CIVIC CONFIDENCE SURVEY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Project Director

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This is the fifth annual Metropolitan State Civic Confidence Survey. The purpose of the survey is to measure attitudes of residents in the seven-county, Twin City area towards government services. About half of Minnesota’s population lives in the region.

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

Because 95% of Metro State’s students come from the seven county region, Metro State has been committed to improving the professional and community life of the metropolitan area since the University’s founding over twenty five years ago. 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.

Metro State plans to continue to conduct this survey in future years. Each year we hope to learn more about the evolving attitudes of Twin Cities metropolitan area residents.

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

* Traffic Congestion is seen as the metro area’s biggest problem.
* Traffic congestion far outpaces crime as the number one problem for suburban residents, while crime and traffic congestion are equally important problems for the core cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul.
* Concern over urban sprawl and lack of affordable housing is increasing.
* Construction of more roads is the most popular choice for reducing traffic congestion, followed by light rail.
* Most area residents said they were unlikely to use the planned light rail line from downtown Minneapolis to the airport.
* $2 per trip was the most popular choice as a fair price for light rail service.
* Residents also have a great amount of confidence in their local school districts and are satisfied with their services, though less so in Minneapolis.
* Twin Citians continue to feel confident about the metropolitan area’s economy and are satisfied with their current economic situation and confident about the future.
* Satisfaction with administration of welfare programs has improved for the fifth straight year.
MAJOR PROBLEMS

When asked in an open-ended question what was the area’s most serious problem, traffic congestion was cited by 31 percent of area residents and the related problem of urban sprawl by 7 percent. This continues the trend since the survey’s inception in 1996; in 1999 traffic congestion and urban sprawl combined to surpass crime as the region’s number one problem. This year traffic congestion alone exceeded crime. Crime, mentioned by 15 percent of Twin Citians, is still a widespread concern, but together traffic congestion and urban sprawl represent the biggest challenge for policy makers.

In 1996 traffic congestion was mentioned by only 8 percent of Twin City residents and urban sprawl was rarely mentioned. By 1999 traffic congestion was mentioned by 24 percent of residents and urban sprawl by 9 percent. During this time, the percent of respondents choosing crime as the chief problem has dropped from 71 percent in 1996 to 27 percent in 1999.

There is a significant disparity in the response of suburban residents compared to Minneapolis and St. Paul residents. Traffic congestion far outpaces crime as the number one problem for suburban residents, 42% to 14%. In the core cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul crime and traffic congestion were each identified by roughly 23% of residents.

Lack of affordable housing continues to grow as an issue. Only 1 percent named this problem in 1998, in both 1999 and 2000 6 percent mentioned this issue, indicating a growing problem.

Other problems facing the Metro Area were education (8%), taxes (5%) and operations of government (5%).

Judging by continued concern over traffic congestion and urban sprawl, there seems to be more worry among residents about maintaining the convenience and livability of the metropolitan area. In fact, 10% say convenience is what they like best about living in the metro areas. Convenience and the availability and variety of cultural and artistic activities are the most popular features of the area. Because of increased concern in these quality of life categories of transportation and urban sprawl, we believe policy makers will need to pay closer attention to them in the future.

Convenience is of course a double-edged sword when it comes to urban life. For example, if you live in a suburb or neighborhood without a mall with the typical entertainment, dining, and shopping options you will likely have to drive farther to do those things and your life will be less convenient. However, when there is a sufficient population mass, or urban sprawl, for those things in your own community, you will confront more traffic and congestion, and thus also have a less convenient lifestyle.
LIGHT RAIL

The survey also found mixed support for light rail transit. When asked to select their first choice for reducing traffic congestion, construction of more roads was the most popular choice, selected by 36% of respondents. The second most popular choice was the construction of a light rail network (29%), followed by improved bus service (19%), increased use of car pool lanes (13%), and the use of toll roads or other pay-as-you-go systems (3%). In 1998 the same question was asked with much different results. In 1998 light rail was the most popular choice (44%) and construction of more roads was second (25%).

