

An Evaluation of the Comments **on the** **FY2009-2010 MAYOR's Budget Challenge (survey)**

prepared for presentation at the **MAYOR's Budget Day**
the FY2009-2010 NC BUDGET ADVOCATES
March 13, 2010

BACKGROUND: CREATION OF THE SURVEY INSTRUMENT

This year, the MAYOR's Budget Challenge took a new departure. It employed a computer-program "package" which presented and received the responses. Better than previous Surveys, this year's MAYOR's Budget Challenge:

1. Displayed and provided links to basic data and educational materials to all who came to the Website,
2. It focused on eight (8) Spending Issues and four (4) Revenue Issues of interest to the Mayor and
3. It encouraged and facilitated additional reactions, Comments and suggestions from the respondents by links on almost every page and a "General Comment" box on the last page.

It is the opinion of us, the NC Budget Advocates, that this Survey Instrument is a vast improvement over those of previous years. Before we go any further, we want to express our admiration and appreciation for the **outstanding work done by Matthew Rudnick** (Policy Analyst in the Mayor's "Finance & Performance Innovation" Office). He should be given much of the credit for the excellence of the MAYOR's Budget Challenge (Survey). We had the opportunity to work with Mr. Rudnick on this Survey's creation and we thank him for his receptivity and application of our input.

As always, this Survey focused on the issues and the questions the Mayor wanted us to know about and wanted us to respond to. That's why it is called **the MAYOR's Budget Challenge**. This fact remained "lost" for many respondents. They want the Budget Survey process to conform to their expectations and what a wide variety of expectations there were. This year, however, there was more involvement of the NCs in the preparation of the Survey and more opportunity for the Respondents. On the same page, as they answered the MAYOR's questions, Respondents could offer Comments on Budget issues. They could:

1. Ask questions and present alternative solutions,
2. Present their own personal views, needs and concerns
3. Offer suggestions and recommend "new" changes.

The Mayor and his staff seem to be reaching out to us more and involving us more than before but, after all is said and done, he is the Mayor and he carries the ultimate responsibility for our City.

We, the FY2009-2010 NC Budget Advocates, are pleased to have had the opportunity to analyze the Comments of the Respondents and to present this report on the Mayor's Budget Day, March 13, 2010. **This is the first formal presentation by NC representatives before a City-initiated Public Meeting. We hope this represents an increasing, formal recognition that NCs are part of our City's Government, a really involved "part of the City family." We look forward to having a "seat at the table" at other Mayoral, City Council and Departmental meetings.**

The NC Active Stakeholders are aware of the severity of the City's increasing Budget Deficit. We see how the concern of the City Government Officials has risen to near panic levels ("Budget Crisis") from the time that the Survey was presented, December 28, 2009, to the last day of data collection, February 28, 2010. **We are pleased to show what the NC Volunteers can do to help.** Now, we must wait to see how much of our input is received, processed and used in the Mayor's and City Council decisions for this year's and next Fiscal Year's Budgets.

STATISTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This Survey lacks the sophistication and scientific validation necessary to provide the usual markers of "statistical significance." It just records the relative numbers of specific responses (Comments) of the participants to specific questions directed to us by the Mayor. All surveys are statistical analyses. They attempt to understand the characteristics (in this case, the attitudes and opinions) of a "total population" by analyzing the responses of a "sample population." In this case, our "total population" is composed of all the NC Stakeholders. Our "sample population" was not "scientifically chosen" but was "self-chosen" by those individuals who became aware of the MAYOR's Budget Challenge, answered at least one of the MAYOR's questions and entered their Comments, in English, in the electronic link at the end of the questionnaire.

We received and analyzed 1,973 Comments entered electronically on the last pages of the survey plus 194 Comments sent by email, a total of 2,167 Comments. We understand that there were hand-written surveys with Comments, as well. We did not have access to them. The Comments came from about 7,500 fully completed Surveys. There were more Respondents, this year, than ever before. These numbers and the Commenter's responses show **the high level of interest, concern and involvement of the participants.**

Half (1,128) identified themselves as NC Stakeholders in 97 different NCs. This included essentially all of the 90 certified NCs, some non-affiliated NCs, some decertified NCs and some NCs-in-formation. A NC Stakeholder is defined by our City Charter as "...anyone who lives, works and/or owns property in the NC and/or affirms (with documentation) an interest in a NC..." Therefore, all of the Commenters were NC Stakeholders even if they did not indicate their affiliation when asked. The Commenters came from "zip codes" which, although a formal analysis was not done, would suggest that they covered every corner of the City. The wide distribution of the Commenter's NCs and zip codes suggests that we have **a well-distributed, possibly "really representative" sample of the City's NC Stakeholders.**

These Comments express the spontaneous outpouring of the Commenter's feelings, beliefs and suggestions, at that moment. As might be expected, some of the responses were not pertinent to the issues addressed, here. **We believe that the Comments amplify and emphasize the strongest held views of the Respondents, however, we must add that we believe that "negative" responses were more likely to be expressed than "positive" ones.**

The 2,167 Comments were reviewed, characterized and categorized by members of the NC Budget Advocates, each of whom "marked-up" up to 300 responses. In the "mark-up" process, they assigned values in terms of attitudes and suggestions regarding the Survey instrument, itself, and recorded specific issues contained or absent from the Survey. Corroboration of these "mark-ups" was reviewed in order to identify and rule out "observer bias."

