

Community Priorities For a Healthy Economy

A Survey of Austin Residents by Liveable City

As part of its continuing efforts to ask Austinites their opinions on important community issues, Liveable City conducted a survey of 500 city residents during the month of June. The survey gives a picture of citizen's views on one of the most important challenges of our day – the economy. It provides a framework for understanding how Austinites have experienced both the boom and the bust and how they want to use the lessons learned in moving the economy forward.

Overview

Austin residents are feeling the negative effects of the downturn, but they are optimistic that the economy will get better over the next three years, not worse. The rapid growth of the 1990's is seen as a double-edged sword, with respondents saying that their lives were improved but that it resulted in more costs than benefits in many areas of the community. Austinites want to encourage growth, but at a slower rate than during the last decade. They want local government to have an active role in shaping the economy, rather than leaving it solely to market forces. Overwhelmingly, residents want greater local government attention to independent local businesses and to building a more diverse industry mix. They believe that local government can best contribute to a healthy economy by focusing economic development efforts as follows:

Economic Priorities for Local Government

Incentives for Local Businesses
Education
Roads
Job Training
Affordable Housing
Low taxes and Utilities

Preferred Industries for Government Economic Support

HighTech
Entertainment/ Film
Light Manufacturing
Renewable Energy

The poll results indicate a desire to ensure that the next wave of economic growth is more balanced and allows more people to participate. In particular, citizens want to see an economy that creates jobs and prosperity while protecting local resources and addressing local needs.

Key Findings

- High Job Loss and Cutbacks Underscore the Effects of the Down Economy: 20% of Austin households have had someone laid off in the last year. 39% reported significant cutbacks at the workplaces of someone in the household.
- Grading the Economy: 26% of Austinites gave the economy a D or F, 45% a C, and 27% a B or A.

- Optimistic about the Future: 59% of Austinites believe the economy will improve over the next three years, with 17% believing it will get worse.
- Rapid Growth – Personal Benefits, Community Costs: 65% of respondents report that their lives had improved during the late 90's. However, 56% say growth has more costs than benefits to taxpayers and 54% feel that population growth brings more costs than benefits to the community.
- Encourage Growth, but Go Slower: 42% of respondents want local government to encourage growth, but at a slower rate than before. 15% want to do nothing to encourage growth, 11% want to discourage growth. 27% want local government to continue growth at the same pace.
- An Active Role for Local Government and Business Groups in the Economy: 55% of respondents want city and county government to take an active role in shaping the local economy; 29% prefer to leave the economy to market forces. 54% believe that business groups, such as the Chamber of Commerce, are best suited for such efforts as recruiting businesses to the area; 21% have greater confidence in local government for that role.
- Strong Consensus for Support to Local Independent Business: 60% of Austinites want local government economic development efforts to focus more on small, local businesses while 16% want more focus for large major employers. Moreover, 95% of respondents view small business incentives as important to the local economy.
- Priorities for Local Government to Help the Economy: Respondents want government economic efforts to focus on infrastructure and key services. Six factors received the greatest support: Incentives for local businesses; Support for local educational institutions; Roads; Expanding job training; Ensuring affordable housing; Keeping taxes and utilities low. Each of these factors were seen as very important to the economy by more than 60% of citizens. Cultural amenities, public transportation, and incentives for large employers were also viewed as important, but the support was less robust.
- Consensus on Key Industries: Agreement is strong that government economic development efforts should be directed at high tech, film/entertainment, light manufacturing and renewable energy sources such as solar and wind power, with greater than 65% of respondents supporting each. Less support was shown for heavy manufacturing and national chain retail.

- Divided On Business Incentives: Austinites are deeply and almost evenly divided on the general concept of business incentives, with 45% favoring them and 42% disapproving of them. They also are divided about the particular use of incentives for big box retail, with 46% believing that big box retail should be excluded from incentives and 43% opposing such exclusion.
- Strong Support for Certain Incentives: Despite the divisions on incentives in general, Austinites strongly favor them for such purposes as directing growth to East Austin (77%), Downtown (64%), and off the Aquifer (76%). When incentives are given, there is a clear desire to tie them to positive employment practices such as wages, benefits and minority recruitment: 59% endorse the consideration of employment practices and 28% say that incentive decisions should be purely economic.

The Poll

The Austin polling firm, Opinion Analysts, conducted the poll during the month of June. A sample of 500 Austin residents was surveyed; the poll has a margin of error of 4.4% at the 95% confidence level.

Liveable City's Next Steps

Liveable City will host a forum this fall to further examine the results of this poll and encourage a community dialog on building a healthy economy for Austin. Based on this dialog and feedback from other experts, later this year Liveable City will issue a specific set of recommendations for consideration by the community.

For further detail about the poll, download the full report at www.liveablecity.org <<http://www.liveablecity.org/>> or call us at 481-8400.