



Summary Report Salinas Community Dialogues Spring 2009

Between February and April of 2009 The City of Salinas convened four Community Dialogues on service levels and choices. More than 140¹ people participated in the dialogues, which were made possible through a grant received from Common Sense California² and designed and facilitated by Viewpoint Learning.³ These dialogues sought to engage both leaders and the public in thinking about how to find the right balance between revenues and expenditures. The dialogues provided a unique opportunity for the City to engage its residents in thinking about the future they want for Salinas. Participants grappled with two key questions: 1) what kind of Salinas do you want for yourself and for your children, and 2) what tradeoffs and choices are you prepared to make to get there?

Key Findings

Dialogue participants loved Salinas and many spoke passionately about their hopes of raising their families in the City. 70% of all participants had lived in Salinas for more than a decade and many indicated that they had lived there all their lives. In addition 50% of the participants identified themselves as homeowners who were committed to living in Salinas and wanted what was best for the community. However, participants readily acknowledged that there are some real challenges that must be resolved if Salinas is to remain truly family-friendly, which they defined as providing recreational activities and appealing programs and services for all ages and being a safe and vibrant place where kids want to grow up and stay to raise their own families. Among the top challenges identified by residents was what they saw as deteriorating public safety. A surge in gang related violence in the first quarter of 2009 caused residents to doubt the effectiveness of current gang prevention methods. Participants were particularly frustrated with what they saw as waste and inefficiency in the police force and an ongoing failure of the police to relate to the community and its needs. This viewpoint was particularly strong among younger participants who cited negative personal experiences with the police department and were more vocal in their critique.

Participants began by considering their larger vision for the future of Salinas. They worked through three distinct choices for the future of the city along with their pros and

¹ While 141 participants completed surveys, total attendance was closer to 180.

² Common Sense California is a nonprofit organization that seeks to help solve California's public problems by promoting citizens' participation in governance

³ Viewpoint Learning, based in San Diego, designs and conducts specialized dialogues for business and public policy

cons. Each choice (briefly summarized below) described a different balance between the level of service received and what residents were willing to pay for those services:

- **Choice # 1: MINIMAL GOVERNMENT SERVICES AT MINIMAL COST:** Salinas was built on a tradition of self-reliance, relatively low taxes and a small government, hometown mindset. We want that to guide our future as well. This means we have to depend more on volunteerism and civic organizations so we can keep our government as small as possible and keep taxes low.
- **Choice #2: PRESERVE THE CURRENT LEVEL OF SERVICE IN SALINAS:** Salinas offers a basic and sufficient level of City services: we want to see the city stay just like it is. If that means we have to pay a little more to maintain public safety and other City services including recreational programs, we are prepared to do so.
- **Choice #3: ENHANCE SALINAS AS A COMMUNITY:** Salinas has changed, and it is time for us to invest in our community to bring Salinas up to par with other nearby cities. Even if our taxes and fees go up, we need to improve public safety and policing to make our community safer and keep up with growth. We also need to add services that families need and expect, like after school programs and additional programs for seniors and youth.

Participants from all four meetings produced very similar conclusions on the future they wanted for Salinas. By a significant margin, the most popular choice was Choice #3: Enhance Salinas as a Community (48% of participants supported this choice). The next most popular choice was Choice #2: Preserve the Current Level of Services in Salinas with 32% supporting this choice, and only 10% favoring Choice #1: Minimal Government Services at Minimal Cost. The areas of common ground from the four meetings include:

- **Continued availability of affordable community programs:** Libraries, parks and recreational services, and programs for the elderly were all seen as very important to the community. This was true of participants at all ages and income levels. Many participants saw these programs as a critical part of the solution to the problem of gang related violence and throughout the dialogues they were often referred to as “preventive” measures. Of the participants who wanted to see increased investments in the community, 67% supported using additional monies on youth programs as either a first or second choice. (42% supported it as a first choice and 25% as a second choice). Participants also recognized the importance of keeping programs affordable in order to include all residents of the Salinas community, in particular those who did not have the money to participate in private programs.
- **Rethink public safety:** Residents saw public safety services (police and fire) as essential to a thriving community. Of those who wanted to see increased investment in the community, 40% favored spending additional monies on the police as either a first or second choice. (25% supported spending on police as a first choice and 15% as a second choice). However, it is important to note that there was a strong push for an assessment of current practices in order to improve efficiency

and effectiveness in the police department. They did not want to see any more money going to the Police Department without critical review and reform. Participants gave examples of inefficiency such as seeing up to five police officers responding to a routine traffic stop. Participants encouraged the police department to explore opportunities for:

