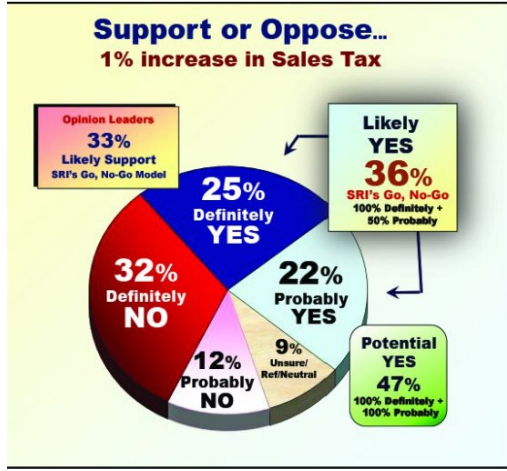




Published March 27th, 2024

Lafayette Council received results of telephone survey to tackle upcoming fiscal challenges

By Lou Fancher



Dr. Gary Manross of Strategy Research Institute at the council meeting March 11 presented survey findings about the city's fiscal standing that were designed for and drew from a sample size of 400 registered Lafayette voters. The scientific telephone survey was conducted between Jan. 15 and Feb. 15. The council had directed SRI to gather data and assess voters' willingness to support a sales tax rate increase to counter ongoing structural deficits of approximately 10% every year that will result in annual deficits of \$2 million if not proactively addressed.

Specifically, the survey sought findings in three categories:

1. Determining whether or not a funding Measure intended to allow Lafayette City officials to address the fiscal challenges they will be facing beginning in the next fiscal year will pass or fail, if placed on the November ballot.
2. Identifying the collective core values and perceptions having to do with likely support for a funding Measure asking Lafayette voters to authorize an increase in the City's sales tax in order to address the fiscal challenges that City officials will soon be facing.
3. Testing the impact on voting behavior of specific arguments both in support of and in opposition to embracing such a funding Measure; in other words, would the respective argument cause voters to be more supportive of or more inclined to oppose such a funding Measure.

Among the most critical results Manross highlighted in his presentation was that nearly three-quarters (74%) of local voters were not aware that the City will soon be facing an annual deficit of about \$2 million. "They just don't know," he said.

When the survey asked respondents about the level of concern they would experience if they were informed by a trusted source about the fiscal challenges soon facing the city, 83% said learning this from a trusted source would make them concerned, 30% it would make them highly concerned, and over half (53%) said the news would make them somewhat concerned. Not unexpectedly, trusted sources known as "opinion leaders" by voter analysts (58 of the survey's 400 responders were deemed opinion leaders), reveal the follow-the-leader influence in survey results showing 91% of all mainstream "information followers" reported they would become concerned at some level should these thought leaders convey the city's potential deficit information.

Of the nine issues presented, the top three the respondents identified as most concerning if negative funding impacts Lafayette in fiscal year 2024-25 were the city's ability to maintain city streets, roads, and storm drains; inability to implement and maintain adequate wildfire preparedness; and being unable to prioritize bicycle and pedestrian safety in Lafayette. The three concerns given secondary prominence related to preserving open space, downtown parks, and recreation facilities, a vibrant downtown, and establishing enough control of new development projects. Completing the list and positioned as less concerning were crime, lack of housing, and climate change.

In positive findings, 93% of mainstream residents said they were satisfied with the quality of life in Lafayette and almost 58% are very satisfied. The opinion leaders came in at 90%, indicating they are close to the percentage of the mainstream response.

Regarding the low crime concern, Manross said, "When you see crime down here, that's good. It means your community knows it has a safe community, knows its police department is doing a wonderful job. That's one of the reasons they chose to move to Lafayette: because it is a safe, wonderful community."

The opinion leaders and mainstream responders reported 86-90% satisfaction when it came to a number of city-sponsored services and programs. For parks, trails and recreation amenities, it was 86-88%, and satisfaction with the level of police services stood at 83-88%, with 43% of that being very satisfied.

Maintenance of public streets was given a thumbs down at 65-77%. Quality of education is not under the

city's domain, but Manross said it was significant and important to include because it is key to understanding community members' actual satisfaction and presenting non-skewed findings. That figure ranged from 76-80%. Interactions with city employees the survey showed registered at 63-67% satisfied, which Manross said was strong as compared to other municipalities and showed "something nice about your professional staff. I'm sure this doesn't hurt their feelings."

Coding and community development he said are always lower in every city and, true to form, the survey had roughly 25% somewhat to extremely dissatisfied and only 57-58% satisfied.

Turning to solutions to increase revenue to address the \$2 million shortcoming, the survey asked about finding new resources or cutting back services and programs. Manross said options were limited to things such as increasing property tax—an action that would result in about \$200 annually per parcel for property owners. Increasing sales tax by one percent was another idea. "Your neighboring communities have done this successfully," he noted, before mentioning that previous efforts by Lafayette to do the same had failed. He said the problem in part lay in a large percentage of the electorate being unaware of the budget deficits to come.

Manross suggested that building support among the undecided or potential probables for approving a sales tax increase is critical for it to be successful. "It's been shown in Lafayette, your voter wants control of how [their] money is spent. [They say], If it's important enough to me, I'll spend money on it—but I want to be sure you spend money on it." He said the good news is that the city needs only 50% to say yes, but the difficulty of coalescing that pool of support is considerable. Awareness of the need is critical, campaigning for either a yes or no vote is not something the city can be engaged in, and ultimately, voters must trust the source of information and the accuracy, objectivity, and transparency of the information.

After Manross outlined components of community outreach to increase awareness of the situation, public comment had people asking about the cause of the deficit, emphasizing that solutions must relate to the community's core values, and requires more details about the survey's process and findings. City staff answered several of the questions and discussed the best methods for implementing the survey findings.

The council amended and accepted staff's recommendation that the city approve up to \$60,000 for IMC Corp to serve as public relations consultant for up to 8 months to assist with a city-wide informational campaign, inclusive of \$12,000 for Interactive tools to receive residents' feedback. The matter will return at future meetings.

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA