



SURVEYS, PUBLIC INPUT

While actively engaged in soliciting information on programs and processes from elected officials, County management and department heads, the Commission also wanted input from all ranks of employees as well as from the general public. To that end, it planned and executed two broad surveys, one targeting employees and the second asking citizens to comment on county government. It also conducted focus group sessions with selected employees (graduates of a County-sponsored Leadership Development Program). Responses provided an invaluable understanding of perceptions and assessments of the value and quality of services, and a wealth of comments and suggestions on improvements. The information below provides a more detailed examination of the surveys and results, and the reports generated.

Employee Survey

After some pre-publicity, the employee survey was sent to all departments in May 2004, along with a letter from the chairman of the MAP Commission explaining the purpose. Responses were requested by June 4, 2004, and could be filed on-line or by returning a paper form. Working with the County's Information Technology Services, the Commission took steps to assure that employees could respond anonymously by utilizing a computer-generated random identification number, rather than requiring personal identification. There was, however, an opportunity for respondents to request personal contact for further discussion with MAP Commissioners.

The survey was distributed to employees in all County departments and the offices of elected and appointed officials. It included 24 questions focusing on attitudes toward job, supervision, evaluation of performance, department/office operations, needed improvements, and adequacy of resources. Two text questions were asked: are there areas needing improvement, and what would you change to save money, work better or improve service. Following the close of the survey period, the MAP Commission sent a second letter thanking those who participated, and recapping responses.

In total, 765 responses were received, or 34 percent of the total distributed. Seventy percent were completed on paper as opposed to the electronic option. Almost 50 employees asked to be contacted individually to further discuss issues with the Commission. The highest response rate was from within County departments (45 percent of department employees). Twenty-one percent of elected officials' staff responded, and 18 percent of appointed. Respondents comprised a full range of years of service, from less than one year to over 20 years.

Several reports were generated based on the responses, and copies of all are attached. Reports include an overview of responses to all questions, with graphs, printouts of responses to the two text questions, questions 1 – 24 sorted by office type, an analysis of the most favorable and least favorable responses, an outline of the most common HR-related comments, and a special report on a breakdown by type of office and years of service.

A comparison of positive to negative results indicates that 41 percent of all responses marked were “very pleased or strongly agree,” 39 percent were “pleased or agree,” 12 percent were neutral, 5 percent were “regret or disagree,” and 2 percent were “strongly regret or strongly disagree.”

A very general overview suggests employees are pleased with their job and the services their department provides. However, they would like to see changes and more flexibility in supervision and management. There is an interest in pay increases based on merit and wider use of flexible scheduling, and a stated need for better communication. Problem areas identified included a perceived split between County departments and elected offices, the need for coordination between departments and between government entities, improved customer service, and a need to move from reactive to proactive decision making. Suggested improvements included consolidation of services, a central information number or call center, cross training employees, improved fleet management, and organizational structure changes to increase span of control.

Citizen Survey

Following completion of the employee survey, the Commission tackled inviting public input through a survey of citizens’ opinions on County government. Again, it looked to the County’s IT contractor to develop an on-line survey tool, test it, install it as a link from the County website, and create an automatic data entry and reporting mechanism. Team CMC did an excellent job providing that support to the Commission.

Coordinated with extensive media coverage, the on-line public opinion survey was launched in July 2004. To support the electronic effort, 5,000 paper copies were printed to be distributed at public meetings and at County buildings and libraries. When responses were slow coming in, a decision was made to print and target mail 15,000 surveys to a cross-section of County zip codes. These were mailed in mid-October. By mid-December a total of 1,417 responses were received, with about 45 percent of those being paper.

The original on-line version of the survey contained 64 questions, including 20 related to specific use of the County web-site. In the version mailed in October, those 20 questions were eliminated to make the survey easier and quicker to fill out. Both versions included one text question asking what change the respondent would most like County government to make to its services. Other questions asked about quality of life and perceptions of the value, efficiency and quality of County services. Included was a question on support for consolidating local services. Two questions asked about the most important issues facing Charleston County Government, and which services/projects respondents would be willing to help fund through additional taxes. Both of these allowed respondents to choose from a prepared list, to add their own answers. Finally, the survey asked for some demographic information to give the Commission information on who was responding.

In general, respondents said the quality of life in Charleston County is good, but there were negative marks for County government's role in balancing growth and environmental concerns. The most highly rated services were the library and recycling; the least highly rated services were planning and building services. There were 861 ideas on improving services, most dealing with schools, taxes, roads and growth. (See the attached report that sorts and categorizes these.) Fifty-eight percent of the respondents live in a municipality; 36 percent in a PSD, unincorporated area or unknown. There is some support for consolidating services.

The most important issues to the respondents are traffic and roads, growth, and in a tie for third place, crime/public safety/jail, public transportation, and preserving the environment. They would pay more taxes for road maintenance/drainage, preservation of open space, public transportation, and new road construction.

A typical respondent was an established resident, middle aged, white, and a registered voter. Half the respondents were female.

Attached are the survey and a full copy of the responses, including a printouts of the text responses. The comments on suggested changes are sorted by categories, a somewhat subjective classification organized by task force, services, and a category for the very large number of comments related to growth, planning and land use. An explanation of the rationale for sorting comments is attached to the printout.

Focus Groups

Commission members met with two groups of employees who had completed a Leadership Development Program. The employees, all considered top-management candidates, were asked what services they are most proud of and do well, and which do they feel could be done better. Their informed responses provided valuable information to the Commission study. Notes from the focus group meetings follow.

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