



## PERSPECTIVE

# The Do's and Don'ts of Community Surveys

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**A**fter Hurricane Helene in September 2024, the City of Asheville, North Carolina City Council had far more demand for recovery-related expenses than the city could possibly afford. Workloads were intense, and finances were stretched thin.

But the leaders were intent on using their limited resources in a way that would be most responsive to the public. Within a very short period, before the city council would identify its priorities, the city wanted to get a solid understanding of what needs weren't being met for the community.

Enter the powerful tool called a "citizen survey," which is defined by the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) as "an approach to provide valuable input to city and county managers and elected officials as they set priorities and allocate resources."

According to Dawa Hitch, communications and public engagement director for the City of Asheville, with so little time to get the information the council needed, the city pulled out all the stops to get as many responses as it could. "We did daily social media promotions on our city platforms," she recalled. "We had media coverage in local news

outlets and used announcements and city newsletters, and we did some email campaigns."

Based on the survey, city leaders discovered that 96 percent of respondents labeled infrastructure as most important to them. But a close look at the comments showed that "road repairs were essential or very important, while infrastructure improvements like sidewalk repairs, greenways, and bikeways were rated as lower importance," she said.

Though the City of Asheville used this citizen survey as a response to a calamitous event, it's been doing citizen surveys about a wider range of topics for years—as have many other cities.

While some communities develop their own survey, many turn to standardized surveys like the one administered by Polco's National Research Center.

"I feel like the key metric for a government is the resident quality of life and satisfaction with public services," said Polco's founder and chief executive officer, Nick Mastronardi. "I just don't see a better way to know if a government is doing a good job than seeing if per dollar spent, they're increasing quality of life and satisfaction with public services."

Mastronardi pointed to some keys for a useful and valid citizen survey. "You've got to do it in a random representative, multi-mode way," he said, "because different people want it in different ways, maybe mailers or postcards or digital delivery. Then as the data is coming in, you've got to compile it and clean it. And if you want to run analytics on it, you should weigh it according to the census data."

While those guidelines may help to create and draw data from citizen surveys, "Councils should look at the results to help set priorities and track progress," Mastronardi said. "It needs to be in a nice chart and a graph. You need someone on staff or a partner with some sort of business intelligence data and visualization capability."

The types of surveys Polco orchestrates tend to look at the big picture, but citizen surveys can also be used to help a community's leaders direct themselves to reflect residents' views about significantly more narrow topics.

For example, there was an awareness in the City of Coppell, Texas, that residents were interested in having a variety of restaurants. According to the city's website, "In May 2024, the City of Coppell released a retail and dining survey to encourage residents to provide feedback on which retail stores and restaurants they enjoy most, and which new offerings they would like to see in the future." The survey was intended to help Coppell's community development team update and develop strategies based on the data to pursue new retail and restaurant opportunities there.

How much do citizen surveys cost? CountyOffice.org, an online directory that offers information on popular government services and local offices across the United States, explained that "The cost of a citizen survey can vary quite a bit. It largely depends on the method used, the number of people surveyed, and how complex the survey is. For traditional methods like mail and telephone surveys, costs can add up. Sending surveys by mail involves printing and postage. Hiring

interviewers for phone surveys also contributes to the expense for a small to medium-sized city. The price can range from \$5,000 to \$20,000 or even more, depending on the size and complexity of the groups involved."

A particularly significant challenge to conducting community surveys is making sure that the responses come from a wide range of residents. For example, "I had a colleague who grew up in a lower income community and whose parents were immigrants, and he said 'Look, I was told that you when you see somebody from the government you don't talk to them.' There's a trust issue here," said Jay Dawkins, chief executive

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officer at PublicInput, a company that creates community engagement software.

To overcome this challenge, the City of Asheville has used a community connectors campaign, to "get out in the field, out to the neighborhoods or places where people are gathering, and pass along the survey. Some of those groups might be, you know, people of color, people with disabilities, or those with lower income, as well as our elderly and young populations."

Finally, when a community chooses to use a citizen survey, respondents need to believe their responses have been heard and considered. Otherwise, they may well rebel by not participating the next time they're asked for their views—or even lose some trust and faith in the government altogether. Even if it's a matter of explaining why a particular priority is heavily favored by respondents but doesn't get funded, people need to know why. If a community can't close the loop and acknowledge that it heard from a resident, there is a natural assumption that this was just a paperwork exercise designed to make people think that leaders care when they don't." ■



After Hurricane Helene, a survey of Asheville residents revealed that 96 percent of residents ranked infrastructure as most important to them, and survey comments showed that road repairs were of higher importance than the repair of sidewalks, greenways and bikeways.



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