

Monkey Business

Business survey doesn't answer key question: Is the survey bogus?

The city of Eugene spent \$22,000 on a business climate survey that wasn't designed to provide clear results.

About 240 business owners responded to the mail survey with charges that the city is anti-business. But the survey itself admits that it's unclear that these businesses represent a scientifically valid sample of Eugene employers, saying, "It is difficult to determine if these perceptions are representative of all businesses in Eugene."

The survey was sent to 2,000 randomly chosen Eugene employers in the fall of 2002. But only 19 percent responded. That has left many city councilors still wondering what businesses really think.

"It's dangerous for us to generalize too much from this survey," said Councilor David Kelly at a meeting on the survey last week. "This is 20 percent of one constituency that has spoken up," he said, pointing out the council has also heard from others "in direct opposition" to the anti-regulatory views of the respondents.

Kelly said it's "unfortunate" that a city press release on the survey results drew broad conclusions based on only the 20 percent who responded. The press release said the survey "found they [businesses] have a negative image of the business climate in Eugene," but did not mention that the survey

respondents were not a statistically valid sampling of business opinion. A story in *The Register-Guard*, written after the press release, reported that the survey "unveiled a pervasive sense among Eugene merchants that city policies, staff and attitudes are anti-business."

Councilor Betty Taylor said the survey results were biased because unhappy businesses were "much more likely to respond" to the survey than businesses who thought the city was doing a good job. "If everything is fine, you don't need to fill out the survey," she said.

"We're talking about a very small group at one end of the spectrum," Councilor Bonny Bettman said. She faulted the study for not comparing the views of Eugene businesses to businesses in other cities. She said businesses across the nation all want lower taxes and fees and less regulation. "Are we really that much harder to work in than Salem, or West Linn or Lake Oswego?"

Bob Parker, the UO planning consultant hired to do the survey, said the city could have conducted a scientifically valid telephone poll of a representative sample of Eugene businesses. But he said Mayor Jim Torrey and Councilor David Kelly wanted to ask businesses a long list of questions. "The depths of issues were too difficult to explore"

in a reasonable phone call, Parker said. So a mail survey with seven pages of questions was sent.

Despite the survey's uncertain meaning, pro-sprawl councilors said the city should move quickly to cut regulations, fees and taxes and increase subsidies as many of the survey respondents demanded.

Councilor George Poling said the survey responses were an "embarrassment" for the city and the city should cater to the wishes of economically important businesses. "It may be a small minority, but without that small minority, where would we be?"

"I realize this isn't everybody in Eugene," said Mayor Jim Torrey. But he suggested the council frame the business survey results up on the wall to remind them of what they should be doing.

survey also showed local business leaders to be out of touch with the citizens. For example, citizens favored more regulations to protect water quality and natural habitats by scores of 70 or more out of 100. The Chamber of Commerce gave such new environmental regulations a zero priority.

The perceptions of the business survey respondents also seem disconnected from reality. The 2000 Census shows that Eugene grew at a 22 percent faster rate than supposedly more pro-growth Springfield in the last decade. Almost half of Springfield residents actually work in Eugene.

Oddly, a vocal minority of businesses are now complaining about the city after a series of major decisions in which the City Council sided with the Chamber of Commerce over labor and environmental groups. The council

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"I hope we take heed of this," said Councilor Gary Pape. "I don't want to see us go through what we did in the early 1980s."

But while replacing environmental and livability regulations with industry subsidies may be popular with some businesses, it's likely to face overwhelming opposition from Eugene citizens. The city's 1996 Growth Management Study demonstrated strong citizen support for ending growth subsidies and controlling sprawl to protect livability and the environment. The comprehensive GMS

recently voted to move forward with building the West Eugene Parkway through wetlands and killed a proposal for a living wage for city workers and contractors.

On its website, the Chamber notes that "Eugene, Oregon, now has the distinction of being one of the few cities in the country targeted by the living wage movement to reject the idea. And that is important with respect to future economic development and to enhancing Eugene's image as a great place for businesses to locate, grow or expand." **ew**

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