EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

APRIL 2007

Project Directors

David O’Hara Ph.D.
Professor
Economics
david.ohara@metrostate.edu
612-659-7260

Roger Israel DPA
Professor
Public Administration
roger.israel@metrostate.edu
612-659-7286

Francis J. Schweigert Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
Public Administration
francis.schweigert@metrostate.edu
612-659-7296
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This is the ninth Metropolitan State Civic Confidence survey since its inception in 1996. The purpose of the survey is to measure attitudes of residents in the seven-county, Twin Cities area toward government services. More than half of Minnesota’s population lives in the region.

The survey focuses on citizens’ views of government services and employees, ethics of elected officials, major issues facing government, the regional economy and community connections. It gives more attention than most public opinion polls to residents’ views of their local government.

Metropolitan State has been committed to improving the professional and community life of the metropolitan area since the university’s founding thirty-six years ago, and the majority of Metropolitan State’s students come from the seven-county region. The Civic Confidence survey is part of that long-term commitment. It is hoped that both policy makers and citizens can use the survey’s findings to improve the performance and accountability of public institutions.

Metropolitan State plans to continue to conduct this survey in future years to learn more about the evolving attitudes of Twin Cities metropolitan area residents. As in previous surveys, we have added a few new questions about current issues we believe will be important for years to come. This year, the new questions related to traffic problems, voting accuracy and election campaign reform, global warming and uses for the projected state of Minnesota budget surplus.

Some of the key findings of this year’s poll are:

- Concern about crime reemerged as the metro area's biggest problem for the first time since 1999.

- Traffic congestion continues to be seen as a major problem metro area, virtually tying with crime as the most-frequently cited concern.

- Drivers using cell phones was identified as the worst traffic problem in the Twin Cities area.

- Twin Cities residents have a great amount of confidence in their local school districts and are satisfied with their services.
Government services and employees still receive high marks from Twin Cities residents, but the perception of elected officials’ honesty and the responsiveness of government officials to citizens’ concerns and needs both declined significantly.

For the first time since the survey began in 1996, a majority of people feel that most government officials are not responsive to their concerns and needs.

Political polarization after the last two national elections in 2004 and 2006 continues to be an issue.

Slightly less than half of Twin Cities residents are very sure about whether their votes and those of other residents are being accurately recorded and tabulated.

An unusually large percentage of Twin Cities residents report that they are not active in civic organizations.

There appears to be strong support among Twin Cities residents for several election and campaign reform ideas.

Almost half of Twin Cities residents believe that recent immigrants may pose a threat to our security even though there is strong support for growing population diversity in the region.

Education is the top priority for the state of Minnesota’s projected budget surplus.

Almost three fourths of Twin Cities residents believe that global warming requires urgent and bold action at all levels of government.

MAJOR PROBLEMS

When asked in an open-ended question what the area’s most serious problem was, crime was cited by 28% of area residents and traffic congestion by 27%. Crime had been the number one problem from 1996 through 1999. In 1996, crime was mentioned by 72% while traffic congestion was mentioned by only 8% of residents. Although crime reemerged in first place, the overall concern about crime in 2007 did not come close to the 72% level in 1996 or the 49% level in 1998. As concern about crime declined, traffic congestion emerged as the top concern in 2000 and remained the chief problem until 2007. Until this year there has been steady growth since 1996 in the public's perception of traffic as the region's number one problem.
Education was ranked third at 9%. Perhaps due to the growing concern about crime, education was cited less frequently than the 13% in 2005. Education has consistently placed in the top four choices every year of the survey.

Because of increased concern in these quality of life categories of transportation, crime and education, we believe policy makers will need to pay closer attention to them in the future.

WORST TRAFFIC PROBLEM

A new question this year asked people to identify the worst traffic problem in the Twin Cities area. Drivers using cell phones was selected by 36% and “too much traffic on the road” by 27%. We could expect that as traffic volume increases, the irritation or risk posed by inattentive drivers will also increase. Poorly laid out highways/intersections was the third most popular traffic problem followed by speeding, road rage and driving too slowly.

TRAFFIC CONGESTION SOLUTIONS

Expecting traffic congestion to rank as a major problem we repeated a question last posed in 2005 and 2001. When asked to select their first choice for reducing traffic congestion, respondents’ answers in the 2007 results were very similar to the 2005 and 1998 results. Light rail was the most popular choice (45%) with construction of more roads second (28%) followed by improved bus service (12%). Reduction/elimination of ramp meters (4%) and use of toll roads (2%) were the least popular choices. These results were a marked contrast to the 2000 and 2001 surveys when construction of more roads was the most popular choice, followed by construction of a light rail network and improved bus service.

