



## Washtenaw County Department of Planning & Environment

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**TO:** Planning Advisory Board

**FROM:** Anya Dale, Associate Planner

**DATE:** 10/5/2007

**RE:** Community Survey Types and Methods

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Communities in Washtenaw County have expressed interest in using community surveys to gather public input during the development of master plans. In order to assist communities in preparing and distributing effective community surveys, this memo illustrates important concepts and provides examples of surveys. Community surveys are valuable because:

- Residents often know areas and aspects of the community more intimately than many decision makers;
- Community surveys provide citizens a method to share useful perspectives on the planning and protection of their community;
- Residents have the opportunity to provide input on future growth including what contributes to the quality of life and how to prioritize areas for improvement;
- Public input helps to develop a holistic basis for making informed and collaborative decisions about a community;
- Involving the community in the planning process, encourages the development of a clear, shared vision for the future; and
- Public participation helps to ensure the resulting plans and policies are legally defensible.

A community survey can be helpful in developing plans, defining and solving problems, prioritizing projects and gaining community support. However, to do so it is essential that the survey be well written. From choosing a survey approach to formatting questions, care must be taken to ensure the survey is unbiased, logical and measurable so it will result in information that can be tabulated, interpreted and analyzed in a way that is useful for the community.

There are also a variety of methods of data collection which may be used either independently or in combination. Which survey method to use is of great interest to a community in that it relates to the detail or information likely to be gathered, as well as expense of conducting the survey. Mailing surveys are a common way of obtaining community input, however surveys may also be done over the telephone, email or web-based, or a combination of methods. How a survey is conducted depends on the community as well as the nature of information desired.

Question format and response interpretation are also important components of surveying communities. Many factors should be considered in order to obtain reliable and usable results. If done properly, results can provide planners and officials with detailed and insightful information about the community and its residents, enabling them to make informed decisions on issues specific to their own communities.

Attached are two sample community surveys which demonstrate different methods of data collection:

- Village of Elk Rapids Planning Commission Master Plan Survey  
This mail survey follows a logical progression and is simple to navigate. Within each category, participants are directed to use a set scale for rating the importance of the issue or the degree to which a given statement matches their opinion. The survey also uses photographs to represent community options where the written description may leave room for interpretation. This enables participants of a variety of backgrounds to visualize and evaluate different land use patterns.
- Manchester Township Community Survey  
This survey utilizes many of the same methods as the Village of Elk Rapids, but also goes one step further to ask whether the participant would support a certain millage. This provides additional information measurable true or false and multiple choice questions. Further, Manchester Township does not rely solely on true-false and multiple choice questions and goes further to include a few open ended questions allowing for additional feedback. While this information may be more difficult to quantify in survey results, it can also provide invaluable information.

Also attached are basic tips for creating a successful community survey, as well as a list of helpful resources. These resources can assist a community in addressing issues such as which survey method is best suited for their purpose, how to implement the survey for best results, and how to tabulate and interpret the data gathered. Additional examples of community surveys are on record in the Washtenaw County Planning office. Please feel free to call if you are interested in obtaining these resources.

Dedicating time to developing, implementing and properly evaluating an effective community survey can be a strategic tool for realizing community goals and enhancing the quality of life.

Attachments:

How to Ask: A Tip Sheet for Creating Successful Community Surveys: Tips and Resources

Master Plan Survey: Village of Elk Rapids

Manchester Township Community Survey

## How to Ask: A Tip Sheet for Creating Successful Community Surveys

- Introduce the survey with some short background, as well as the purpose.
- Surveys can be divided into two broad categories: the questionnaire and the interview.
- There are many ways to format questions. Using a variety of questions formats may help keep participant interest.
- Start with an important, easy question that encourages respondent to continue with survey.
- Use concise questions. Avoid being wordy or using technical terms or acronyms participants may not be familiar with.
- Avoid wording questions in a way that leads the participant toward a certain answer.
- When deciding types of questions to be asked, consider the method by which the results will be measured and the format in which it will be presented.
- This format of answer choices allows the answers to be quantified and analyzed.
- Group questions into categories to keep related questions together, beginning with broader questions and becoming more specific.
- Answers to multiple choice questions should be mutually exclusive.
- Make sure you have all the options covered by multiple choice answers. When in doubt, include an "Other \_\_\_\_\_" option.
- While free text responses are difficult to analyze, it is worth considering the benefit of receiving extra information, as well as the increased level of satisfaction for the participant to be able to expand on their answer.
- Mailing a survey should begin with a pre-notice letter, followed by the questionnaire, a reminder card, and finally a replacement questionnaire if the original is not returned within a timely manner.
- Conducting a pilot survey before beginning the formal survey will help to identify ambiguous questions, and to catch any errors.
- Avoid using "not" in your questions if you're having respondents answer "yes" or "no" to a question. Use of "not" can lead to double negatives, and cause confusion.

Links to resources:

There are many resources available to assist communities in drafting and implementing community surveys. Guidelines for selecting the appropriate type and method of surveying, in addition to data gathering and analysis can be found at the below resources:

General survey design tips:

<http://www.vovici.com/pdf//designtips.pdf>

Interactive guide to conducting community surveys:

<http://www.communitydevelopment.uiuc.edu/commsurvey/>

A good introductory site; highlights advantages and disadvantages of different survey methods, and suggestions for question formatting.

<http://www.surveysystem.com/sdesign.htm>

Question types and formats:

<http://www.socialresearchmethods.net/kb/questype.php>

Designing surveys, examples of question types with advantages and disadvantages of each:

[http://www.sciencebuddies.org/mentoring/project\\_ideas/Soc\\_survey.shtml](http://www.sciencebuddies.org/mentoring/project_ideas/Soc_survey.shtml)

Table depicting advantages and disadvantages of various survey methods:

<http://www.socialresearchmethods.net/kb/survaddi.php>

Comprehensive survey guide:

<http://www.whatisasurvey.info/>