
CITY OF RENTON
Citizen Survey
CITY BUDGET PRIORITIES
July 2004


ELWAY RESEARCH, INC.

CITY OF RENTON

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Methods	3
Respondent Profile.....	4
Key Findings.....	5
Quality of Life	6
City Services.....	7
City Budget Priorities	8
Spending and Taxes	10
Implications	13
Findings.....	16

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INTRODUCTION

Facing a potential budget deficit and a possible property tax roll-back, the City of Renton commissioned this public opinion survey to ascertain the relative value citizens place on various city services and to engage citizen input on the hard choices ahead for city government budget writers.

Following on the baseline survey conducted in 2002, this survey was designed to ask Renton citizens what priority they would place on a list of 32 city services and programs.

The hard choices, of course, are program and service cut backs, tax increases or both. The possibility of a tax increase was not introduced to respondents until they had registered their priority for each of the 32 programs. The programs were introduced as "a list of services and programs currently being funded by City Government with taxpayer dollars." The task was presented as deciding "which programs to keep, which ones to trim, and which ones to eliminate."

Respondents were asked to assign a priority for each program, using the following categories:

- 1) 'Top Priority', so funding should not be cut for that program;
- 2) 'High Priority' but spending could be trimmed;
- 3) 'Low Priority' so spending could be cut significantly; or
- 4) 'Not a Priority,' so that program could be eliminated.

Prior to the prioritization exercise, respondents were asked about the general quality of life in Renton and were asked to rate six categories of city services: 1) Police; 2) Fire; 3) Parks and Recreation; 4) City Streets; 5) Economic Development; and 6) City Utilities. These same six (plus two others) had been included in the 2002 baseline survey.

Following the prioritization exercise, respondents were asked about the value they believed they receive for the taxes they pay to the City of Renton. They were also asked how likely they would be to support

continuation of, or increases in, the property tax to pay for city programs and services.

The sample for this survey consisted of 400 heads of household within the City of Renton. The households were randomly selected from an up-to-date list of registered voters in Renton. The voter list was used to ensure that households selected were inside the city limits. Individuals within the household were not necessarily registered voters; they were selected by alternately asking for the male or female head of household. Heads of household were selected because they are more likely to be aware of city services and property taxes paid by the household.

The survey was designed and administered by Elway Research, Inc. The questionnaire was designed in close collaboration with City of Renton Communications Office, who coordinated the questions with city departments.

Annotated charts of the survey findings follow the narrative. A complete set of demographic crosstabulation tables is presented in the final section.

METHODS

SAMPLE:	400 adult heads of household in the City of Renton, Washington.
TECHNIQUE:	Telephone Survey
SAMPLE FRAME:	Registered voter households within the City of Renton. Respondents were not necessarily registered voters; voter households were used to insure that the respondents' households were in the specified ZIP Codes.
FIELD DATES:	June 12-21, 2004
MARGIN OF ERROR:	5% at the 95% confidence interval. That is, in theory, had all Renton heads of household been interviewed, there is a 95% chance the results would be within 5% of the results in this survey.
DATA COLLECTION:	Calls were made during weekday evenings and weekend days. Trained, professional interviewers under supervision conducted all interviews. Up to four attempts were made to contact a head of household at each number in the sample before a substitute number was called. Questionnaires were edited for completeness, and a percentage of each interviewer's calls was re-called for verification.
OPEN-ENDED ITEMS:	A number of the questions were open-ended, allowing the respondent to express answers in his/her own words. Responses to open-ended questions were recorded as close to verbatim as possible, then categorized and coded for analysis.

It must be kept in mind that survey research cannot predict the future. Although great care and the most rigorous methods available were employed in the design, execution and analysis of this survey, these results can be interpreted only as representing the answers given by these respondents to these questions at the time they were interviewed.

RESPONDENT PROFILE

In interpreting these findings, it is important to keep in mind the characteristics of the people actually interviewed. Presented here is a demographic profile of the 400 respondents in the survey.

Note: Here and throughout this report, percentages may not add to 100%, due to rounding.