WHAT DID THESE COMMENTERS TELL US ABOUT THE SURVEY INSTRUMENT?

Since the Commenters were free to choose whatever issues they wanted. They usually answered only 1 – 5 of the "key questions." Therefore, the observations here address the Commenter's preferred topics, only. Among them were many (138) specific suggestions which will help in the creation of next year's Survey.

Among the answers specific to the question, more Commenters (127) reported approval of this Survey than those (94) who didn't like it. Their criticisms included:

1. The Survey was created for the Mayor's purposes. The topics on the Survey did not include the concerns, the needs and/or the expectations of the Commenter.
2. The Commenters wanted other subjects, other issues or other response options included. Many wanted to be able to comment on the functions of more Departments or even all Departments and Agencies in the City.

WHAT DID THESE COMMENTERS TELL US ABOUT THE CITY'S BUDGET CRISIS?

Among the answers specific to the question, more Commenters (114) disapproved of the current incumbents' handling of our financial affairs and almost all of these "disapprovers" (102) offered suggestions for change.

The most frequent criticisms and suggestions focused on two issues:

1. There were 263 spontaneous Comments objecting to the absence of a specific question about the LAPD budget. A majority of them (209) were willing to see the LAPD allocation, staff and/or services decreased. The Commenters recognized that the Mayor has taken LAPD "off the table" of budget and personnel cuts but they say it must be considered, given the magnitude of the current Budget Deficit and the percentage of the General Fund (over 50%) dedicated to Public Safety, in general, and to the LAPD, specifically. While the recognized that LAFD had already been cut, further decreases were recommended by 51 Commenters.
2. There was a potent display of the Commenter's frustration vented upon the Mayor, the City Council and the Mayor's Appointees (Departmental General Managers and Agency Directors) whom they seemed to hold "responsible" for much of the City's Budget Crisis or, at least, for our City Government's failure to resolve the problem. They are our City's highest paid employees. The Mayor took the biggest "hit" (247 negative Comments), then the City Council (223) and the GMs (124).
3. There were only a few (30) Comments recommending or accepting the need for increases in taxes and 48 Comments in favor of increased enforcement of outstanding taxes, licenses, fees, fines & penalties collection. These Commenters recognized the need for more efficient handling of our City's revenue collection. However, their proposals for increased payments were usually applied to "other" taxpayers.
4. There were many who supported continuation of Library and Parks & Recreation funds and services (54 and 40, respectively) and a cluster of Respondents (15) pleading to have the Eagle Rock Child Care Center continue.
5. Although it was not part of the Survey, there were 17 who wanted decreased funding or elimination of NCs.
6. The questions related to Transportation, Infrastructure, General Administration, Capital Construction, Pension Plan Reform, Parking User's Tax, Public-Private Partnerships (P-3's) and Clean Water received no more than 10-20 Commenters.

THE FUTURE OF THIS SURVEY "process"

The value of a study like this is the insights it provides for future activities.

We recommend:

1. **Archiving** the images, results and interactivity of this Survey on a City Web-Site so that
 - a. the Surveys and their results will serve as ongoing, available documents for all,
 - b. the Surveys may serve as an educational resource for NC Stakeholders, students of government and anyone interested in our City's financial activities.
 - c. the last archived Survey may serve to receive specific responses and Comments all year long,
2. **Expansion of the involvement of NC Active Stakeholders** in the preparation, presentation and evaluation of future Surveys. This might become part of the permanent assignment of the NC Budget Advocates in their annual tenure, especially at this time, when the City needs help. The NC Active Stakeholders are stepping up to provide services which are becoming more and more difficult for City Agencies to perform. This could become an important aspect of the NC's fulfillment of their charter and Plan obligations:
 - a. "...more public participation in City governance and decision making..."
(Plan: Article I(1))
 - b. "...to have an advisory role on issues of concern..."
(Charter: Section #900)

- c. "...present to the Mayor and City Council an annual list of priorities for the City budget..." (Charter: Section #909) and
- d. "...monitor the delivery of City services in their respective areas and have periodic meetings with responsible officials of City Departments..." (Charter: Section #909)

Who Prepared this Report?

The authors of this report are the FY2009-2010 NC Budget Advocates. They were elected by their NC colleagues in February 2009 and reported their recommendations for the FY2009-2010 Budget to the Mayor last spring. These Neighborhood Council Active Stakeholders met many times in the past 12 months to deliberate on Budget issues and, with the increasing awareness of the severity of the Budget Crisis, they have been active participants in the 12 meetings held by the LANC Coalition and BudgetLA which began before the release of the MAYOR's Budget Challenge, Dec. 28, 2009.

We, the FY2009-2010 NC Budget Advocates, respectfully submit this report:

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