CIVIC CONFIDENCE SURVEY
COLLEGE OF MANAGEMENT
METROPOLITAN STATE UNIVERSITY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

AUGUST, 1997

PROJECT DIRECTORS

KEN PETERSON
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR
PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

DAVID O’HARA
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR
ECONOMICS
CIVIC CONFIDENCE SURVEY

COLLEGE OF MANAGEMENT

METROPOLITAN STATE UNIVERSITY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This is the second 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 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.

Two students in a Public Policy Analyses class in the College of Management first conceived the study several years ago. The students, Todd Ferrara and Wendy Klancher, were frustrated by lack of anything more than anecdotal accounts of citizens’ views of government performance and leadership. As a consequence, for their required final paper the two wrote the initial survey questionnaire and coordinated the first stages of the Civic Confidence Survey.

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 finds of this year’s poll are:

* Crime is seen as the metro area’s biggest problem, though fewer say it is this year than last.
* Residents believe education should be top priority for state spending.
* 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 Saint Paul.
* Twin Citians are also more trusting of local governments and satisfied with their services, than they are with larger federal and state governments.
Twin Citians this year feel even better about the metropolitan area’s economy that last year, they are more satisfied with their current economic situation and more confident about the future. Fear of crime has decreased in the suburbs, though it appears to be as significant as ever in the two central cities. Women are more concerned about crime than men.

BIGGEST PROBLEMS

The metropolitan area’s biggest worry remains crime, though there is less concern this year than last. When asked in an open-ended question what was the area’s most serious problem, 42% of residents ranked crime as the top problem, a significant decrease from a year ago when 68% said it was. These findings are consistent with a recent Star-Tribune poll and national polls.

Other problems facing the Metro Area were traffic congestion (10%); taxes (7%); education (6%); operations of government (6%); and urban sprawl (5%). (See Figure 1).

Judging by increased concern over traffic congestion, up from 8% a year ago, and urban sprawl, which did not even show up as a problem in last year’s poll, there seems to be more worry among residents about maintaining the convenience and livability of the metropolitan area. In fact, 13% say convenience is what they like best about living in the metro areas. It is third only after friendly people and variety of activities. 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.

Last year’s poll showed little support for toll roads and though discussed for years, there has never been much support for light rail transit or tighter limits on growth. Still, it is likely we will have to pay in one fashion or another to restrict urban sprawl and retain our convenient lifestyles.

SPENDING PRIORITIES

Education should be the legislature’s top priority for spending the state’s $2.3 billion surplus. An income tax rebate was ranked second, and property tax reform third.

Since the poll was conducted in early May, 1997 before the end of the legislative session we asked what should be the top priority for spending the state’s surplus. We believe that the surplus was a good proxy for understanding citizens priorities. Education was ranked
first by 33%; an income tax rebate by 23%; property tax reform by 17%; followed by infrastructure improvements and health care at 12% each. (See Figure 2).

Only 3% thought the budget surplus should be spent on a new stadium for professional sports teams. This is consistent with the findings of other polls, including last year’s Civic Confidence Survey, showing very little support for public stadium financing.

**EDUCATION**

Not only do Twin Citians support additional spending on education, they are satisfied with the work of their local school districts and have a great deal of confidence in them. 72% are either satisfied or somewhat satisfied with the services provided by their local district. Almost the same percentage, 73%, say they have a lot or some confidence in their local school district. School districts were the only one of the five levels of government that we asked about (also federal, state, city, county) which a significant number of residents, 32%, 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 Saint Paul and Minneapolis have a more negative view of their local districts than do suburban residents. 35% of residents in the two core cities have no confidence or not very much confidence in their local schools while only 15% of suburban residents lack confidence in their schools.

In terms of satisfaction, 42% of city residents are either dissatisfied or somewhat dissatisfied with the quality of services provided by their local school district while only 23% of suburban residents feel that way.

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 and satisfied with their services, than they are with larger federal and state governments.

When asked which level of government Twin Citians trust to do the “right thing” most often, 53% said local government, 24% said state government and 11% replied federal government. When asked about quality of service provided by respective governments, 45% of metro area residents said they were satisfied with city government; 38% were satisfied with their school district; 37% were satisfied with county government; 27% were satisfied with state government and 21% were satisfied with federal services.
Metro area residents hold public employees in reasonably high regard. 67% think they do as good a job as other Twin Cities employees and 7% think they perform better.

This year more of the region’s residents agree that government officials are responsive to their needs, 59% as opposed to 53% a year ago.

Perhaps due to fewer publicized cases of misconduct, residents think slightly better of the honesty of elected officials than they did a year ago. In this year’s poll 54% believed they are as honest or more honest than average Minnesotans while 46% believe elected officials are either less honest or actually dishonest. Last year 49% thought they were as honest while 51% thought they were honest or dishonest.