- Community policing
 - Working with parents
 - Streamlining the procedures for response to non-violent offenses
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- **Increased government efficiency:** There was a strong emphasis on government accountability, transparency and efficiency to help keep taxes low. Residents believed that the City could save real money through evaluating programs and making adjustments. They did not believe claims that City government was streamlined and that all options for belt-tightening had been pursued. In the course of this discussion, what emerged was a real disconnect between residents of Salinas and City government. Many knew little or nothing about how the City spent money, and had never seen a City budget before. A number of participants felt an important first step would be to improve communication about how tax dollars are being spent. They did not think the information was readily available or easily digestible.

 - **More reliance on volunteerism and civic organizations:** Participants wanted a future where Salinas's residents took an active role in maintaining and improving their community. They believed that volunteers from community organizations could accomplish some of the functions that would otherwise require City dollars, and they saw great benefit in developing a sense of service and ownership in the community, especially among young people. Participants wanted to see more community involvement, more youth service and more creative ways of harnessing the talent of community members. Some dialogue participants explored the possibility of creating programs similar to a Job Corps or requiring misdemeanor offenders to perform community services such as gardening and park maintenance. This last proposal appealed on a number of levels; in addition to providing needed services at lower cost, they also believed it would help to address rising gang violence by connecting young people, and non-violent offenders, to the community before they moved towards more serious offenses.

 - **Market the attractions in Salinas and maximize the use of City facilities:** Participants believed that Salinas had much more to offer than its public image suggested. In more than one group, participants raised the idea of marketing Salinas, creating attractions and signature events. They thought city leaders could do a better job promoting and taking advantage of the beautiful climate, the location and the underused cultural facilities to bring business and visitors to Salinas.

- **Willing to pay a little more:** Participants came to realize that the future they wanted would likely require additional funding. Though they were still convinced that the City could save money through increased efficiency, many came to agree that Salinas would need some additional revenues to create a better future and maintain or improve City services. Based on their somewhat improved understanding of the financial picture, participants expressed a willingness to pay a little more. However, there were clear conditions on this willingness, which was dependent on the assurance that all efforts were taken to maximize the use of existing funds and that there would be built-in accountability measures to ensure that new funds would be appropriately spent.

Service Cuts vs. Revenue Increase

Following their discussion of the future they would like to see for Salinas, participants moved on to identifying the most acceptable (or least offensive) cuts in City services or new and increased revenue sources that would support the future they had just described. This discussion was difficult for participants as they were forced to think critically about the tradeoffs involved on either side of the revenues and expenditures equation and how each would affect the future. Many participants came to acknowledge that there were no easy answers.

Potential areas for cuts

- **Increase accountability, transparency and efficiency** – In all four discussions dialogue participants stressed what they felt was the need to address what they saw as wasteful spending in the current City budget. When pressed for specific examples residents cited unnecessary acquisition of new vehicles, having too many police and firefighters responding to minor incidents and instances of delayed or slow completion of jobs (in particular when it came to street and lighting repair). Participants concluded that Salinas should first explore all avenues for increasing accountability, transparency and efficiency before making any cuts in services or raising taxes or fees.
- **Cut administrative costs** – When selecting from a list of possible departments or services to cut, the most popular choice was administrative costs with 40% of participants targeting this area for cuts. There was a general sense that the City should be more efficient and little sense that the administrative function of the City provided any tangible benefit to the residents of Salinas. Participants felt that City administrative staff should be “tightening their belts” like everyone else. Suggestions for doing so included:
 - Furlough one day a week
 - Improve technology for efficiency gains
 - Compare Salinas’s administrative expenditures to that of other cities and use best practices to cut costs

For the most part, people did not have much of an understanding of the services provided by the administrative staff. And the services they cared most deeply about, public safety and recreational programs for youth and seniors, were viewed as distinct from administrative services. Because it was difficult to translate these expenditures into real, everyday benefits for themselves and their families, many people believed that cutting administration would have the least effect on their lives and on the services they valued.

