

Wausau Budget/Services/Facilities Survey: Analysis and Summary

Introduction

This report provides a summary and analysis of the City survey that was undertaken in mid-2006.

The survey was commissioned by Mayor Tipple and the Common Council Committee of the Whole. It was intended to give the Common Council and other City officials an idea of how a cross-section of the community views various City services and facilities and to also provide some direction for making budget and service reductions in order to compensate for the ever-increasing costs of government. As the price of gasoline, diesel fuel, electricity, asphalt, health insurance, and other necessary expenses increases, the City of Wausau is faced with the need to either cut the level of services to reduce costs or take actions to generate additional revenue.

To receive broad, unbiased citizen input on this effort, a survey with cover letter was mailed to 2,000 of the City of Wausau's 15,678 (2000 Census) households. The cover letter and complete survey are attached as Appendix "A". The households that were mailed the survey were randomly selected from a list of all residential water utility customers.

The survey was mailed on August 11, and the survey was to be returned by August 30 in an enclosed, self-addressed, postage paid envelope.

A total of 932 surveys were returned during the following 6-week period, which represents a response rate of over 46%. It should be noted that survey researchers consider a response rate of 25% for a mail-out survey to be exceptionally high.

In addition to those persons receiving the random sample survey, other people wishing to complete the questionnaire could obtain a copy on-line or at City Hall. Thirty nine people chose to participate in this fashion; however, their input has not been included with the results from the mail-out survey. An evaluation of these 39 surveys will be completed later and compared to the responses provided by the larger, sample population.

The remainder of this report is divided into two primary sections — an analysis of the 2006 survey followed by a comparison of the results of that survey to an almost identical survey that was conducted in 2002. Most of the questions, as well as the survey format, used in the 2006 survey were identical to those used in the survey conducted in 2002.

Survey Analysis - 2006

The survey consisted of eight questions followed by a request for basic socioeconomic information about the respondent. The first question asked respondents to rate the overall quality of life in the City of Wausau. This question served as an introduction to the next three questions which listed 32 different City services and facilities and asked respondents to indicate: **how important** each of these services and facilities is to them; **how satisfied** they are with these City services and facilities; and **to what extent**, if any, **they would cut funding** for these services and facilities. Finally, the survey asked respondents about their **overall level of satisfaction** with the amount and quality of service received from the City for their tax dollars. The last three survey questions sought input

about various methods the City might use to increase revenue to offset the rising costs of providing these services.

The final page of the survey offered respondents an opportunity to provide written comments about City services, facilities and finances. Over half of the surveys, a total of 517, contained comments in this space. These comments have all been copied and are available for review in the City Planning Office and the City Finance Department.

Below is a more detailed discussion of the results for each of the survey questions.

1) How would you rate the overall quality of life in the City of Wausau?

The overwhelming majority of the survey respondents hold a positive perception about living in the City of Wausau. Almost 92% of the respondents with an opinion on this question rated the quality of life in Wausau as *Excellent, Very Good, or Good*. Only 8% indicated the quality of life in the City is *Fair or Poor*. A complete breakdown of the results for this question is provided in *Table I*. Note that the results show the percent distribution of responses both with and without the *No Opinion* answers included in the total number of responses.

2) Importance of City services and facilities

Survey respondents were asked to indicate the importance of each of 32 different services and facilities. Respondents were given five response options, ranging from *Very Important* to *Not Important* and *No Opinion*. The intent of this question was to help identify the level of value or significance placed on each of the listed services and facilities.

Detailed rankings for responses to this question are provided in *Tables II* through *V*. *Table II* ranks the importance of these services and facilities based upon the *Very Important* rating. Fire Protection, Police Patrols/Police Protection, and Paramedic Service received extremely high ratings, **with over 700 of the 932 respondents identifying these services as *Very Important***.

At the other end of the spectrum, the following services/facilities had very few respondents indicating they are *Very Important* (see *Table II*):

Services/Facilities	No. of Respondents Ranking <i>Very Important</i>
City Cable Access Channel	13
City Newsletter	21
Expanding/Maintaining the Municipal Airport	43

These three services and facilities, however, were identified by many respondents as *Not Important*. Rankings for this response are shown in *Table III*. Here, the Cable Access Channel, the City

Newsletter, and Expanding/Maintaining the Municipal Airport were identified as the three principal services/facilities receiving the most *Not Important* responses.

When the *Very Important* responses and the *Important* responses are added together, the ranking for the various services and facilities changes very little, as indicated in *Table IV*. The Cable Access Channel, City Newsletter, and the Municipal Airport continue to have a very low level of importance to Wausau residents.