GENDER:	49%	Male
	51%	Female
AGE:	12%	18-35
	28%	36-50
	23%	51-64
	34%	65+
YRS IN RENTON:	15%	1 to 5 yrs
	19%	6 to 10 yrs...
	19%	11 to 20 yrs...
	46%	More than 20 yrs
AREA:	33%	South Renton (98055)
	43%	North Renton (98056)
	7%	South East (98058)
	18%	North East (98059)
HOUSEHOLD:	6%	Single, Kids @ Home
	27%	Couple, Kids @ Home
	30%	Single, No Kids
	35%	Couple, No Kids
EMPLOYMENT:	10%	Self-Employed or Business Owner
	26%	Private Business
	14%	Public Sector
	11%	Not Working Right Now
	37%	Retired
HOMEOWNER:	81%	Owner
HAVE HOME INTERNET:	74%	Yes
EDUCATION LEVEL:	22%	High School or Less
	35%	Some College / Voc-Tech
	31%	College Degree
	11%	Graduate / Prof. Degree
INCOME:	15%	\$25,000 or Less
	26%	\$25 to \$50,000
	19%	\$50 to \$75,000
	19%	Over \$75,000

KEY FINDINGS

3 in 4 rate Renton as an “excellent” (21%) or “very good” (54%) place to live
Up from 63% two years ago

Top reasons for positive ratings:

- Atmosphere
- Location
- Public Services
- Sense of Community

9 in 10 feel “very safe” (48%) or “somewhat safe” (45%)
Unchanged from 2002.

Performance grades higher or even since 2002 for all 6 categories of city services
Average ratings up for: Fire, Parks, Police; Economic Development
Unchanged for: Utilities; Streets

21% name at least 13 “top priorities”
93% rate at least one program as “top priority”

Top four priorities all in police and fire departments:

- Fighting Fires
- Neighborhood Police Patrols
- EMT
- Solving Crimes

63% said tax money is “well spent”
Down from 69% in 2002

Slight Majority would support tax increase if needed to maintain city services

41% would increase property tax by 1% to maintain city government services at current level

15% would support increase of more than 1% to improve or add city services

31% support cuts to keep property taxes at current level

11% support cuts to lower property taxes

QUALITY OF LIFE

The overall quality of life in Renton was rated higher in this survey than it was two years ago. Slightly more residents also said they feel “very safe” in Renton.

3 in 4 Rate Renton as a Very Good Place to Live

Compared to 2002, nearly twice as many respondents this year rated Renton “excellent” as a place to live, and more rated it “very good.”

In this survey:

75% rated Renton as “excellent” (21%) or “very good” (54%) as a place to live; compared to

63% in 2002 (12% “excellent” + 51% “very good”).

The main reasons for the positive ratings were similar to those given in 2002. Those who said “excellent” or “very good” cited Renton’s

“Atmosphere” (18%), including its small town, yet urban feel; its “nice” comfortable feeling; the relative peace and quiet; and safety.

“Location” (15%), which mainly focused on proximity to work and recreation.

“Public Services” (14%), including schools, parks, police and fire, health care and libraries.

“Sense of Community,” and the friendly people (12%)

Only 5% rated the city as a “poor” or “only fair” place to live; down from 9% in 2002.

Nearly Half Feel “Very Safe”

Nine in 10 respondents said they felt “very safe” (48%) or “somewhat safe” (45%) in Renton. This is up slightly (though not significantly) from 2002, when 45% said “very” and 47% said “somewhat safe.”

CITY SERVICES

Respondents were asked to give letter grades “like they do in school” to six categories of city government services. These same six had been graded in the 2002 survey. The overall grade point average for the services rated rose slightly compared to 2002: from 2.99 to 3.10.

Slightly Higher Ratings for Most City Service Categories

Five of the six city services categories tested here got a better “report card” than in 2002. The lone exception – utilities – fell off slightly, even though it received slight more “A’s” than in 2002. None of the differences, positive or negative, were statistically significant.

RATINGS OF CITY SERVICE CATEGORIES

“Grade Point Average” + % of “A’s”		2004	2002
FIRE SERVICES	<u>GPA</u>	<u>3.58</u>	<u>3.54</u>
	A grades	60%	57%
POLICE SERVICES	<u>GPA</u>	<u>3.38</u>	<u>3.36</u>
	A grades	47%	49%
PARKS & REC	<u>GPA</u>	<u>3.38</u>	<u>3.21</u>
	A grades	49%	41%
UTILITIES	<u>GPA</u>	<u>2.99</u>	<u>3.04</u>
	A grades	32%	31%
ECONOMIC DEVEL	<u>GPA</u>	<u>2.66</u>	<u>2.50</u>
	A grades	14%	11%
CITY STREETS	<u>GPA</u>	<u>2.62</u>	<u>2.59</u>
	A grades	14%	14%

“GPA” = “Grade Point Average.” Respondents were asked to give each category a grade “like they do in school.” The GPA is calculated on the basis of A=4 grade points; B=3, C=2, D=1, and F=0. “No opinion” is factored out of the GPA.

