

Austin @ Large: New (and Improved)

In Liveable City Economic Survey, Austin knows what it wants

BY MIKE CLARK-MADISON

Last week I alluded to a new study by the all-star "quality-of-life nonprofit" Liveable City about the local economy. I don't know if the group knew that its survey -- conducted during June by local pollmasters Opinion Analysts -- would hit the streets at *exactly* the same time as the much-feared FY 04 city budget (see p.24). But it certainly is opportune. Already, rather than dwell on the relentlessly negative city fiscal news, Mayor Will Wynn and his cohort have focused on the positive signs -- or fantasies -- of economic rebound.

But as we said last week, rather than use the need for econo-recovery to justify any damn booster deal that hits the dais, or to shoot down any initiative to spend public money in a useful way, City Hall needs to set its sights on a long-term strategy that uses civic power to move Austin past this tiresome boom-bust cycle. Contrary to the view of certain local leaders (like, say, the daily's editorial board), the Liveable City study suggests that Austinites are not so deeply fractured that any initiative, in any direction, can be extolled as "bold leadership." "I keep hearing that there's no consensus in this town," says Liveable City chair Robin Rather. "But this survey shows a substantial consensus for a certain kind of economic policy and a role for the government within it."

Certain Kinds of Consensus

Some of the key findings: Nearly 75% of the respondents gave the current local economy a letter grade of C or below; 20% had experienced a layoff in their household in the last year; nearly 40% had seen job cuts in their workplaces. On the other hand, nearly 60% felt the economy would show at least some improvement in the next three years; only 17% felt it would get worse before it got better.

Two-thirds of respondents felt that their lives were personally improved by the 1990s boom and that they would benefit personally from economic growth in the region. Yet solid majorities *also* said that both economic growth and population growth bring more costs than benefits to the community and its taxpayers. This split perception is made more sensible by the responses to questions about specific components of quality of life. On elements that don't really involve "the community" in a civic sense -- shopping, entertainment, household income -- lots of people felt the boom benefited them personally. On elements that have a big civic angle -- housing costs, the environment, taxes, traffic congestion -- the respondents saw nothing but downside in the boom. In the middle we find elements like neighborhood quality, community identity, and the schools.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, citizens want growth, but less of it, and they want local government (city and county) to do something to encourage that result. That was the belief of 42% of the respondents. The remainder were split on either side of this middle -- 26% wanted local government to either do nothing to encourage growth or to actively discourage it, and 27% want it to encourage growth at the boom-era pace. (As often happens in politics, those two edges have much louder voices than the larger group in the middle.)

Citizens had more confidence in the efforts of business groups like the Chamber of Commerce to do actual economic development and recruitment; they want government to take an active role, but doing something else. The survey was evenly split on the specific questions of government incentives to private business, *à la* Smart Growth or the Domain -- but a solid majority felt government efforts should be focused on small, local businesses. Only a tiny fraction -- less than 20% -- felt it was "very important" to provide incentives for major employers, the *raison d'être* of recent civic economic investments.

As for types of industry, people are still pretty satisfied with high tech as the local cotton crop, but large numbers would like government resources to also support the music and film industries. What really bombed out were -- surprise! -- large national retailers, along with heavy industry and manufacturing of the type Austin has never really had anyway. (The survey split on whether we should have a specific policy forbidding Wal-Mart and its big-box brethren from getting city incentives.) This is implicitly consistent with the survey's solid support for the basic principle of Smart Growth -- directing economic growth to particular areas of the city, specifically the Eastside, Downtown, and "away from the aquifer."

Renewable Priorities

As we reported last week, the Liveable City citizens very much want to see local government work on the civic-infrastructure side -- helping educational institutions (specifically ACC), building and maintaining roads, supporting affordable housing and job training, and keeping taxes and utility rates low. One of these things is not like the others; the Wynn council will be defined by its ability to convince the public that it is *either* truly supporting the infrastructure *or* doing its best to keep down taxes and rates. During the Watson era, City Hall claimed success at doing both, but the new budget would suggest that this wasn't exactly true.

The survey does suggest, however, a few civic investments that don't impress the populace. Compared to housing, job training, and the like, "cultural amenities such as performance centers, museums, the symphony, and the music scene" left the public rather cold, as did "public transportation such as light rail or express bus systems." Nor, surprisingly, did people really care that much about slaying that booster bugaboo, city development regulation. If those are yesterday's causes, then tomorrow's is probably renewable energy; a huge, huge majority approved of local government "using incentives to encourage renewable

resources, like solar and wind power and recycling" -- and would even pay a surcharge on their electric bills.

On top of spending money, the Liveable City respondents highlighted ways local leaders should spend more time focusing on what Austin needs. The respondents solidly felt too much attention had been given to big business and real estate developers, not enough to small business and average citizens. Opinion was more mixed regarding attention to environmentalists, neighborhood groups, or African-American and Hispanic interests -- although for all three constituencies, responses skewed toward "not enough."

Results of the poll -- which claims to have a margin of error of plus or minus 4% -
- are available online at **www.liveablecity.org**.