Although the 2007 ranking of these options was quite consistent across both city and suburban residents, more residents of Minneapolis and St. Paul favored expansion of light rail and improved bus service whereas suburban residents were more inclined to build additional roads.

USE OF STATE BUDGET SURPLUS

Since Minnesota is currently projecting a substantial budget surplus we returned to a question we asked in 1997 and 1998. We asked what should be the legislature’s top priority for use of the surplus if the projected surplus becomes a reality. Education (36%) was the highest priority (as it was in 1997 and 1998). Property tax reductions (23%) were second and health care and infrastructure (such as new or improved highways, light rail system) was tied for third at 15% each. Income tax reductions was a significantly less popular choice in 2007 (7%) than in 1998 (29%) and 1997 (23%). The environment remained the last choice at 3%. Households with children in grades K-12 overwhelmingly preferred education (50%) to the second choice of property tax reductions (16%) while households without schoolchildren were evenly split between
property tax reductions (28%) and education (27%). And although both men and women ranked education as their top choice, the preference was stronger for women. 42% of women chose education as their top choice while males chose education (30%) just ahead of property tax reductions (25%).

VOTING/ELECTION REFORM

Two new questions were added to the 2007 survey related to elections and campaign reform. When asked how sure they were that the votes of Twin Cities residents were accurately counted, 42% were “very sure” and 40% only “somewhat sure”. In a state that justifiably prides itself on very high voter turnout and the absence of apparent voting irregularities, the fact that 40% of Twin Cities residents were only “somewhat sure” and 8% are “not at all sure” about the accuracy of voting results is disturbing.

Having just completed a mid-term national election and a major state government election, we asked Twin Cities residents about their ideas for improving the quality of election campaigns. The top three reform strategies were “limiting campaign spending” (29%), “systematically monitoring the accuracy of campaigns by public media” (26%), and “limiting the duration of campaigns” (21%). Elected officials, political parties and civic groups would do well to give this issue priority attention because it appears that voters may be ready for dramatic changes in how campaigns are conducted in Minnesota. It also may be helpful with respect to other significant survey findings related to the perceived honesty of elected officials and their responsiveness to citizen concerns and needs.

EDUCATION

Consistent with the past five surveys, most Twin Citians are happy with their local school districts and have a great deal of confidence in them. 74% are either satisfied or somewhat satisfied with the quality of services provided, while 81% have either a lot or some confidence in their public school system. These are high overall ratings considering that education is the state’s largest and most scrutinized public expenditure. Despite the high level of current satisfaction, education was the highest priority for the use of the potential budget surplus.

TRUST IN GOVERNMENT/SATISFACTION WITH PERFORMANCE

While continuing the historical pattern of being generally supportive of government services and employees at all levels, this year’s survey results reflect unusually high civic concern about the honesty and responsiveness of public officials. The perception of the honesty of elected officials has significantly declined in the 2007 survey compared with the 2005 results. For the first time in the survey’s 11 year history, the percentage of Twin Cities residents who believe elected officials are “as honest” or “more honest” compared to average Minnesotans dropped well below one-half to 42%; in 2005 it was 59%. The previous low had been 49% in 1996, the first year the survey was conducted, and the previous high was 61% in 2000.
A related finding from this year’s survey is the fact that only 44% of Twin Cities residents now “agree” or “somewhat agree” that most government officials are responsive to their needs and concerns. This compares with a 59% positive response in 2005, which was consistent with a pattern in the upper 50’s and low 60’s throughout the survey’s history. The high points were 65% in both 2000 and 2001.

Whether these findings are related to growing public concern about the War in Iraq, recent scandals in Washington, or more local issues, the fact that 58% of Twin Cities residents now believe that elected officials are “less honest” or “dishonest” compared to average Minnesotans and that 56% of residents now “disagree” or “somewhat disagree” that government officials are responsive to their needs, should be of considerable concern to citizens and community leaders.

In spite of these disturbing findings, Twin Cities residents continue to give high marks to the quality of public services they receive, especially from local and state governments. Support for the quality of local government services (“satisfied” or “somewhat satisfied”) remained quite high in 2007: 74% for city government and 77% for county government. These are very similar to the results in the past few surveys. Support for local school district services rose from 68% in 2005 to 74% in 2007. The highest previous level had been 72% in 1997. In terms of state government, satisfaction with the quality of services rose slightly, from 64% in 2005 to 66% in 2007, closer to the pattern in earlier surveys at the low 70’s percentage level.

