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Contact: Jim Spady
(206) 949-8484

Jobs, Bus Service, Public Safety and Health Key Priorities in Countywide Survey **Majority see county as “above average” now, but worry about the future**

Seattle – *Countywide Community Forums* (CCF) today released survey results from Round 3 of its forums on King County’s first-ever countywide strategic plan. Survey results showed majority support for public transportation, roads and bridge maintenance, police services and emergency services as top priorities for county government. A majority rated King County as “above average” as a place to live, but fewer see King County as maintaining this level of livability in the future. To obtain complete survey results and demographic information, go to: [Round 3 Opinion Report Values and Performance of King County Government](#)

Survey questions covered public satisfaction with government services, where to focus county government – priorities, values and tradeoffs in delivering services, and input on annexation, public health, human services, Metro Transit, and taxes. A summary follows below.

The report compiled responses from 249 people who completed the CCF *Opinionnaire*[®] titled “**Values and Performance of King County government.**” Respondents either attended one of 36 forums organized by volunteers between May 23 and June 21, or completed the survey online during the next week. Unlike random sample polls, the CCF program and survey are open to any interested person living or working in King County.

Jim Spady, deputy coordinator for CCF, said the report is timely as governments at all levels grapple with spending priorities and tax issues. “The county is developing a comprehensive, five-year strategic plan while at the same time facing serious budget shortfalls. Making every dollar count seems to be a growing theme for government as well as individuals and families in King County. The Community Forums are all about giving people the tools to easily and conveniently communicate their opinions on important public issues.”

Questions about King County as a place to live:

A majority of participants, 53 percent, rated King County as a “better than average” place to live today, slightly lower than their perception of King County as a place to live five years ago. However, only 35 percent believed King County would be “better than average” five years from now.

Questions about the quality and value of King County government services:

When asked about the quality of King County governmental services, a plurality of participants were “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with the services they received. However, when asked about the value of these services in relation to the taxes and fees paid, a plurality, 34 percent, were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied, with only 28 percent satisfied or very satisfied.

Larger pluralities agreed with the statements “King County government protects natural resources, at 43 percent, and “keeps people safe,” at 40 percent. Thirty-seven percent agreed that “King County government “promotes equity and social justice,” while 34 percent agreed that King County government “promotes livable and prosperous communities.”

However, a 34 percent plurality answered “neutral” when asked whether King County government “provides high quality customer service and accountability,” with 29 percent disagreeing with that statement and 24 percent agreeing. A plurality, 34 percent, answered “neutral” when asked whether “King County government serves those

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most in need,” with 22 percent agreeing and 20 percent disagreeing with that statement.

A plurality of 40 percent also described themselves as “dissatisfied or very dissatisfied” with “the overall level of public involvement in King County government.”

Focusing county government over the next five years

Services and programs covered by King County include metro transit, to roads and bridges, emergency services, public safety, prosecutors and public defenders, court system, food safety, public health, wastewater treatment, agriculture and forestry management, animal care and control, elections, flood management, human services and others. Participants were asked where the county should focus its attention during the next five years.

Majorities agreed that the county should focus its attention on four areas:

- Bus (Metro) transit services – 61 percent
- Road and bridge maintenance – 60 percent
- Police Services – 54 percent
- Emergency services, including emergency medical services – 51 percent

A plurality of support was shown for all other areas of county government including the following:

- Human services, such as mental health, drug/alcohol treatment, and housing – 43 percent
- Economic development and business services – 42 percent
- Programs to protect and preserve the environment – 40 percent
- Public Health protection and health promotion programs – 40 percent

Values and tradeoffs for service delivery decisions

If projected budget shortfalls are realized in 2010, tens of millions of dollars in either additional cuts or additional revenue will be needed in order to balance the county’s general fund budget. Accordingly, participants were asked about their value criteria, and how they would prioritize different services and tax options.

The top rated value criterion for participants was “maximizing the benefit per dollar spent” at 31 percent. Fifteen percent rated it their second criterion and 14 percent as their third choice.

“Effectiveness at accomplishing its goals” was the second rated value criterion overall, with 16 percent rating it their top choice. Sixteen percent also rated it as their second choice and 17 percent as their third choice.

“Funding sustainability” was the third rated value criterion, with 15 percent rating it as their top choice. Sixteen percent rated it as their second choice, and the same percent rated it as their third choice.

Participants were also asked to prioritize their “top 3” of five program areas. Top preferences included:

1. Economic development and/or job creation in the region – 71 percent listed it in the top 3
2. Responding to natural disasters or emergency – 66 percent listed it in the top 3
3. Providing a social safety net – 54 percent listed it in the top 3

Finally, respondents were asked to choose their “top 5” priorities from a longer list of 13 choices. Top answers in this category included:

1. Building an integrated, more effective public transportation system – 61 percent listed it in the top 5
2. Building regional economic strength – 53 percent put it in the top 5
3. Accountability and transparency – 52 percent listed it in the top 5
4. Improving public safety – 47 percent listed it in the top 5
5. Working to reduce the number of people in jail and the dependence on our criminal justice system – 46 percent listed it in the top 5.