- **Cut City maintenance** – Some participants were willing to make sacrifices in the area of park and outdoor maintenance. 17% supported cuts to the funding of park and tree maintenance. There was a widespread belief that the City could save money through the use of volunteers to accomplish some of the maintenance tasks at parks. In addition volunteerism was seen as a tool by which Salinas’s youth could be engaged in their community. And in the end, participants were willing to accept less frequent maintenance of outdoor areas, even if it meant Salinas looked somewhat less manicured, while times are tough. There was very little support for cutting maintenance to City facilities (only 1% supported such cuts), as they were seen as key to providing the programs for youth and seniors that participants valued so highly.
- **Across the board cuts** - In all four community dialogues participants suggested that across the board cuts might be necessary. Although this was not a choice on the post-session surveys, many groups brought it up in discussion. They believed that given the global nature of the financial downturn currently affecting Salinas and California, it was only fair that everyone sacrificed in the short term until the economy recovered. When it came up that much of the City budget went to salaries and benefits, some participants suggested using a progressive approach to salary cuts where City employees with higher salaries would face larger cuts and lower paid employees would receive smaller cuts. But for many, this seemed to be the fairest choice and to some extent inevitable if the economy continued to decline.

Potential sources of revenues

Residents were clear in pointing out that any increase in revenue must be justified by a clear and demonstrable need. They wanted to see proof of efforts to maximize the use of current funds and eliminate waste and they wanted to see those efforts effectively communicated to the public. Mistrust of government spending was particularly evident when participants were asked to discuss potential sources of new revenue. When asked to identify sources of revenue that would be most tolerable, participants supported several to varying degrees.

- Improving revenue generation through **increased use of City owned facilities.** Residents felt that the City could raise more money by making far better use of existing large facilities that often sat empty. Specifically, they suggested that the sport complex and the rodeo grounds should be used for more events, and they

encouraged the use of facilities for music festivals or similar attractions that would pull in tourist dollars.

- **An extension of Measure V** – Even when told that an extension of Measure V would not solve the short-term budget shortfall this option was still the leading choice amongst participants. Among options for raising additional revenue, extending Measure V beyond its 2016 deadline was the first or second choice of 49% of dialogue participants. (28% chose an extension of Measure V as their first choice and 21% as their second choice). Though some participants were surprised and disappointed that only 44% of Measure V funds went to the libraries, they still focused on what they liked about it, namely the fact that it was targeted, accountable and it served the libraries.
- **Increase the transient occupancy tax** – Initially many participants saw an increase in the transient occupancy tax as an easy fix to the budget shortfall. They later reduced their support for the tax when confronted with the fact that even if doubled TOT would not raise enough revenue on its own. In the end 44% of dialogue participants supported an increase in the transient occupancy tax (15% as their first choice and 29% as their second) as a potential source of new revenue.
- **Possible sales tax** – 30% of dialogue participants were willing to accept an increase in sales tax as either their first or second choice for raising additional revenues. (24% chose it as their first choice and 6% as their second choice). This willingness to accept a sales tax was conditioned on the tax being affordable (in addition to the increase in the state sales tax) and the inclusion of a sunset clause, as with Measure V. A large number of participants wanted to use Measure V as a model and supported dedicating a new sales tax to specific programs such as libraries and recreation. It is important to note that along with outspoken support there was strong and vocal opposition to the inclusion of any tax increase. Participants who opposed an additional sales tax were concerned that it would put too much burden on consumers and negatively impact business especially in light of the statewide increase in sales tax that went into effect on April 1st 2009
- **Times have changed and old rules need rethinking.** Several participants thought that Salinas must look at the City charter and revise it to ensure that everyone is paying their fair share. In particular, there was a strong sense that powerful agricultural interests have been, for the most part, exempt from any contribution to City revenues while benefiting all the while from services. As agriculture is by far the largest industry in Salinas, this struck these participants as unfair and unsustainable, given the profit margins of these businesses and the fact that they were benefitting from City services and the labor of city residents without contributing to those services.