When asked which level of government they trusted to do what is right most often, 55% said local governments, 35% said state government and 10% said the federal government. This compares with, respectively, 57%, 32% and 11% in 2005. In 2002, the trust level in terms of the federal government reached an all-time high of 18%, probably reflecting unusually strong public support in the immediate aftermath of 9.11.01. But since 2002, this level of support has returned to the more typical level of 8-12% as the war on terrorism becomes an ongoing effort led by the federal government, with mixed results so far.

Metro residents continue to hold public employees in reasonably high regard. 72% think they do as good a job as other Twin Cities employees and 5% think they perform better, for a combined total of 77%; the comparable figures in 2005 were, respectively, 72% and 7% for a combined total of 79%.

We wonder about the apparent inconsistency between residents’ more positive attitude toward public employees who actually deliver government services, as well as the quality of services that they receive, and their more negative views about public officials’ honesty and responsiveness. Are residents’ opinions about public officials influenced, to a greater extent, by public displeasure with political campaigns or by controversial national issues like the War in Iraq and controversial local issues like publicly supported sports stadium proposals?
CRIME

Concern about crime reemerged as the metro area's biggest problem for the first time since 1999. 28% rated it as the #1 regional problem, roughly the same percentage as in 1999. It is important to note that in spite of the increased concern since 2005 this year's 28% level is still considerably below the 72% level in 1996, which steadily declined to 17% in 2000 as concerns about traffic congestion in the region grew considerably. When asked if there were an area within one mile of their home where they would be afraid to walk at night 42% said “yes” which is similar to the responses in 1997 and 1998 and the highest level since 1998.

Fear of crime was greatest in Minneapolis and Saint Paul, and much less so in the suburbs. There continue to be substantial differences in the fear of crime among men and women. In 2007, 51% of women agreed that there were areas within one mile of their residences in which they would not walk alone at night; only 33% of men said “yes.” Although this “gender differential” is very consistent with the results of previous surveys it is notable that there was a significant increase in “yes” responses for both men and women. There is a similar dichotomy between households with schoolchildren (49% responded “yes”) and households without kids (37% said “yes”).

ECONOMY

There was very little change from 2005 in the views of Twin Cities residents about the region's economy and their personal financial situation.

People feel confident about the metropolitan area's economy and their personal financial situation. 20% believe the area's economy is improving, down slightly from 24% in 2005. 58% believe the economy is staying the same, virtually identical to 2005. 23% of the region's residents believe the Twin Cities economy is getting worse, an increase from 20% in 2005. In this year's survey, 33% were satisfied with their personal financial situation, 44% were somewhat satisfied, 20% were somewhat dissatisfied and 3% were dissatisfied. In 2005, 45% were satisfied, 33% somewhat satisfied with their financial situation, 13% were somewhat dissatisfied and 10% were dissatisfied. Fewer households with schoolchildren (73%) were satisfied or somewhat satisfied with their financial situation than households without schoolchildren (79%).

We also observed a significant increase from 2005 in the percentage of area residents who have cut back their spending due to uncertainties in the economy, from 46% who said they had cut back spending a lot or somewhat in 2005 to 59% who reported cutting back a lot or somewhat in 2007.

Residents report slightly less confidence in the region's future outlook and their personal future from 2005. Although 75% were confident or somewhat confident that they would be better off 3 to 5 years from now, this is down from 81% in 2005. There was consistent agreement that the Twin Cities area is (usually or always) headed in the right direction, 53% in 2005 compared to 52% in 2005 and 2002.
CONFIDENCE IN SOCIAL SECURITY

Reform of the Social Security system continues to be a significant national public policy debate. We repeated a question from 2005 concerning people’s confidence in their future social security benefits. When asked how confident people were that Social Security will still be providing benefits when they reached retirement age, 45% were completely or very confident (compared to just 32% in 2005) while 55% were just somewhat confident or had no confidence (compared to 65% in 2005). Just as in 2005 when we looked at the distribution of responses by age, younger respondents were much less confident. The only people who were “very confident” were born before 1950. Those born in the 1960s and later expressed no confidence.

POSSIBLE POLITICAL POLARIZATION

In response to political polarization in the aftermath of the national election in 2004, we asked Twin Cities residents in 2005 if they felt the country was coming together to face challenges ahead of us. 63% strongly or somewhat disagreed. Only 8% strongly agreed that we were coming together. In the 2007 survey, right after the hotly contested midterm national election and state government election, the results revealed no significant change; 58% somewhat or strongly disagree that the country is now in a better position to face the significant challenges ahead of us. Only 8% strongly believe that the country is in a better position. At the same time, we found that the opinions on major issues covered in the survey like transportation, education, the state surplus and global warming, do not differ greatly by political party affiliation.

