

# On Gauging Public Opinion

by Elaine Cogan

How do you and the other planning commissioners keep your figurative fingers on the pulse of your community?

There are many ways to ascertain public opinion and attitudes and it is very important that you choose those that suit you and your community. That does not imply you should always change well-reasoned and substantiated findings if some people seem to think otherwise. However, it is important to know prevailing attitudes on general planning issues or specific areas of contention. Polls, questionnaires, and other techniques described below can help you.

*Scientific surveys.* Usually conducted by phone, surveys are the most accurate opinion research tools — and also the most costly. Pollsters can test any sample of the population you require and provide statistically accurate results. As the client, keep close control over the content of the questions and make sure they cover your issues in a factual and unbiased fashion. For statistical accuracy, a professional pollster should craft the exact language, but the commission and staff should control the topics to cover.<sup>1</sup>

*Written questionnaires.* The value of a questionnaire is that it can be broadly distributed, with minimal cost. There are many ways: if you have a website, post it there; ask the local newspaper editor to print it; send it out with utility bills; leave stacks at the local library, market, and other places people gather; ask the schools if they can send them home with the children. In other words, be inventive and you will find many ways to distribute it.

Schools may be more cooperative if you include a question or two important

to them. They probably have parents who will volunteer to help you collate the results. Retired seniors, church, and civic groups are other sources of free labor. It is important to remember that, unlike scientific surveys, such questionnaires do not have statistical reliability.

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Even so, as with surveys, the questions should be unambiguous and factual, neutrally worded, and relatively easy to answer. For example, “on a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being highly agree; 5 disagree; what is your opinion of the following: (fill in the issues).” Always leave space for personal comments. Also consider asking demographic questions such as age, gender, zip code or neighborhood, and how long respondents have lived or owned a business in your community. Names should be optional.

*Focus groups.* These are facilitated discussions with usually no more than 10 or 12 participants chosen as representatives of specific segments of the population whose opinions are important to you. Many times, they are paid a stipend for their participation. The validity of the results is dependent to a great extent on the skill of the discussion leader in soliciting information from a roomful of strangers, and how accurately the few people represent the population you want to hear from. This is best accomplished by hiring a professional firm.

*On-the-street interviews.* Paid interviewers or volunteers who stop people on the street or at malls or supermarkets

is a marginally useful technique. Many just do not want to be bothered and some may become hostile. The questions must necessarily be brief and require simple answers. Their primary value is getting the word out that the planning board is genuinely interested in public opinion.

*Internet dialogue.* This can be based on a written questionnaire but also include additional information and encourage the exchange of opinions. You may receive more responses than you anticipated or the conversation may go off in a direction that makes you uncomfortable, but such electronic town halls are becoming increasingly popular.

*Presentations and feedback.* Whenever commission members and staff give speeches or presentations to community groups, you should include a time for questions. Having a staff person or volunteer keep a summary of remarks is still another way to keep track of public opinion.

*Letters to the editor or opinion columns.* Though only the most motivated people usually take the time to use this forum, you should read them as they represent still another segment of public opinion.

Not one of the techniques discussed is sufficient unto itself in giving you and the commission an accurate understanding of public opinion on planning issues. Knowing the range should enable you to choose those most appropriate to your needs. In gauging public opinion, it is best to use many techniques and use them continuously. ♦

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed look at how planning departments can develop and make use of surveys and questionnaires, see Thomas Miller's, "Citizen Surveys" in PCJ #35, available to order & download at: <[www.plannersweb.com/citizensurveys.html](http://www.plannersweb.com/citizensurveys.html)>.