

"Federation Corner" column
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More to County Resident Survey than meets the eye

by Wayne Goldstein

Earlier this week, the county government released the results of a study of the attitudes of its residents (see survey results at <http://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/libtml.asp>). The press release states: "Residents in New Independent Survey Endorse Montgomery County as Good Place to Live. First Residents' Survey in 13 Years Also Points to Areas Needing Improvement." As is too often the case with how this county spins information, there is evidence that the interpretation of the results overstates the positive and understates the negative. For starters, the geographic distribution does not appear to be even, based on responses by zip code. Germantown and points north appear to be underrepresented. Certain zip codes had much higher response rates than others. So, even if the company that did the survey thought that a 32% response rate to the initial contact was better than many other jurisdictions, it appears that the results may be skewed geographically.

Some answers were very contradictory of one another. For example, the study found that 84% of the respondents thought that the county population was either growing much too fast or somewhat too fast, and 57% thought that commercial growth of offices, stores, restaurants, etc. was growing too fast. However, only 8% thought that jobs were growing too fast and 42% thought jobs were growing much too slow or somewhat too slow. There seems to be a real disconnect with this group who want more jobs yet do not want either the population growth that invariably accompanies job growth nor the increases in the buildings where the jobs go. Perhaps they want the jobs to be for county residents who go elsewhere to do the work. Should the survey company have explored this contradiction?

While large majorities of responses in a number of categories appeared to find county services to be excellent or good, there were also a number of disturbing incongruities. 60% found that land use, planning and zoning activities were either fair or poor and 61% found that code enforcement actions concerning weeds, dumping, over-crowded housing, etc. were either fair or poor. 49% rated street repairs and maintenance as either fair or poor and 55% gave fair or poor marks to the preservation of natural areas such as open space and farmland. For a county government that prides itself on planning, on its parks, and on creating and protecting the Ag Reserve, the majority of county residents apparently feel differently. The same goes for solving certain very straightforward, unambiguous problems concerning street conditions and code violations. Thus when 45% rate the county's mental health services as fair or poor, as do 59% each for services to low income people and services to immigrants, government might be able to say that the solutions are not straightforward, but such arguments are much weakened when government isn't seen as even able to fix the obvious.

What I found to be the most provocative were the many responses to "Verbatim Responses to Open-Ended Questions." There were 22 pages of praise but 31 pages of criticisms. Due to listings in multiple categories, a number of these comments were duplicated. Are those who are pleased with county services too content to write at length? Or are those so full of discontent also full of a need to complain endlessly? Or, is the contentedness less satisfying while the aggrieved are full of rightful vitriol? I've not included some of the most angry and offending remarks. You'll have to find them in the report yourself.

Consider these few excerpts: "Safety, education - public, beautiful housing & neighborhoods, shopping, restaurants, sense of community... The good services provided - such as good police work and the lovely parks which are taken care of well... Convenience, culture, no natural disasters, affluent community, shopping, comfortable home, low crime, good services, recreation... The cleanliness of the streets, roads,

attention paid to vegetation, tree trimming, sanitation, availability of arts & arts centers, excellent shopping, malls, houses of worship, military facilities... Its safety & I absolutely love it here!"

Then, there are these: "Came 35 years ago from Kansas, we are stuck here... We arrived here in 1957. It is a good place to live still but has suffered seriously due to high growth rate, a relative decline in the overall quality of the public schools, the flood of immigrants with accompanying strains. The lack of affordable housing and a booming increase in the very rich... Traffic congestion, no bilingualism - English only - I hate Spanish. No illegal immigrants, no attractive welfare... Stop out of control development (town houses esp.), moratorium on property taxes (they are way too high). In 7 years my property taxes have almost doubled from 2800-4800, but I have seen no increase in services. My kid's classroom is in a trailer at Takoma Park Elementary... There are too many rude people. Too much traffic & parking congestion. The "piggyback" tax is too high. The county is too accommodating of developers and illegal immigrants. We need free-er east-west travel (the ICC). We need another bridge to northern Virginia. We need intelligent zoning, not sprawl... Need more trash cans along boulevards that have bus stops! Need to stop building such dense housing. Greed, greed, greed of developers. Need more green space/personally recommend every three houses or buildings (if multi-family) have 1 acre of green space... The rate of growth. Make sure that you preserve green space/the environment. Planned growth should be smart growth. Take the developers hands out of the politicians pockets... Montgomery County schools were each in top 10 nationally for decades. They are now in terrible shape. Crime is rampant and has increased with the presence of illegal aliens. Clean up our county and make sure our laws are enforced... More hot chicks, less traffic, less illegal immigrants."

As disturbing as some of the most negative comments are, what is most disturbing of all is the overall relationship between residents and county government. 46% find that the value of services for the taxes paid to Montgomery County is fair to poor, 48% believe that the overall direction that Montgomery County is taking is fair to poor, and 59% feel that the job Montgomery County government does at listening to residents is fair to poor. So, how have these residents dealt with this level of distrust in their government? 1% have attended more than 26 meetings of local elected officials or other local government meeting open to the public in the past year; 1% have attended 13 to 26 such meetings, 4% have attended 3 to 12 meetings, 16% have attended one or two meetings, and 77% have not attended a single meeting.

This disconnect between the people and the government is very disturbing. Fortunately, the County Executive is on the verge of beginning to try to do something to close this gap. The CountyStat program that I've written about before will be starting in January 2008 to get at the heart of such straightforward issues as doing street repairs and maintenance in a timely manner and following through on code enforcement complaints. A 3-1-1 call program for residents to make it easier to make complaints and get satisfactory resolution could begin in another year. If the County Executive and his agency heads take their commitment to CountyStat seriously, we could see inroads into solving a number of ongoing problems, especially if you join me in regularly attending CountyStat meetings and observing the workings of this program. The next resident survey might find very different results.