

# Council Communication

## January 15, 2013, Business Meeting

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### Results of Citizen Survey

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**FROM:**

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**SUMMARY**

This is a report on the results of the Ashland Citizen Survey conducted in October 2012 using the National Citizen Survey developed by the National Research Center, Inc. and the International City Management Association.

**BACKGROUND AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS:**

In October, postcards were mailed to 1,200 randomly selected Ashland households announcing that a survey will follow. The survey was mailed a week later and was followed by a “reminder” letter one week after that. A total of 458 completed surveys were returned resulting in a margin of error plus or minus 5%. This means if 60% of survey respondents report that a particular service is “excellent” or “good”, somewhere between 55-65% of all residents are likely to feel that same way (*pages 2 and 3*).

The survey results are weighted, a “best practice” in survey research, to provide as accurate a picture as possible of the overall population. Typically, certain population groups (senior and homeowners) tend to respond more often to surveys, while other population groups (renters and single males) tend to respond less often. For example, 15% of Ashland’s population is male between the ages of 18 and 34 (2010 census) and of this group just 3% responded. Software using mathematical algorithms is used to calculate the appropriate weights for each population segment. In this case, the weighting of Ashland males between 18 and 34 brought the response rate up to 10%, a much closer representation of the actual population base of that group. Because of weighting, the results better reflect the sentiments of Ashland’s overall population and give a much broader picture than from just the groups that typically respond to surveys (*pages 94 and 95*).

The National Citizen Survey maintains a database of approximately 500 jurisdictions whose residents evaluated local government services and gave their opinion about the quality of community life. The City of Ashland chose to have its survey results compared to the national database and to a subset of university communities with populations between 10,000 and 40,000. Comparisons to this database and the subset establish Ashland’s benchmarks (*pages 97 and 98*). Detailed comparisons are included in the Benchmark Report which includes the list of jurisdictions included in the national benchmark comparisons, (*page 13*) and the list of university communities’ benchmark comparisons (*page 27*).

A variety of characteristics of Ashland was evaluated by those participating in the study. Ratings of community characteristics were compared to the Benchmark database. Of the 31 characteristics for which comparisons were available, 22 were above the national benchmark comparison, three were similar to the national benchmarks and six were below including, shopping opportunities, availability



of affordable quality health care, variety of housing options, employment opportunities, amount of public parking and availability of affordable quality housing.

Respondents also evaluated services available in Ashland. Of the 38 services for which comparisons were available, 27 were above the national benchmark comparison, seven were similar to the national benchmark comparison and four were below including street lighting, animal control, economic development and services to low income people.

## **Custom Questions**

The City of Ashland chose to add the three following custom questions to the survey (*see pages 56 and 57 for responses*).

- #1 Please indicate how important, if at all, each of the following projects and issues are for the City to address.
- #2 The City does not currently assess the maximum property tax rate allowed under state law. To what extent do you support increasing the current property tax rate by nine cents per \$1000 assessed property value to maintain City services and current service levels?
- #3 Which of the following statements about affordable housing options in Ashland best matches your view?

## **Open ended question**

The City of Ashland chose to include the following open ended question in the survey (*see Open-ended Question Report for responses*).

- If you could change one thing about the City of Ashland what would it be?

## **Staff Comments**

The results of the citizen survey are extremely favorable. Citizens are happy with city services and city employees. They love their community, they feel safe in Ashland and they value the city services for which they pay taxes. While the results of the survey are extremely positive, there are some topics that that could be explored further.

Survey results establish trends and help to inform staff and elected officials of how city government is doing over time. The results provide a “voice” to Ashland citizens that neither city staff nor the City Council may otherwise hear. If a downward trend develops, staff can evaluate why and consider responsive actions. Significant downward trends or consistent “low scores” can serve to raise policy questions for council to consider. After review and consideration of the policy questions, the Council may then determine that the “low scores” are not a cause for concern or that policy needs to be implemented to raise the “low scores.”

Here are some sample policy questions based on the current survey results Council may want to consider in the future.

- 1) Do we have the right balance between parking needs, active transportation, meeting the commercial needs of businesses and encouraging density? [Available public parking ranked much below” the benchmark comparisons.]



- 2) Is the City currently playing an appropriate role for providing services for low-income people? Are social services a core function of municipal government? [Services for low-income ranked “much below” the benchmark comparisons.]
- 3) Do we have an appropriate balance between the interests in encouraging affordable housing and maintaining citizens’ current property values? [Affordable quality housing ranked “much below” the benchmark comparisons.]
- 4) Do we have the right balance in encouraging economic development and regulating commerce to ensure our land use and environmental goals are met? [Economic development ranked “much below” the benchmark comparisons.]

**FISCAL IMPLICATIONS:**

The total cost of this survey was \$16,000 which is included in the current budget.

\$10,300      Basic Survey

\$5,700      Additional costs include demographic subgroup comparisons, custom benchmarks (university communities), one open-ended questions and online web survey (non-scientific).

**STAFF RECOMMENDATION AND REQUESTED ACTION:**

N/A

**SUGGESTED MOTION:**

N/A

**ATTACHMENTS:**

1. Citizen Survey Report
2. Benchmark Report
3. Demographic Subgroup Report
4. Open Ended Question Report
5. On-line Survey (non-scientific) Report