**SATISFACTION WITH PERFORMANCE**

Delivery of Twin Cities’ public services apparently do not need reinventing. Services such as libraries, garbage/recycling, parks, 911 service, road repair, and snow plowing earned approval ratings of over 80% from local citizens. Libraries and garbage and recycling collections 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 70% of the region’s residents.

This popularity of local government services may be why state and local government has grown so much over the last 45 years. In fact, as a share of total personal income, federal spending has decreased slightly during that time while state and local spending has almost doubled so that today it takes almost 1/5 of taxpayers incomes.

An alternative explanation for the popularity of local government services is to reverse the causation: the fact that state and local spending has skyrocketed is the reason that local government is popular. It is possible that people “observe” more of local government spending (K-12 schools, road repair, parks, etc.) than federal spending (national defense, environmental protection, food inspection, etc.) and thus feel that their local tax dollar is working harder for them than their federal tax dollar.

Welfare reform was one of the biggest changes in government services in the last year. Satisfaction with administration of welfare programs is up from 52% in last year’s poll to 56% this year. Perhaps this increase is a modest endorsement of last year’s changes in federal welfare law.

In terms of quantity of services, 69% thought their city government provided enough services while 16% said there were not enough and 15% said there were too many. 59% said their county government provided the right amount of services, 19% said not enough while 23% thought it provided too many services. 54% said their local school district provided enough services while 32% said not enough and 14% said too many services were provided.
CRIME

As stated earlier, the metropolitan area’s biggest worry remains crime, though there is less concern this year than last. Citizens also are slightly less fearful of 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 42% replied yes while last year 50% said there was such an area. This lessening in concern about crime follows a national trend and is also consistent with the overall decrease in local crime.

Women are more concerned with crime than men. 46% of women said it was the region’s biggest problem compared to 35% of men. Even more significant is the fear of crime. 51% of women say there are places within one mile of their home where they would be afraid to walk at night compared to only 31% of men.

Despite their worries about crime, 88% of the area’s citizens felt law enforcement agencies were doing a satisfactory or somewhat satisfactory job. They also believed local police were honest. 79% felt their local police would not lie or break the law in order to arrest somebody.

Significantly, residents of Minneapolis are less satisfied than residents of St. Paul or suburban communities with law enforcement and less trusting of the honesty of their police. Only 71% of Minneapolis residents felt their law enforcement personnel were doing a satisfactory or somewhat satisfactory job and only 52% of Minneapolitans surveyed thought their police would not lie or break the law in order to arrest somebody. Likewise, fear of crime was greatest in Minneapolis, slightly less so in Saint Paul and much less so in the suburbs.

ECONOMY

The poll also shows Twin Citians are confident about the metropolitan area’s economy, satisfied with their current economic situation and confident about the future. 35% of the area’s residents say the area’s robust economy is improving compared to 28% last year. 54% say it is staying the same. Only 11% say it is getting worse while last year 24% thought so. 82% say they are either satisfied or somewhat satisfied with their own financial situation while last year only 73% said they were.

When asked if they would be better off in 3 to 5 years than today, 80% said they were confident or somewhat confident they would be better off, the same percentage as a year ago. Also, fewer this year than last have cut back their spending due to uncertainties in the economy.

PERSONAL CIVIC INVOLVEMENT

Only 12% of the region’s residents consider themselves active in civic activities. 29% said they were somewhat active; 18% said they were not very active while 41% said they were not active at all.
Almost half of the region’s residents, 47%, said they had never contacted an elected official; 33% said they seldom contacted one; 14% said they contacted officials somewhat often while 6% said they often contacted officials.

Television was the chief source of news for 46% of the region’s residents; newspapers for 33%; radio 18%; and magazines 1%.

**Facts about the Confidence Survey**

Results are based on a Metropolitan State College of Management poll conducted April 30 to May 6, 1997 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.

Ken Peterson, Associate Professor of Public Administration (612-341-7567) and David O’Hara, Assistant Professor of Economics (612-341-7674) direct the Metro State Civic Confidence Survey. Dr. O’Hara can also be reached via the Internet at dohara@msus1.msus.edu.
Figure 1

Chief Problem Facing the Twin Cities

Refused/Not Sure 8%
Crime 42%
Other 16%
Taxes 7%
Education 6%
Government 6%
Urban Sprawl 5%
Traffic 10%

The “Other” category includes items such as race relations, family problems, poverty, and a new sports stadium.

Figure 2

Top Priority for Budget Surplus

Education 33%
Income Tax Rebate 23%
Property Tax Reform 17%
Health Care 12%
Infrastructure 12%
Professional Sports 3%
Education 33%