Council Agenda # _____
Meeting of February 10, 2004

STAFF REPORT

Citizen Opinion Survey

Honorable Mayor and Council Members:

Summary

In 2002, the City Council directed staff to conduct a survey of citizen opinions on a wide range of City services. The survey was intended to provide a baseline from which to judge future satisfaction levels and is also an important component of the Service Delivery Initiative and Performance Budgeting. The Gelfond Group was hired and conducted the survey in April and May. The results were presented to Council in June 2002. At the time, staff recommended similar surveys be conducted every two years in order to have good data for Performance Budget measures, and to track trends and changes in citizen opinions. Thus it is time for another survey, which staff believes can be accomplished for under $10,000. Before proceeding, staff seeks Council direction.

Background

Prior to 2002, the City last conducted a professional community-wide satisfaction survey in 1995. In January 2002, Council provided direction to staff to develop a contract with a professional survey research firm to conduct a new citizen opinion survey in Belmont. After staff reviewed several proposals, the City Council approved a contract with the Gelfond Group in February to develop and conduct a citywide survey.

The Gelfond Group's work included the following key components:

- ✓ Customized question design based on Belmont's interests
- ✓ Mailing of approximately 3,500 surveys to a representative cross-section of the community, with a cover letter from the Mayor explaining the project and purpose
- ✓ More than 40 questions, including one open-ended question and demographic questions
- ✓ Multiple response options
- ✓ Statistical validity at the 95% confidence level
- ✓ Analysis and reporting of results, including cross-tabulations and comparisons to other communities where possible

A total of 702 surveys were returned to the Gelfond Group by Belmont residents, leading to a margin of error of +/- 4%.

Among the key findings in 2002 were:

- ✓ 91% of residents rated Belmont "above average" as a place to live
- ✓ 69% of residents rated Belmont "above average" for the overall quality of services
- ✓ Satisfaction levels with key services were:
  - 89% favorable for police protection
  - 91% favorable for fire protection
  - 45% favorable for zoning and planning
  - 63% favorable for park, athletic field and open space maintenance
  - 52% favorable for maintenance of streets, roads, sidewalks and street trees
- ✓ 49% of residents said traffic was a serious problem in their neighborhood
- ✓ 96% of residents feel "very safe" or "fairly safe" in Belmont
- ✓ 85% of residents feel it is "very easy" or "fairly easy" to obtain information about City services in Belmont
- ✓ 72% of residents rated City staff "above average" for overall helpfulness

Discussion

The theory behind a citizen opinion survey is that you do not truly know how you are doing, how you can improve, or what is most important, without asking the users of your services. Without hard data, political, financial and management decisions are often made based on speculation, assumptions and the views of a small number of people.

The Service Delivery Initiative (SDI) adopted by Council in May 2000 was intended to make long-term, sustainable changes in the organization with an overall goal for the City to be more of a customer-driven, results-oriented organization. One of the specific objectives of SDI was: *to assist staff to more sharply focus on the services desired and to serve as the foundation for continuous improvement.*

A critical part of SDI is Performance Budgeting and quantifiable measures of accomplishment. In many cases, this involves some type of customer satisfaction assessment. At least a handful of measures rely directly on a citywide survey mechanism. If that data is not collected at least every other year, the measures begin to lose their usefulness for continuous improvement efforts.

A new survey would also allow the Council and staff to assess the effectiveness of customer service and process improvements (such as the Permit Center) over the past two years. The survey two years ago essentially serves as a benchmark. Now we need to see if we have improved in the eyes of our customers. If not, deeper analysis or changes in the way we do business may be necessary.

In addition to asking questions regarding customer satisfaction, a survey provides valuable input on citizens' priorities, which could be important information should additional budget cutting be

required.

Staff recognizes, however, that in this time of tight budgets, some might not see a citizen opinion survey as a good use of resources. Therefore, staff is seeking policy direction on whether or not to proceed.

The last survey cost under $14,000. Staff has talked to the Gelfond Group to get a sense of the potential cost this time. It is our understanding that if we do substantially the same survey, it would cost somewhat less this time, and depending on the extent of mailings, could be under $9,000. A key factor will be if we direct respondents to the internet or a phone system, so hard copies of the survey do not have to be mailed out. Staff also explored another survey vendor that uses a standardized approach but the cost is higher. Should Council agree to proceed with a survey, staff would endeavor to do it as inexpensively as possible, while maintaining statistical validity.

Fiscal Impact

In light of the new Purchasing Ordinance, staff would not normally seek Council authorization for a contract of this size. However, as this is a very visible use of public funds, we wanted to get your policy approval.

Sufficient funds are currently available in the City Manager's FY04 budget to pay for a survey.

Recommendation

Staff recommends Council direct staff to proceed with a citizen opinion survey in Spring 2004.

Alternatives

1. Direct staff not to implement a 2004 survey
2. Provide alternative direction to staff including, but not limited to, input on the distribution method

Respectfully submitted,

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