62% of area residents said they were unlikely to use the planned light rail line from downtown Minneapolis to the airport while 16% were likely to use it. 48% said that a fair price for a one-way trip on a light rail network is $2; 22% chose $3 while 16% said less than $2. In an open-ended question asking residents to identify the most important factor that would influence their decision to switch from their current mode of transportation to using light rail the overwhelming top choice (selected by 58% of respondents) was convenience and accessibility. 23% of residents responded that they would never use light rail as an alternative to their current mode of transportation. It appears there is a relatively small group of people that are willing to use light rail, provided that it will conveniently take them to work and back and that they do not have to pay too much per trip.

Since the first light rail line is planned for Minneapolis, it is not surprising that Minneapolis residents appear far more likely to use light rail. 51% of Minneapolis residents said they would be likely or somewhat likely to use the planned Hiawatha Avenue light rail line compared to 22% of St. Paul and suburban residents.

TRANSPORTATION SOLUTIONS

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EDUCATION

Consistent with the past two years, most Twin Citians are happy with their local school districts and have a great deal of confidence in them. 71% are either satisfied or somewhat satisfied with quality of services provided while 79% have either a lot or some confidence in their public school system. Interestingly, schools were again the only levels of government that a significant number of residents, 35%, believed did not provide enough services.

These are high overall ratings considering that education is the state’s largest and most scrutinized expenditure.

However, residents of Minneapolis have a more negative view of their local districts than do St. Paul and suburban residents. 27% of Minneapolis residents have no confidence or not very much confidence in their local schools while only 19% to 20% of St. Paul and suburban residents lack confidence in their schools.

In terms of satisfaction, 48% of Minneapolis residents are either dissatisfied or somewhat dissatisfied with the quality of services provided by their local school district compared to 31% of St. Paul and 24% of suburban residents feel that way. Both of these numbers represent a significant decline (increase in dissatisfaction) from 1999.

It is beyond the scope of this survey to pinpoint reasons for the disparity between the views of inner city and suburban residents. However, in future surveys we hope to obtain more information on these and other differences within the metropolitan area to assist policy makers and government officials.

TRUST IN GOVERNMENT

Twin Citians are more trusting of local governments than they are with larger federal and state governments. When asked which level of government Twin Citians trust to do what is right most often, almost 57% said local government, 31% said state government and 12% replied federal government. When asked about quality of service provided by respective governments, 77% of metro area residents said they were satisfied or somewhat satisfied with city government; 71% were satisfied or somewhat satisfied with their school district; 84% were satisfied with county government; 78% were satisfied or somewhat satisfied with state government and 70% were satisfied or somewhat satisfied with federal services.

Metro residents hold public employees in reasonably high regard. 68% think they do as good a job as other Twin Cities employees and 9% think they perform better.

A majority (65%) of the region’s residents agree that government officials are responsive to their needs.
The perception of the honesty of elected officials continues to rebound from 1998’s decline, surpassing previous levels. In this year’s poll 61% believed elected officials are as honest or more honest than average Minnesotans while 39% believe elected officials are either less honest or actually dishonest. In 1998, perhaps due to the Clinton sex scandal, 50% believed they were as honest or more honest than average Minnesotans while 50% believe they were either less honest or actually dishonest.

SATISFACTION WITH PERFORMANCE

When asked about the quality of services provided by governments, 77% of metro area residents said they were satisfied or somewhat satisfied with city government, 84% with county government, 78% with state government and 70% with federal services. When asked which level of government Twin Citians trust to do what is right most often, 57% said local, 31% said state and 12% replied federal.

Twin Cities’ public services continue to earn high marks. Services such as libraries, garbage/recycling, parks, 911 service, and snow plowing earned approval ratings of over 85% from local citizens. Libraries, parks garbage/recycling and 911 service had the highest approval ratings with 96% of residents either fully or somewhat satisfied with those services. Even road repair, that annual curse of Minnesota’s summers, receives full or somewhat satisfaction ratings from 85% of the region’s residents.

