

Retrieved from The Register-Pajaronian website: www.zwire.com/news/newslist.cfm?brd=1197

Survey shows local support for taxes

Jun 8 2004 12:00AM By

By DAVE BROOKS

OF THE REGISTER-PAJARONIAN

Most respondents satisfied with police, recreational services

Watsonville residents would likely support increasing sales taxes and the hotel tax, a recent survey indicates.

Pollsters from Watsonville-based Applied Survey Research released a study last week showing support for both tax increases as well as a monthly \$2 fee for 911 service and an increase on the Utility User's Tax Cap.

The survey, commissioned by the City Council, could be a preview of the November election and provide a glimpse of several revenue-generating proposals that might be put before voters.

Overall, the telephone survey of 620 city residents found that 74.1 percent were satisfied with the job the city of Watsonville is doing to serve the community, including one-quarter of respondents who described themselves as "very satisfied." Another 12.6 percent described themselves as "somewhat dissatisfied" and 7 percent said they were "very dissatisfied."

The survey found city residents were most happy with efforts to increase police presence in their neighborhoods, followed by improvements in recreation services for youth, overall reductions in crime and improvements to city streets. The city's ability to provide affordable housing received the lowest rating.

The positive report card comes as the city struggles to find a way to continue to fund city services amid state budgetary cutbacks, including a recent deal brokered by the California League of Cities to temporarily hand \$468,000 back to the state.

Faced with possible budgetary shortfalls, the city is considering a number of ballot initiatives to increase revenue to benefit the fire department, the police department and Parks and Community Services. Some of those measures include:

o Sales tax increase: The survey found that 66.9 percent of respondents would support a plan to increase sales taxes by .25 percent within the city of Watsonville. Sales tax in the city is currently 8 percent, and the city itself only keeps 1 percent.

According to state law, an increase in sales tax would require approval by two-thirds of voters.

o Hotel tax increase: The survey found that 67.3 percent of respondents - slightly more than the two-thirds requirement - would support an increase in the city's hotel tax. The measure would increase the transient occupancy tax from 10 percent to 11 percent.

During the November 2002 election, the Santa Cruz County Conference and Visitors Council attempted a similar measure in Watsonville, Santa Cruz, Capitola and unincorporated parts of the county. All four measures failed to pass, though the initiative in Watsonville came closest, garnering 66 percent of the vote, just shy of the 66.7 percent requirement.

o Increase to Utility User's Tax Cap: The survey found that 52.4 percent of respondents would support increasing the taxes industrial businesses pay for utility use, far short of the two-thirds requirement.

Currently, businesses within city limits pay a tax on their utilities based on usage with a ceiling or "cap" at \$9,900. During the survey, residents were asked if they would support a plan to double the cap to \$18,000 annually.

o Monthly telephone fee for emergency services: The survey found that 56.1 percent of respondents supported a monthly fee of \$2 per residential telephone customer to help pay for the city's portion of the 911 emergency communications center.

In September, the city of Watsonville imposed the fee to help offset the almost \$1 million in costs of providing the services. In May, activist Nick Bulaich submitted the required amount of signatures needed to place the repeal of the 911 fee on the ballot.

On Sunday, Bulaich said he was unconcerned with the results of the survey, adding that he felt the questions were worded unfairly.

The survey, which was conducted between May 4 and May 14, was done in both English and Spanish, based on the preference of the respondents. Sixty-four percent were classified as "likely voters." About one-third of respondents were Caucasian, 54.6 percent were Latino and 12.8 percent identified themselves as of other ethnicity.