Finally, *Table V* ranks the responses by the number of people indicating that they had *No Opinion* about the importance of the particular service/facility. It should be noted for this question that very few people responded with *No Opinion*; the highest total number (63) was received for room tax contributions. The high level of opinion for this question relates to the fact that it is an opinion-oriented question; unlike for the next question, the respondent does not need to have any experience with the service or facility to provide an honest response.

3) Satisfaction with existing City services and facilities

After identifying how important the 32 services and facilities are, respondents were then asked to indicate how **satisfied** they are with the existing services and facilities. The survey explained that, “By *SATISFIED*, we mean do these services and facilities meet your needs, expectations, and/or desires?” Respondents were given five categories of response, from *Very Satisfied* to *Very Dissatisfied*, as well as the *No Opinion* option.

Overall, City residents appear to be quite satisfied with all of the services and facilities listed in the survey. This is detailed in *Table VI* through *Table X*. Garbage Collection had the highest number of respondents indicating that they were *Very Satisfied* with the service. Most respondents were *Very Satisfied* with the City’s protective services, Collection of Recyclables, the Yard Waste Drop-Off Site, Fall Leaf Collection, Snow Plowing, and Spring Clean-up Collection; all of these had over 50% of the survey respondents indicating they were *Very Satisfied* with these services (See *Table VI*).

At the other end of the spectrum, dissatisfaction with City Services was quite low. The Cable Access Channel, which had the lowest level of satisfaction, still had over 53% of the people **with an opinion on the service** indicate that they were *Very Satisfied* or *Somewhat Satisfied* with the service (bottom of *Table VII*).

Not surprisingly, a high proportion of the respondents did not have an opinion on many of the services and facilities listed since they are probably unfamiliar with these. Fourteen of the 32 services and facilities had over 235 respondents (over 25%) indicate they did not have an opinion on their level of satisfaction with the service or facility. The City Cable Access Channel had the highest level of *No Opinion*, with over 52% of the respondents (492 people) checking that box. Again, this probably relates strongly to the number of respondents who do not subscribe to cable television service or do not view the programming. At the other extreme, few respondents checked *No Opinion* for many of the City’s most common services. As indicated at the bottom of *Table VIII*, only 19 respondents did not have an opinion about their level of satisfaction with Garbage Collection, a service nearly everyone uses, and only 27 checked *No Opinion* about Police

Patrols/Police Protection.

4) Funding Cuts

The fourth question in the survey presented a hypothetical situation to survey respondents. It stated, “Now let’s say you were given the job of cutting services and activities from the Wausau City budget. To what extent, if any, would you cut the following City services?”. Again, the 32 services/facilities listed in the earlier two questions were listed here and respondents were given the following options: *Don’t Cut At All*, *Cut Funding a Little*, *Cut Funding Significantly*, or *No Opinion*. As indicated in *Table XI*, over 50% of the respondents **do not want to see any cuts** in the four protective service categories listed nor in Snow Plowing, Garbage Collection, Providing Housing for the Elderly, or Street Repair. At the other end of the spectrum, as indicated in *Table XII*, Cable Access and the City Newsletter had over 50% of the respondents suggesting that funding for these be **cut significantly**. On a middle ground, *Table XIII* ranks the 32 services and facilities by the number of respondents suggesting that funding be **cut a little**.

A careful review of these three tables provides a relatively good indication of the services and facilities in the community that have both strong public financial support as well as weak public support. Again, it is quite clear that all of the protective services, Snow Plowing, Street Repair, Garbage Collection and Housing for the Elderly are very important to the community. Some programs, however, are closely split, such as Operating Three Outdoor Swimming Pools, where 255 respondents suggested that funding be cut significantly, while 260 respondents indicated that funding should not be cut at all. Most people having an opinion on swimming pool operations (292 respondents) suggested that funding should be **cut a little**.

When it comes to funding reductions, the number of people checking *No Opinion* (*Table XIV*) was considerably lower than for Question #3 (*Table VIII*). Thus, while many respondents did not have an opinion on how satisfied they were with a particular service or facility, they did have an opinion on reducing the level of funding for many of those same services and facilities.