Satisfaction with administration of welfare programs was consistent with 1999 at 69%. Satisfaction has increase since the survey’s inception; from 52% in 1996, 56% in 1997, and 63% in 1998 to 69% in 1999 and 2000.

In terms of quantity of services, 76% thought their city government provided the right amount of services while 14% said there were not enough and 11% said there were too many. 67% said their county government provided the right amount of services, 16% said not enough while 18% thought it provided too many services. 52% said their local school district provided enough services while 35% said not enough and 13% said too many services were provided.

CRIME

Citizens are also less fearful of crime. The proportion of citizens fearful of crime has declined for the fifth consecutive year. When asked if there is an area within one mile of their home where they would be afraid to walk at night, 35% said yes compared to 37% in 1999, 41% in 1998, 42% in 1997 and 52% in 1996.

Women are more concerned with crime than men. 21% of women said it was the region’s biggest problem compared to 12% of men. Even more significant is the fear of crime. 47% of women say there are places within one mile of their home where they would be afraid to walk at night compared to only 20% of men. This is consistent with the 1999 survey.
Despite their worries about crime, 91% of the area’s citizens felt law enforcement agencies were doing a satisfactory or somewhat satisfactory job. They also believed local police were honest. 77% felt their local police would not lie or break the law in order to arrest someone. Again, this is consistent with the 1999 survey.

Minneapolis residents are less trusting of the honesty of their police compared to residents of St. Paul and the suburbs. 63% of Minneapolitans surveyed thought their police would not lie or break the law in order to arrest somebody (compared to 72% in St. Paul and 81% in the suburbs). Fear of crime was greatest in Minneapolis and Saint Paul and much less so in the suburbs.

**ECONOMY**

58% of Twin Citians said the region was headed in the right direction, compared with 56% last year and 52% two years ago. People continue to feel confident about the metropolitan area’s economy and the future. 50% said the area’s strong economy is improving, roughly the same as last year’s 54% and 1998’s 52%. Only 9% say the economy is getting worse while 41% say it is staying the same.

The poll also shows Twin Citians are satisfied with their current economic situation and confident about the future. 87% say they are either satisfied or somewhat satisfied with their own financial situation, an increase from 78% in 1998 and 83% in 1999.

When asked if they would be better off in 3 to 5 years, 84% said they were confident or somewhat confident they would be, approximately the same as last year’s 82%. Also, fewer this year than last have cut back their spending due to uncertainties in the economy.

**PERSONAL CIVIC INVOLVEMENT**

Only 5% of the region’s residents consider themselves active in civic activities. This represents a significant decline from previous years when this figure was in the range of 12% to 17%. 15% said they were somewhat active; 25% said they were not very active while 54% said they were not active at all.

Almost half of the region’s residents, 47%, said they had never contacted an elected official; 18% said they seldom contacted one; 21% said they contacted officials somewhat often while 14% said they often contacted officials.
INTERNET ACCESS TO GOVERNMENT

A new question to this year’s survey asked people how frequently they used the Internet to access information provided by government agencies in the past year. 48% had not used the internet for this purpose, 28% said somewhat infrequently, 16% said somewhat frequently, and 8% said frequently. Not surprisingly those individuals who often contacted elected officials were much more likely to have also used the internet to access government information. This may indicate that government information on the internet is used most by interested and active parties, or possibly that the internet helps facilitate interaction between individuals and their elected officials.
1996-2000 COMPARISON

This is the fifth annual Civic Confidence Survey. Some interesting changes have occurred in public opinion.

CHIEF PROBLEM

Traffic Congestion is the chief problem facing the Twin Cities metropolitan area. For the first time since the survey’s inception in 1996 traffic congestion surpassed crime as the region’s number one problem. Crime is still a widespread concern, but together traffic congestion and urban sprawl represent the biggest challenge for policy makers.