IMMIGRATION/POPULATION DIVERSITY

Twin Citians continue to believe that the growing population diversity of our region is a “good thing,” with 75% favorable in 2007 and 78% favorable in 2005. However, in response to a new question in this year’s survey, 47% of our residents report being concerned that recent immigrants pose a threat to our security. Although only 13% indicated they were “greatly concerned,” this means that one out of every eight residents has this level of concern.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

This year’s survey results yield a significant decrease in residents’ level of civic engagement; i.e., their active involvement in civic organizations. 51% reported no activity at all and 21% identified themselves as “not very active”. The comparable figures in the 2005 survey were 36% and 20%. More significantly, results for eight surveys going back to 1996 were much closer to the 2005 than the 2007 level. This will be an area to watch in future surveys to see if a trend toward disengagement emerges.
GLOBAL WARMING

While it is not surprising that Twin Cities residents would be concerned about global warming, it is very significant that nearly half (41%) strongly agree that the “threat to our environment requires urgent and bold action by public policy makers at all levels of government.” An additional 32% somewhat agree with this statement. Elected officials should take note that their constituents are ready for them to take action.

Equally interesting are the opinions read through demographic breakdowns of gender, family make-up, geography, and political party. Significant differences appear only between those who strong agree on bold action and those who somewhat agree: 47% of women tend to support urgent action compared to 36% of men; 47% of those with no children of K-12 age support urgent action compared to 35% of those with children those ages; 46% of east metro residents favor urgent action compared to 40% the west metro and in the cities of St. Paul and Minneapolis; and 53% of Democrats support urgent action vs. 28% of Republicans. However - when those who somewhat support bold and urgent action are included, the percentages of support equalize between 70-80%. Elected officials can read this as widespread and deep support for government action.

SUB-REGIONAL DIFFERENCES WORTH NOTING

While sub-regional data is available from the survey, the accuracy of results is stronger at the regional level because the sample is larger.

But there is an interesting pattern of more favorable, positive results for residents of growth areas (defined as outside the I-494/694 beltway for this survey) of the metropolitan region compared with those residing in older, stable areas (i.e., within the I-494-694 beltway). People living in growth areas of the Twin Cities feel more confident about the metropolitan area's economy and their personal financial situation than residents of older, stable areas. 22% in growth areas believe the area's economy is improving compared to 18% in stable areas. 19% in growth areas believe the Twin Cities economy is getting worse compared to 26% in stable areas. There was a similar difference in satisfaction with their personal financial situation. Growth areas residents were more content (80% satisfied or somewhat satisfied) compared to 74% of stable area residents.

Residents of growth areas also indicated a higher level of satisfaction with the quality of services provided by the state government (72% satisfied or somewhat satisfied) and their local school district (79% satisfied or somewhat satisfied). This compares to ratings of stable area residents of 62% for state government services and 71% for local school district services.

When asked if there were an area within one mile of their home where they would be afraid to walk at night 50% of stable area residents said “yes” compared to only 32% of growth area residents.
The responses to some survey questions indicated differences between city and suburban residents. Far more Minneapolis residents (39%) cited crime as the region’s chief problem than St. Paul (29%) and suburban residents (26%). Suburban residents ranked crime second to traffic as our biggest problem. Many more Minneapolis (61%) and St. Paul (72%) residents identified an area within one mile of their home where they would be afraid to walk at night compared to suburban residents (35%).

**Facts about the Civic Confidence Survey**
Results are based on a Metropolitan State College of Management poll conducted February 19 to March 1, 2007, by telephone with 500 randomly selected adults in the seven-county Twin Cities metropolitan area. The margin of error in the poll is 4.5% or less, for results based on all interviews in the poll. Margins of sampling error for smaller groups in the poll are larger. In addition to random error, as with any public opinion survey, other forms of error may be inadvertently introduced by question order, wording and practical difficulties in conducting the poll, including events that may have occurred during the interviewing period. The Metropolitan State Civic Confidence survey is directed by David O’Hara, Professor of Economics (612-659-7260, david.ohara@metrostate.edu), Roger Israel, Professor of Public Administration (612-659-7286, roger.israel@metrostate.edu) and Frank Schweigert, Assistant Professor of Public Administration (612-659-7296, francis.schweigert@metrostate.edu). Copies of the executive summary are available from Dina Inderlee (612-659-7281, dina.inderlee@metrostate.edu) and at [http://www.metrostate.edu/com/news/civicsurvey.html](http://www.metrostate.edu/com/news/civicsurvey.html).