Encouraging annexation of unincorporated urban areas through reduced police services – rejected.

A majority of respondents rejected the idea of “reducing law enforcement services to urban unincorporated areas to encourage incorporation or annexation of these areas.” 53 percent either disagreed or strongly disagreed with this idea, with a plurality, 39 percent, strongly disagreeing.

Public Health

Respondents were generally supportive of King County’s public health efforts. For example:

Sixty-four percent agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “preventing the transmission of communicable disease is an important government function.”

Fifty-six percent agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “King County should be involved in protecting and improving the health of residents.

Fifty-four percent agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “walkable communities, good trail systems, or other elements that encourage healthy behavior, are important to me.”

Near majorities of 46 percent and 45 percent also supported King County’s efforts at helping uninsured people with certain critical health services and general health care services.

Human Services

Sixty percent either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “King County should prioritize human services that are proven most effective in reducing involvement in the criminal justice system, even if other programs are cut.

Fifty-five percent either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “In a budget crisis, King County should focus on maintaining human services that provide critical, life saving services (such as emergency homeless shelters in the winter) because demand for these services rises as economic conditions worsen.”

However, participants were more evenly divided when asked to comment on the more general statement: “Funding human services should be a priority, even if it is not required by law for King County to provide these services.” While a plurality of 37 percent either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, only slightly fewer people, 33 percent, disagreed or strongly disagreed. Twenty-four percent of participants were “neutral,” or chose “abstain” or “object.”

Metro Transit

Respondents were asked a number of specific questions about metro bus service. Highlights include:

A plurality of 47 percent would still use the bus if there were no longer shelters at transit stops, while 13 percent said they would not.

A plurality of respondents, 48 percent, said, “Metro should reduce weekend and all-day service on low-ridership routes.

A plurality of respondents, 42 percent, would rather pay higher bus fares than close existing bus routes.

Taxes

Many participants from the previous round of CCF had used their “write-in” option to suggest a county income tax as a solution to the county’s budget problems. Accordingly, three questions were added to the current round as follow-up questions. This included questions on whether participants would support a county income tax by itself,

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as a substitute for other taxes, or in combination with strict limits on county spending. All three options were opposed by a plurality, and two options by a majority of Round 3 respondents.

A plurality of 46 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement “The State Legislature should give King County voters the option of authorizing a county income tax on the very wealthiest income earners of our county.” Thirty-three percent agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. Most participants had strong opinions on the subject, with 43 percent strongly opposed while 28 percent were strongly supportive.

A majority of 55 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed with the same statement when the following proviso was added: “... BUT ONLY IF one or more other general taxes (such as property and/or sales taxes) were reduced across the board for everyone by the same amount raised by the new county income tax.” Sixteen percent agreed or strongly agreed with the statement.

A majority of 53 percent also disagreed or strongly disagreed with the same statement when the following additional proviso was added, “. . . AND ONLY IF there were strict limits placed on total King County spending.” Eighteen percent agreed or strongly agreed with the statement.

Participants were also asked which budget area should be cut first to protect other programs. “Human services” was the only area where a plurality favored cuts to protect other programs (34 percent favored such cuts, while 33 percent opposed). In all other areas, the plurality opposed cuts to protect other programs. The Sheriff’s department had the most support with 50 percent opposing such cuts and only 22 percent supporting, followed by bus service (45 percent opposing, with 22 supporting), Public Health (35 percent opposing, with 25 percent supporting), Courts (34 percent opposing, with 25 supporting), and Jails (34 opposing, with 28 percent supporting).

Finally, respondents were asked if they would support an increase in sales taxes, property taxes, utility taxes, or “other” taxes to avoid cuts in different king county services.

Pluralities of 39 to 44 percent opposed any specific tax increase. However, a majority, 51 percent, supported raising one of the four taxes for “bus service,” and pluralities supported some kind of tax increases to support “public health,” at 48 percent, and “human services,” at 44 percent. In these areas more people supported one of the four types of tax increases than opposed any tax increase. However, support for tax increases was so divided among the four areas that no single specific tax increase had the support of more than 21 percent of respondents. In general, “other” tax increases generated the most support, followed by “sales” taxes, “utility” taxes and “property” taxes.

Round 4 topic is “Public Safety: Law and Justice.”

The next opportunity to participate in the Countywide Community Forums will begin in mid-September. The topic for the next round will be “**Public Safety: Law and Justice.**”

To sign up as a volunteer *Citizen Councilor* visit <http://CommunityForums.org/>, call (206) 296-1633 or toll free (800) 369-2584, or email CommunityForums@KingCounty.gov.

Since 2007, over 1,700 people have registered to serve as volunteer *Citizen Councilors* under the CCF program. CCF is overseen by the King County Auditor’s office, uses no taxpayer money and is managed by the volunteer leadership of Dick Spady, co-founder of *Dick’s Drive-In Restaurants Inc.*, and his sons John and Jim Spady.

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