CIVIC CONFIDENCE SURVEY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

November 2001

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This is the sixth 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. Over 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, the regional economy and community connections. 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 thirty 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.
* 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 and improvements in bus service.
* The trial elimination of ramp meters had little effect on the commutes of most Twin Cities residents.
* Residents also have a great amount of confidence in their local school districts and are satisfied with their services, though less so in Minneapolis and St. Paul.
* Twin Citians are less confident about the metropolitan area’s economy and are less satisfied with their current economic situation.
* Residents across the Region are more involved in civic activities, have a great deal of pride in their neighborhoods, know their neighbors and believe that their neighbors know and care about each other.
* Residents strongly believe that the Region’s increasing population diversity is a good thing, but also perceive a growing economic gap between its wealthier and poorer citizens.
MAJOR PROBLEMS

When asked in an open-ended question what was the area’s most serious problem, traffic congestion was cited by 35 percent of area residents and the related problem of urban sprawl by 6 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 suggests that people may not be making the connection between traffic congestion and urban sprawl. Urban sprawl is often cited as a contributing factor of growing traffic congestion.

A growing problem is lack of affordable housing. The percentage of area residents listing affordable housing as the chief problem increased from 6 percent in 2000 to almost 12 percent in 2001. Crime, mentioned by 10 percent of Twin Citians, is still a widespread concern, but traffic congestion, urban sprawl, and affordable housing represent the biggest challenges 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.

Other problems facing the Metro Area were education (11%) and government (10%). The percentage of area residents citing government as the chief problem doubled from 2000, perhaps due to the constant discussion of a possible state government shutdown during the survey period.

Judging by continued concern over traffic congestion, urban sprawl, and affordable housing, there seems to be more worry among residents about maintaining the convenience and livability of the metropolitan area. In fact, 15% 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, urban sprawl, and affordable housing 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 in your community you will confront more traffic and congestion, and thus also have a less convenient lifestyle.
TRANSPORTATION SOLUTIONS/RAMP METERS

The survey also found little support for reducing or eliminating freeway ramp meters as a traffic solution. When asked to select their first choice for reducing traffic congestion, construction of more roads was the most popular choice, selected by 35% of respondents. The second most popular choice was the construction of a light rail network (30%), followed by improved bus service (21%), increased use of car pool lanes (7%), the reduction or elimination of ramp meters (5%) and the use of toll roads or other pay-as-you-go systems (3%). These results are consistent with a similar question asked in 2000. 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%).

Suburban residents ranked traffic congestion solutions slightly differently than residents of Minneapolis and St. Paul. Building more roads was the most popular choice of suburban residents with light rail ranked second. Minneapolis and St. Paul residents reversed these two choices. Improved bus service was the third most popular choice among both groups.

Area residents were asked how the temporary elimination of ramp meters affected their daily commute. 56% said there was no change in their commute, 18% said their commute was a little bit better, 13% said their commute was much better. 6% said their commute was a little bit worse, while 7% had a much worse commute.

EDUCATION

Consistent with the past three years, most Twin Citians are happy with their local school districts and have a great deal of confidence in them. 68% are either satisfied or somewhat satisfied with quality of services provided while 80% 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 expenditure.

However, residents of Minneapolis and St. Paul have a more negative view of their local districts than do suburban residents. 28% of St. Paul and 24% of Minneapolis residents have no confidence or not very much confidence in their local schools while only 18% of suburban residents lack confidence in their schools.

In terms of satisfaction, 39% of Minneapolis residents are either dissatisfied or somewhat dissatisfied with the quality of services provided by their local school district compared to 35% of St. Paul and 30% of suburban residents feel that way. The trend here is mixed, with Minneapolis residents showing an improvement in satisfaction while both St. Paul and suburban residents demonstrating an increase in dissatisfaction from 2000.

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/SATISFACTION WITH PERFORMANCE**

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 56% said local government, 30% said state government and 14% replied federal government. When asked about quality of service provided by respective governments, 78% of metro area residents said they were satisfied or somewhat satisfied with city government; 68% were satisfied or somewhat satisfied with their school district; 81% were satisfied with county government; 68% were satisfied or somewhat satisfied with state government and 66% were satisfied or somewhat satisfied with federal services. The only sector to decline in satisfaction from 2000 was state government, again perhaps due to the constant discussion of a possible state government shutdown during the survey period.

Metro residents hold public employees in reasonably high regard. 67% think they do as good a job as other Twin Cities employees and 12% 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 was consistent with the 2000 survey. In this year’s poll 58% believed elected officials are as honest or more honest than average Minnesotans while 42% 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.

**CRIME**

Citizens are also less fearful of crime. The proportion of citizens fearful of crime has declined for the sixth consecutive year. When asked if there is an area within one mile of their home where they would be afraid to walk at night, 33% said yes compared to 35% in 2000, 37% in 1999, 41% in 1998, 42% in 1997 and 52% in 1996.

Women are more fearful of crime than men. 42% of women say there are places within one mile of their home where they would be afraid to walk at night compared to only 21% of men. This is consistent with the 2000 and 1999 surveys.

