

Notes on the “Budget Survey” Approach

Surveys can provide a relatively easy to organize snapshot of public opinion at any given time. Such snapshots can give decision-makers a picture of the services that the public most and least values, and the budget choices that enjoy more or less support.

Keep in Mind

Surveys do have limitations. For instance, those who respond to a survey may be only minimally informed about the issue in question, and the opinions expressed may be tentatively held and can change as new information emerges or if other circumstances change.

Survey methodology affects the validity and usefulness of the results. For example, online surveys only reach a certain segment of the community (those that own and use computers and have access to Internet service). Phone surveys may exclude a portion of the community if cell phone numbers are not part of the sampling. In multilingual communities, surveys conducted in a respondent’s native language will more fully and accurately reflect his/her views.

Because of their question-and-answer format most (but not all) surveys typically offer limited opportunities for respondents to consider and respond to alternative budget scenarios or trade-offs. Surveys also tend to only minimally connect responding residents with the sponsoring local agency.

Key Elements

Surveys collect information by telephone, special mailings, or online. They may seek input from a truly random or generally representative sample of respondents. Or, they may simply request input from anyone who wishes to participate.

Surveys may be stand-alone efforts or combined with other methods of seeking public input. For instance, survey results may be used to develop budget balancing choices or strategies that residents later discuss at community workshops and other forums.

Some surveys are accompanied by educational materials, as part of an overall outreach and communication effort.

This note is a service of the Institute for Local Government (ILG) whose mission is to promote good government at the local level with practical, impartial, and easy-to-use resources for California communities. ILG is the nonprofit 501(c)(3) research and education affiliate of the League of California Cities and the California State Association of Counties.

The Institute welcomes feedback on this resource:

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