5) Overall Satisfaction with City Services

To summarize the level of satisfaction respondents have with City services, Question #5 asked, “Overall, to what extent are you satisfied with the amount and quality of service you receive from Wausau City Government for your tax dollars?” Respondents were given four options, ranging from *Very Satisfied* to *Very Dissatisfied*. In addition, they could also check *No Opinion*. Of the 881 respondents who had an opinion on this question, 31% indicated they were *Very Satisfied* and 58% indicated they were *Somewhat Satisfied*. Nine percent indicated they were *Not Satisfied*, and only 3% indicated they were *Very Dissatisfied*. Overall, the overwhelming majority, 89%, of the respondents were satisfied with City services. Only 11% indicated they were *Not Satisfied* or *Very Dissatisfied* with City services (See *Table XV*).

6) Tax/Revenue Increases

Respondents were then asked for an opinion on four different means that the City might use to increase the revenue available to fund City services and facilities. The question asked was, “*When the City needs more funds to pay for the services and facilities listed in this survey, which of the following revenue increases, if any, would you support?*” Four revenue-increasing measures were listed and respondents could mark *Yes*, *No*, or *No Opinion*. Only two of four revenue-generating methods received more positive than negative responses. *Increase the fees charged for City services, licenses, and permits* was the most popular of the four methods listed. Over 57% of the people with an opinion on this topic supported this option. On establishing a local, \$10 motor vehicle registration fee, the proponents and opponents were split almost equally, with 423 respondents supporting this option and 422 respondents opposing it.

Having residents pay for garbage collection and recycling directly was identified as an extremely unpopular measure, with 669 respondents (almost 80% of those with an opinion on this topic) answering *No* to this means of generating revenue. Only 174 responded *Yes*.

Another extremely unpopular method of generating additional revenue was the establishment of a stormwater utility, with 579 respondents indicating they would not support this method of generating additional revenue, while only 156 indicated they would support this method. This option, however, was apparently the least understood by survey respondents, since 197 people indicated they had *No Opinion* on the stormwater utility. At the other end of the spectrum, only 87 respondents indicated they had *No Opinion* about imposing a local, \$10 vehicle registration fee.

7) Referendum on Property Tax Increase

Another option for generating additional City revenue, of course, involves increasing City property taxes. Respondents were asked, “*Should the Wausau City Council place a referendum question before City voters seeking the authority to increase the City property tax in order to maintain the current level of City services?*” Of the 826 respondents who had an opinion on this question, 62% answered *Yes*, while 38% responded *No*.

8) Annual City Property Tax Rate Increase

Question #8 asked, “*What is an acceptable increase in the annual City property tax rate to offset the rising costs of providing City services?*” Respondents were given five options, which were increases of 1%, 2%, 3%, *None — Cut Services Instead*, and *No Opinion*. When it came to increasing property taxes, 50% of the respondents indicated they would rather see services cut than see an increase in property taxes. On the other hand, 28% of the respondents supported a 1% increase, 15% supported a 2% increase, and 7% supported a 3% increase. The responses to this question would seem to indicate, at least on the surface, that if a referendum is placed before the property taxpayers of the City of Wausau asking them to vote for or against an increase in the property tax rate of higher than 1%, the referendum would fail. Although the question was asked without any reference to specific service improvements or the need for an increase, on the surface it appears Wausau residents would not support a higher than 1% increase in the property tax rate to offset the rising costs of providing City services.

When cross tabulations between Question #8 and Question #7 were evaluated, no particular pattern emerged. That is, one might assume persons responding *Yes* to the City officials seeking authority to increase property taxes might also be against increasing property taxes. The survey results, however, indicate that of the 509 answering *Yes* to the referendum question (Question #7), 259 indicated they would accept at least a 1% increase in property taxes, while 198 did not want to see an increase in property taxes. On the other hand, of the respondents who did not wish to have a referendum on property tax increases, only 106 would support at least a 1% increase in the property tax rate, while 176 said City services should be cut instead.

Again, in summary for Questions #7 and #8, it would appear that the community is evenly split on supporting even the slightest increase in property taxes.

Socio-Economic Characteristics of Respondents

Based upon a comparison of demographic data from the 2000 Census, the overall makeup of the survey respondents differed from the general population of the City in several areas, including:

1. **Owner-Occupants vs. Renter Occupants** — People who rent their homes were very poorly represented in the survey. Approximately 38% of the householders in the community rent their living quarters, according to the 2000 Census. However, only 4.5% of the survey respondents indicated they rent their homes. Thus, owner-occupied households were over-represented in the survey (95.5% in the survey, compared to 62% in the 2000 Census). This large deviation from the community as a whole was primarily due to the source of the mailing list used for the survey, which was the utility billing list maintained by Wausau Water Works. Generally, renters do not pay sewer and water bills, which are primarily the responsibility of landlords. The fact that homeowners were over-represented in the survey sample may also have contributed to the extremely high survey return rate of almost 47%.
2. **Size of household** — Single person households were under-represented in the survey. The U.S. 2000 Census indicated that approximately 40% of the households in the community are occupied by one person, while only 25% of the survey respondents indicated they live alone. Again, this may be the result of the sampling method since many renter-occupied units are single person households.