Fear of crime was greatest in Minneapolis and Saint Paul and much less so in the suburbs.
ECONOMY

For the first time since 1997 less than half (49%) of Twin Citians said the region was headed in the right direction, compared with 58% last year and 56% two years ago. People feel less confident about the metropolitan area’s economy and their personal financial situation. 24% said the area’s economy is improving, much less than last year’s 50% and 1999’s 54%. 25% say the economy is getting worse while 51% say it is staying the same.

When asked about their financial situation, 55% were satisfied, 23% somewhat satisfied, 12% somewhat dissatisfied and 10% dissatisfied. These results indicate a growing level of dissatisfaction about people’s financial situation. In 2000 60% were satisfied and 27% were somewhat satisfied with their financial situation. We also observed a slight increase from last year in the percentage of area residents who have cut back their spending due to uncertainties in the economy.

When asked about their concern for maintaining a satisfactory retirement income and lifestyle, 21% of metro area residents were very concerned, 38% somewhat concerned, 28% not too concerned, and 14% not at all concerned.

When asked about the security of their current employment situation, 35% of metro area residents were very secure, 33% somewhat secure, 11% somewhat insecure, and 19% very insecure. With the economy now in recession and in the aftermath of September 11, these results would likely change to a more pessimistic picture.

The concern about the current economy does not seem to have affected people’s future outlook. When asked if they would be better off in 3 to 5 years, 86% said they were confident or somewhat confident they would be, approximately the same as last year’s 84% and 82% two year’s ago.

Residents perceive a growing economic gap between wealthier and poorer people in the Region. 82% agree that the gap is intensifying, with Minneapolis at 86%, St. Paul at 87% and suburban/rural Twin Cities residents at 80%.

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

18% of the region’s residents consider themselves active in civic activities. This represents a significant increase from 2000 and a return to the past pattern of previous years when this figure was in the range of 12% to 17%. 30% said they were somewhat active; 16% said they were not very active while 36% said they were not active at all.

Almost half of the region’s residents, 48%, said they had never contacted an elected official; 30% said they seldom contacted one; 17% said they contacted officials somewhat often while 5% said they often contacted officials.
This year, we added some questions that address community connectedness and attitudes toward cultural diversity in the Twin Cities Area. Although we will not have comparative historical data until 2002 and beyond, the vital signs in this important dimension of metropolitan life are very encouraging. When asked for their views about neighbors and neighborhoods: 84% of Twin Cities residents said their neighbors know and care about each other; 89% said they would feel comfortable discussing neighborhood issues and problems with neighbors; 93% said people have pride in their neighborhoods; 87% said they know the names of their neighbors on their street or in their building; and 91% said they would feel comfortable contacting their neighbor in an emergency situation. Interestingly, these responses were consistently strong across both Minneapolis and St. Paul and suburban/rural communities in the Region. Given the concerns about American social disconnectedness expressed in the media and in prominent studies like Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam’s recent book, “Bowling Alone”, these numbers are certainly encouraging. Also, in light of the growing racial and ethnic diversity of our Region, it is reassuring to learn that 83% of Twin Cities residents regard increasing population diversity as a “good thing”.

INTERNET ACCESS TO GOVERNMENT

A new question to last year’s survey asked people how frequently they used the Internet to access information provided by government agencies in the past year. The percentage of people using the internet to access government information has increased since 2000. 38% (48% in 2000) had not used the internet for this purpose, 30% (28% in 2000) said somewhat infrequently, 21% (16% in 2000) said somewhat frequently, and 11% (8% in 2000) said frequently. Consistent with the 2000 survey 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.
1996-2001 COMPARISON

This is the sixth 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. In 2000 traffic congestion surpassed crime as the region’s number one problem. Crime is still a concern, but traffic congestion, affordable housing 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 1999 and 2000 6 percent mentioned this issue, and this year 12% 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 33% 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 and 2001. Residents of the two core cities have remained more fearful of crime while suburban residents are feeling much safer. In 2001 only 25% of suburban residents replied yes, compared to over 60% of Minneapolis and over 45% of St. Paul residents.

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, 31% in 2000 and 35% in 2001.

The survey also found little support for reducing or eliminating freeway ramp meters as a traffic solution. When asked to select their first choice for reducing traffic congestion, construction of more roads was the most popular choice, selected by 35% of respondents. The second most popular choice was the construction of a light rail network (30%).
followed by improved bus service (21%), increased use of car pool lanes (7%), the reduction or elimination of ramp meters (5%) and the use of toll roads or other pay-as-you-go systems (3%). These results are consistent with a similar question asked in 2000. 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%).

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The concern about the current economy does not seem to have affected people’s future outlook. In each of the six 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.

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% and remained stable in 2001.

When asked about quality of service provided by respective governments, the ratings of city, county, and federal governments and school districts remained relatively constant. The only sector to decline in satisfaction from 2000 was state government, again perhaps due to the constant discussion of a possible state government shutdown during the survey period.

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%. This trend appears to have been short-lived. In 2001 the percentage identifying themselves as independents declined to 14%.

Facts about the Confidence Survey

Results are based on a Metropolitan State College of Management poll conducted May 11 to June 25, 2001 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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