CITY BUDGET PRIORITIES

The primary objective of this survey was to assess citizen priorities for city government spending. Respondents were asked to assign a priority to each of 32 city programs and services. For each one, respondents indicated whether they would favor eliminating that program, cutting it significantly, trimming it, or leaving the level of spending as is.

Cut Spending, But Don't Eliminate Programs

Perhaps the most striking finding of the prioritization exercise was the overall value placed on these city government programs. Despite the conventional wisdom of this being an "anti-tax," anti-government" era, most of these programs were rated as high priority by most respondents:

Only one program had as many as 10% of respondents in favor of eliminating that program (animal control).

Majorities rated 4 programs as "top priorities," meaning that funding should not be cut for those programs.

On average, respondents named 7.8 programs as "top priorities."

1 in 5 respondents (21%) rated 13 or more programs as "top priority."

For only 3 of the 32 programs did a majority of respondents favor "significant cuts" to its budget (animal control, historical museum. Adult recreation).

By the same token:

The proportion of respondents who favored at least trimming the budget of these 32 programs ranged from 42% to 91%.

On average, respondents named 9.9 programs as "low" or "non" priorities.

1 in 6 respondents (17%) rated 16 or more programs as "low" or "non" priorities.

The overall picture, then, is one of a citizenry able to differentiate between city government programs, and willing to make choices about spending their tax dollars.

Top Priorities: Fire and Police Services

The top four priorities – each with a majority who said the program budget should not be cut at all – were all in the categories of fire and police services. In order, they were:

- 1) Putting out fires and limiting damage (58% said “top priority”);
- 2) Keeping police patrols in the neighborhoods (58% “top priority”);
- 3) Providing emergency medical transport services to the hospital (55% “top priority”); and
- 4) Investigating and solving crimes (51% “top priority”);

Unlike the top four, the next four highest-rated priorities represented a diversity of service categories. The next four priorities were:

- 5) Operating existing recreation centers, like the Renton Community Center and Senior Center (30% “top priority”);
- 6) Operating the libraries (29% “top priority”);
- 7) Recruiting and retaining business (29% “top priority”);
- 8) Preserving open space and natural areas (26% “top priority”).

Note that there was a significant drop off (21 points) in the proportion of respondents who rated the second tier programs as “top priority” and therefore exempt from budget cuts. In fact, after the top four, the proportion who rated each of the other 28 programs as a “top priority” tapered off gradually to the bottom of the list. The difference in “top priority” rating between #4 and #5 was the same as between #5 and #32.

This pattern illustrates the strength of the ratings for the top four programs and the lack of a natural “break point” or dividing line between the others.

SPENDING AND TAXES

Most of the Renton citizens interviewed for this survey thought their tax dollars were being well spent by city government and most were willing to consider raising their city taxes to maintain programs and services.

6 in 10 Said Tax Dollars “Well Spent” by City Government

Although the proportion was down somewhat compared to two years ago, most respondents said that the taxes they pay to city government were being “well spent”:

63% said their taxes were being well spent, while
24% said they were not.

Two years ago, when asked the same question:

69% said “well spent” and
19% said not.

Not surprisingly, the answer to this question was related to how one felt about Renton as a place to live:

81% of those who rated Renton an “excellent” place to live said their taxes were being well spent, compared to just

47% who rated the city as “satisfactory,” “only fair,” or “poor.”

As could be expected, the higher the number of programs one said could be significantly cut or eliminated, the more likely one was to say that tax dollars were not being well spent:

85% of those who named *no* programs that could be significantly cut said their tax dollars were being well spent; compared with only

46% of those who named 16 or more programs that could be cut.

The expected pattern did not hold for “top priority” ratings, however: the same proportion (57%) of those who rated *none* of the 32 programs as a “top priority” said their tax dollars were being well spent as those who rated 13 or more programs as “top priority.”

The only significant differences between demographic categories of respondents in answer to this question was that public sector employees were more likely than private sector employees to say their taxes were being well spent (79% to 56%), with retirees in between (65%). It is notable that even though the difference was not significant, a majority of

private sector employees were satisfied that their taxes were well spent.

Most Willing to Increase City Property Taxes

At the end of the interview, a majority of respondents said they were willing to raise their property taxes to maintain or improve city services. The exact question was:

About 29 cents of every dollar in the city's general government budget comes from property taxes. The City's general property tax levy is \$3.16 per \$1,000 of assessed property valuation. So, for example, if your home is assessed by the county at \$250,000, you would pay \$790 dollars per year in property tax to support city services.