Other interesting characteristics of the respondent population include the following:

- A. With respect to age, the respondents were very representative of the community as a whole. Seventy percent of the survey respondents were less than 65 years old, while 30% were 65 years or older. The 2000 Census found that 73% of the householders in the community were less than 65 years old, while 27% were 65 and over.
- B. Just over 70% of the survey respondents indicated they have lived in Wausau

for 20 years or more. Thus, one would expect the survey respondents to be well informed and knowledgeable about many of the City services and facilities that were the focus of this survey. This high rate of long-term residency among the respondents may also be due to the sample source. Homeowners are much less transient than renters.

- C. Over 45% of the households responding to the survey had a 2005 income in excess of \$50,000.
- D. Over 40% of the respondents were college graduates.

2006 Survey Results Compared To 2002 Survey Results

As discussed earlier, an extremely similar budget/services/facilities survey was conducted in Wausau during the summer of 2002. The first four questions of that survey were nearly identical to the questions asked in the most recent survey. To determine if public sentiment about the importance and quality of community services has changed in the last four years, the results of the 2006 survey have been compared to the results from the 2002 study. **Overall, the results of the two surveys were extremely similar.** Below is a brief summary of some of the most significant findings:

1. Ratings for the overall **quality of life in the community** have not changed at all. In both survey years, 91% of the respondents indicated the quality of life in the City of Wausau was either *Excellent, Very Good or Good* while only 9% of the respondents felt the quality of life was either *Fair or Poor*.
2. For **Question #2**, which related to the importance of the services and facilities provided by the City, the top eight services in 2002 were identical and in the same order of importance as those in 2006. Similarly, the least important services — Cable Access Channel, City Newsletter, and the Municipal Airport — were identical in both survey years.

Many of the other services/facilities were ranked relatively close in both survey years except for the Yard Waste Drop-Off Site, which moved up considerably in 2006, and Helping Businesses Grow/Expanding Job Opportunities, which moved down in 2006. A possible explanation for these moves may be related to the sample population. With more homeowners in the 2006 sample population, the importance of yard waste disposal would probably be higher since respondents who rent their living quarters usually do not have to manage the yard waste. The slight reduction in the importance of business growth and expansion may also be related to the sample population or possibly to improved economic conditions from 2002 to 2006.

3. When it came to **services/facilities satisfaction** (Question #3) the results of the two surveys were nearly identical. The top seven services were ranked in the same order in 2006 as in 2002. The next eleven services were also ranked very close to the same order for both of the survey years.

4. For **service cuts** (Question #4), the results for the two survey years were also nearly identical. The top nine services that respondents indicated should not be cut at all were the same in both survey years. The only significant movement between 2002 and 2006 involved City bus service. It appears that residents in 2006 were much more likely to suggest that City bus service not be cut at all than they were in 2002. In 2002, 32% of the respondents suggested that the City bus service funding not be cut at all, while in 2006, 42% indicated that bus service funding should not be cut. Although it is purely speculative at this point, it may be that with significantly higher gasoline prices City residents see bus service as a more important community asset than they have in the past.
5. When it came to **generating revenue**, the method with the most support in both survey years was to **increase the fees charged for City services, licenses, and permits**. Support for this option was almost identical for both surveys, with 58% of those expressing an opinion responding *Yes* in 2002 and 57% responding *Yes* in 2006.

It appears that support for a vehicle registration fee (**wheel tax**) has increased significantly in the last four years. In 2002, only 44% of those expressing an opinion responded *Yes* to this revenue option; by 2006, support had increased to 50%.

Increasing property taxes to generate additional City revenue was only supported by 10% of the respondents in 2002 but in the 2006 survey, the level of support had increased to 50%. It should be pointed out, however, that in 2002 the option of increasing property taxes was one means of off-setting an apparent cut in State revenue sharing. In the 2006 survey, respondents were asked, "*What is an acceptable increase in the annual City property tax rate to offset the rising costs of providing City services?*" Respondents were given five options, increases of 1%, 2%, 3%, *None — Cut Services Instead*, and *No Opinion*. When it came to increasing property taxes, 50% of those people with an opinion on this question would rather see an increase in taxes (ranging from 1% to 3%) than have service cuts.

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