

Survey participants tell city to cut waste, not services

DECISIONS: Property taxes the least-favorable funding option.

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Some 350 Anchorage residents who participated in discussions and a survey this summer about budget decisions facing city government said they don't want services cut but they do want gains in efficiency.

And if they get such gains, a majority said they'd be willing to pay more in taxes to maintain current city services.

But not property taxes.

Given choices of several taxes and fees that could be used to raise more money, 53 percent picked a tax on alcohol. Only 16 percent chose higher property taxes.

The idea of sales taxes, either seasonal when tourists are in town or year-round, drew support of about 55 percent of the people but also significant opposition.

Those are findings of a report the city released Wednesday. The report summarizes the opinions of 350 people who participated in structured meetings organized by California consultant Viewpoint Learning to probe what people think about the direction of Anchorage's city government.

The meetings, around town on four evenings in August, were framed against a backdrop of city cuts and layoffs this year and an anticipated \$27 million gap in revenue vs. spending next year if property taxes remain flat and city services don't change.

Mayor Dan Sullivan has said he wanted the community discussion in time for the comments to be considered in advance of the 2011 proposed budget that he will present to the Anchorage Assembly on Oct. 1. This year's budget totals \$421 million.

The findings regarding efficiencies "re-inforces initiatives we've already started," Sullivan said Wednesday.

He cited a reorganization of departments related to public works and community planning and development and said the reorganization is expected to save about \$600,000 per year.

ONE COP PER CAR

Heidi Gantwerk of Viewpoint Learning said Anchorage residents, based on their reporting, are not as distrustful of city leaders as residents are in some other parts of the country.

"But most did see inefficiency, redundancy and a lack of coordination between city departments," the report said.

Some of the perceived inefficiencies are more symbolic than serious, Gantwerk said, but the city needs to explain them.

A common example people raised is police officers riding alone in cars instead of doubling up and cases where more officers respond to minor calls like fender-benders than seem necessary.

At a news conference Wednesday, Sullivan repeated the fender-bender example, which caused police union president Derek Hsieh, sitting in the audience, to get upset. The mayor is the department's leader, not an outsider, Hsieh said afterward. "Comments like that are disappointing."

Police Chief Mark Mew said in an interview later that his department's response time is better because of the number of cars the city has on the streets and many calls need only one officer. On the other hand, fewer cars out would lower maintenance costs.

Mew said he's heard anecdotally the complaint about more than one car responding to a fender-bender, but he can't see why they would do that. He said something else might be happening, such as the car's occupants being wanted on felonies.

MAINTAIN SERVICES

Among other findings in the report on residents' attitudes:

- Asked whether the city should reduce services and keep taxes lower, tax to the legal cap to maintain services or increase taxes to improve Anchorage services, people preferred taxing to the cap.

But when you look at the overall data, "people's highest priority was to maintain essential services -- preferably by increasing efficiency and reducing waste," the report says.

- If cuts are required, people said they should come from administrative and support services, maintenance and operations, and police -- the departments where most of the money is.

Most thought small departments like health and human services were already on lean budgets and shouldn't have to cut further. People also supporting keeping the People Mover bus system affordable.

- Sixty-two percent strongly opposed increasing property taxes, making it the least acceptable choice for adding to the revenue. The consultants concluded people would rather pay taxes for activities or purchases, such as alcohol, than for what they own.
- Many people said the school district budget should be examined as well as the city government budget before there are tax increases. The city and Assembly only set the bottom line of the school budget. The School Board approves how the money will be spent.

A FUTURE FOR SALES TAXES?

The consultants presented their report to the Assembly in a work session Wednesday, as well as participating in a news conference.

Assembly member Chris Birch said he was impressed with the focus on rooting out inefficiencies.

"I'd be interested in drilling down" to further study some of those ideas, he said.

Assembly member Paul Honeman said of three recent city studies -- one on police, another auditing the finances under former Mayor Mark Begich and this one -- he thought this one was most useful.

He said he thinks the climate is changing in favor of sales taxes, and it's clear that basing so much of the city budget on property taxes is causing problems.

"I'm interested in looking at it."

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