Building Social Capital

The community dialogues provided a unique opportunity for Salinas's residents to be engaged in the city's governance and decision-making process. For most it was the first time that they had seriously thought about what services the City provided and how those

services affected their daily life. Participant feedback on the community dialogues was positive with 86% indicating that they found the discussion to be useful. In addition, participants appreciated the background material and many spoke of how much they had learned from the experience (83% indicated that the background materials were useful). Specifically, participants began to have a better idea of how tax dollars were spent and many expressed how important that information was in broadening their understanding of what services The City of Salinas provides and how those services are paid for. They were energized by the experience and expressed a sense of gratitude for being included in the process (83% of participants indicated that the dialogues had impacted their thinking about issues facing Salinas).

It was common to hear participants expressing their surprise at how well fellow citizens worked together to find common ground and how the experience had refreshed their hope in the fact that dialogue around difficult issues is possible. The dialogues revealed that there is room to improve the channels of communication between The City of Salinas and its residents and that when properly engaged, residents are willing to become more involved in their community. These dialogues have created opportunities for city leaders to build on the energy and interests of dialogue participants, and also explore future possibilities for civic engagement. The opportunity to engage younger residents of Salinas cannot be understated. 45% of dialogue participants fell within the 18 to 34-age bracket. This high participation rate by younger residents was in part due to the fact that one of the dialogues was held at Hartnell College. The insight and energy from younger participants greatly enhanced these dialogues, and provides a strong beginning on which to build. In addition, older participants were delighted to have interaction with younger residents who were new to governance discussions and many realized that the dialogues gave them an opportunity to share and learn from people with whom they ordinarily had very little interaction.

Lessons for Decision Makers

Participants raised many questions and concerns about the functions of city government and many of their perceptions were based on assumptions common to the general public though not supported by City staffers and decision makers. For example, the public's perception of waste in government was a common theme as they worked through potential choices for the future, and played a significant role in shaping the results. This belief led some to reject the assertion that across the board cuts would, in fact, lead to a reduction in services and that maintaining the current level of service would require additional revenues. There is a real disconnect in how City employees understand where and how dollars are spent and what the public perceives. Building trust and understanding within the community will require responsiveness to these concerns. The community dialogue research suggests a number of steps leaders can take to build public trust and support for future decisions:

- **Exploring opportunities to improve police relations with the Salinas community.** It was not surprising that the issue of public safety was frequently raised during the dialogues. Most participants did not seek an immediate expansion of the police force. Instead, it became evident that there were significant trust issues as it related to how the police related to the community.

Long-term gang prevention efforts will require closer relationships between citizens and the police force, consequently it will be important to reassess efforts at community policing.

- **Actively educate the public through direct outreach, helping residents understand the functions of the City government.** Many participants indicated that they did not know how to get information on City services and could not recall receiving City mailers. Outreach and engagement efforts can't assume people know how to get involved. Many who attended the sessions said they were very lucky to have found out about them, and that city leaders needed to find better ways of alerting residents of opportunities like these. It is likely that the City will need to explore alternative means to reach out to the public and in doing so provide background for residents on such areas as:
 - The roles and responsibilities of different City departments and
 - How the budget is determined (discretionary vs. non-discretionary funds)
 - How decisions are made on tough issues

- **Building on the community support for Measure V.** Many dialogue participants were pleased with Measure V and were satisfied with the use of Measure V funds in providing important services to the community, especially library services. Leaders must use this as a model for success and find ways to inform more residents on how these funds help to make Salinas a better place to live.

- **Exploring opportunities to involve the voice of the youth will allow the city to tap into the energy of Salinas's younger population.** Younger participants bring unique insights to the governance process, a fact that was evident throughout the dialogues. Participants were very clear in their support of the need to develop a sense of ownership and service among young people (hopefully future residents) in the community and participants wanted to see city leaders make this a priority. Having young and old together in these dialogues provided an opportunity to surface common ground around a future that everyone supports.

City leaders in Salinas engaged their residents, through these dialogues, in a new form of democratic practice, known as “deliberative democracy” that encourages people to take a more active, thoughtful role in their own governance, grappling with the tradeoffs and working through hard choices. The Mayor and the City Council stepped outside the box of town hall meetings and public hearings, encouraging a very different kind of conversation about the future of their city. Participants appreciated the opportunity and are ready to become more engaged. While four dialogues is only a beginning, it is a model for a new kind of dialogue between city residents and leaders; a two-way conversation that sets up better and more transparent communication and begins the complex process of rebuilding trust.