In 1996 traffic congestion was mentioned by only 8 percent of Twin City residents and urban sprawl was rarely mentioned. By 1999 traffic congestion was mentioned by 24 percent of residents and urban sprawl by 9 percent. During this time, the percent of respondents choosing crime as the chief problem has dropped from 71 percent in 1996 to 27 percent in 1999.

Lack of affordable housing continues to grow as an issue. Only 1 percent named this problem in 1998, in both 19990 and 2000 6 percent mentioned this issue, indicating a growing problem.

CRIME

When asked if there is an area within one mile of their home where they would be afraid to walk at night, this year 35% replied yes, a decline from 52% in 1996. In 1996 there was little difference between the feelings of Minneapolis, St. Paul, and suburban residents. This is not the case in 2000. Residents of the two core cities have remained fearful of crime while suburban residents are feeling much safer. In 2000 only 25% of suburban residents replied yes, compared to almost 60% of Minneapolis and St. Paul residents.

There are a number of possible reasons for continued high concerns with crime, despite declining crime rates. The first is that even though crime is decreasing, many people feel there is too much crime. A second explanation may be that it takes time for public opinion to absorb the fact of decreasing crime. A third explanation is that due to the strong economy, there is simply a lack of other things about which to be concerned. A fourth explanation is that the strong economy has failed to improve the circumstances of the inner city where crime continues to be a major concern. Finally there is the higher priority given to crime reporting in television, the chief source of news of most metro residents, than in other news media.
TRAFFIC CONGESTION

As previously mentioned, traffic congestion has emerged as the region’s number one problem. In 1996 traffic congestion was mentioned by only 8 percent of Twin City residents. This grew to 10% in 1997 and 1998, 24% in 1999 and 31% in 2000.

ECONOMY

For the last three years, at least 50% of Twin Citians believe the economy is improving (50% in 2000 compared to 28% in 1996). In both 1999 and 2000 a majority of people has not reduced their day to day spending due to uncertainty or insecurity about their economic future. Since the metropolitan area economy has been strong for several years, this likely reflects a lag in people’s perceptions and the fact that it takes time for the impact of a robust economy to reach most segments of society.

An interesting side bar is that in spite of the very strong economy of the last five years, confidence in the future remains high and unchanged. In each of the five years of the survey over 80% were confident or somewhat confident that they would be better off in 3 to 5 years than they are now.

SATISFACTION WITH PERFORMANCE

Many Twin Cities’ public services have received very high ratings every year. Services such as libraries, garbage/recycling, parks, 911 service, and snow plowing earned approval ratings of over 80% from local citizens.

The most noticeable change is the satisfaction with administration of welfare programs. This area improved each year from 1996 to 1999. In 1996 52% were either satisfied or somewhat satisfied compared to 56% in 1997, 63% in 1998, and 69% in both 1999 and 2000.
TRUST IN GOVERNMENT

The responsiveness of government officials has also improved in people’s estimation. In 1996 54% believed that government officials were responsive to their concerns and needs. By 1998 this had improved to 61%. In 2000 this has increased to 65%.

When asked about quality of service provided by respective governments, the ratings of city governments and school districts remained relatively constant. The performance of the federal government, state government, and county governments has improved. In 1996 54% were either somewhat satisfied or satisfied with the federal government compared to 61% in 1997, 62% in 1998, 63% in 1999, and 70% in 2000. In 1996 71% were either somewhat satisfied or satisfied with the state government compared to 78% in 2000. In 1996 76% were either somewhat satisfied or satisfied with their county governments compared to 84% in 2000.

GROWTH OF INDEPENDENTS

One sweeping change in 2000 from previous years is in the percentage of people categorizing themselves as independents rather than Democrats or Republicans. From 1996 through 1999 roughly 20% of residents listed themselves as independents. In 2000 this percentage doubled to 42%.

Facts about the Confidence Survey

Results are based on a Metropolitan State College of Management poll conducted May 4 to June 2, 2000 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.

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