

Our view: Good city, fair price ***'Community Conversations' find some common ground***

(09/15/10 18:18:49)

About 350 Anchorage citizens weighed in last month about what kind of city they want and how they would like to pay for it.

Anchorage Community Conversations, a series of four budget dialogues coordinated by Viewpoint Learning of California, found common ground about where you'd expect it -- in the middle. The report on the dialogues found Anchorage residents love their city and want it to flourish, within our means.

In other words, the consensus was that we should maintain the current level of city services, even if it means taxing to the cap -- but most dialogue participants agreed that taxing to the cap should only come, if necessary, after more efficiencies and streamlining in city government.

And a decisive majority -- 62 percent -- opposed any property tax increase.

The most popular alternative was an alcohol excise tax, the first choice of 53 percent of participants, an option that sparked little opposition.

Next popular was a sales tax -- but that alternative also had significant opposition.

Participants saw the greatest opportunities for efficiencies in the police department, administration and operations and maintenance. Stories about inefficiency, incompetence or just lack of communication in those areas peppered the sessions.

As the report pointed out, such shortcomings usually don't have tremendous effect on budget shortfalls. But their symbolic effect is far greater than their fiscal effect. If a citizen's experience with any part of city government is bad, that will stay with her. And when people see inefficiencies or poor performance in one part of their government, they naturally wonder if that's the norm for the rest of government, too.

The flip side is more promising. When citizens have a good experience with government -- city crews respond to that ice-dammed storm drain during breakup, paramedics are swift and able on a 911 call -- they tend to feel they're getting what they've paid for.

The dialogues' coordinators found that participants had considerable good will toward Anchorage leaders -- that while stories of inefficiency were common, there was little talk of corruption or malice, and that most felt city officials were trying to do a good job for the city. They noted the contrast with some other city governments in the United States, which suffer a toxic relationship with their residents.

That good will is an opportunity for the administration to build trust and a two-way street for communication with residents. That's something Mayor Dan Sullivan said he wanted when he announced the budget dialogues. The city continues to seek public input with a budget survey available online at www.muni.org.

The report also recommended the city make clear to residents when and how -- and Sullivan responded

Wednesday afternoon by saying his reorganization of planning and public works will save about \$650,000 a year.

The common ground the dialogues found is classically conservative -- steady as she goes, neither tea party nor tax-happy. Give us a city that operates more efficiently and effectively without service cuts. Streamline before raising taxes, only raise taxes modestly, as needed, and don't go to property owners for the increase. Maintain services like public health and the People Mover.

Details of the 2011 city budget, due Oct. 1, will test the strengths and weaknesses of this common ground. But the genuine public spirit that animated these conversations is encouraging. Let the conversation continue.

BOTTOM LINE: Budget dialogues reveal willingness to pay for a vibrant, well-run city -- but not too much.

[Print Page](#)[Close Window](#)

Copyright © Fri Sep 17 2010 09:39:01 GMT-0700 (PDT)1900 The Anchorage Daily News (www.adn.com)