As I mentioned earlier, Renton City government is facing a budget deficit. Maintaining the city services and facilities at their current level will require an increase in the property tax levy of 1 percent – or about \$10 per year for the average homeowner. Given this situation, which of the following do you tend to favor:

- 41% said "I would favor increasing the city property tax by 1 percent to maintain city government services at their current levels for as long as we can";
- 15% said "I would support raising the property tax more than 1 percent in order to add or improve city programs and services";
- 31% said "I would favor keeping property taxes at their current level, and cutting back programs and services as necessary"; and
- 11% said "I would favor lowering property taxes and cutting city programs and services now."
- 3% had no opinion.

This suggests a 56% majority (41% + 15%) for a 1% increase to maintain services at current levels, since presumably, those who favor a higher increase would favor the 1% increase.

Support for tax increases was related to citizen evaluation of Renton and current city services:

- 45% of those who rated Renton as an "excellent" or "very good" place to live supported the 1% increase; and another
- 15% supported a higher increase to add or improve services; while
- 50% of those who rated Renton as "satisfactory" or lower favored keeping taxes at their current level (33%) or lowering property taxes and cutting city services (17%).

It might be expected that citizens who were less than satisfied with the quality of life in Renton would support a tax increase to improve city services. There was some support for that reasoning:

43% of those who rated Renton as “satisfactory” or lower supported a tax increase to maintain (28%) or improve (15%) city government services.

The opposite effect was also evident, however:

29% of those who rated Renton “excellent” or “very good” as a place to live wanted to keep property taxes at their current level by cutting services and programs as necessary; and

8% wanted to reduce their property taxes and cut city services.

Support for a tax increase was more strongly related to ideas about how current taxes were being managed.

Of those who thought their taxes were being well spent now:

51% supported a 1% tax increase to maintain city services;

17% supported a higher increase to improve or add services;

25% wanted to keep taxes at their current level and cut services as necessary;

5% wanted their taxes reduced.

Among those who said their taxes were *not* being well spent:

20% supported a 1% tax increase to maintain city services;

10% supported a higher increase to improve or add services;

43% wanted to keep taxes at their current level and cut services as necessary;

24% wanted their taxes reduced.

Interestingly, there was not a strong relationship between support for a tax increase and the prioritization of city government programs and services.

Of those who gave “top priority” (i.e., no budget cuts) to 13 or more of the 32 programs rated:

32% supported a 1% tax increase to maintain city services;

27% supported a higher increase to improve or add services;

25% wanted to maintain taxes at their current level and cut programs as necessary.

Of those who gave “top priority” to 3 or fewer programs:

36% supported a 1% tax increase to maintain city services;

19% supported a higher increase to improve or add services;

30% wanted to maintain taxes at their current level and cut programs as necessary.

IMPLICATIONS

These results indicate that most Renton citizens are generally more than satisfied with how things are going in their city. Most rate the quality of life as very good, and the number is rising. Most are satisfied with the way city government is operating

While there is certainly a constituency for “trimming” city government spending on programs and services, there is virtually no constituency for wholesale cuts. There is little “anti-government” or “anti-tax” sentiment evident in these findings.

In fact, most respondents were willing to raise their city property taxes to at least maintain city government programs and services at their current level. Raising taxes higher to add or improve city services was a stretch.

A number of caveats are important here. First, it is much easier to support a tax increase in a telephone survey than to do so in the voting booth. A strong case would have to be made for any proposed tax increase. What these results indicate is that taxpayers are willing to listen to such a case.

Second, one of the things that makes it easier to say “yes” in a survey is the characterization of the issues. There is only time in a survey to *indicate* city programs, not to describe them. Thus the characterization of the program in the questionnaire is of critical importance. While effort was made to identify the programs and services in a neutral manner, there are always other ways in which the programs could be described. Alternative descriptions may elicit different responses. In the real world of budget politics, the same program is described in many different ways by its champions and detractors. So the caveat here is that these results provide a general indication of resident inclination; they are a long way from a final, well thought out opinion.

In that same vein of real world budget politics, it is useful to note that, despite the clear ranking of priorities, every one of the 32 programs had at least one person in 10 who thought it should not be cut at all. When the budget decisions are being made, that one person is much more likely to be vocal and active than the nine who favor cutting or trimming the budget for that program.

Finally, there may be a difference between the two tax increase proposals discussed here. Support may not be automatically additive. Favoring a higher increase is not exactly the same thing as favoring a 1% increase. Some might want to improve certain services, and be willing to pay more for that, but their support may not transfer to other services or to maintaining all services.

That being said, the general finding here is that Renton citizens appear willing and able to have a civil discussion about the role and funding of city government.



Annotated charts displaying the findings are presented in the following section