a timely fashion by county personnel.

Residents satisfied with county services

Residents are considerably more satisfied (78 percent) than dissatisfied (10 percent) with the services offered by Sarasota County. Significantly, in this year's survey, the proportion of residents who say they are "very" satisfied with services rose slightly for the first time since 2007. Dissatisfaction levels fell.

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