

Dutchess Budget Survey Results Now Available

Residents Want Balanced Approach

Poughkeepsie, NY... Dutchess County Executive Marcus J. Molinaro asked county residents to share their thoughts and feedback to help with the development of the 2013 county budget and more than 2,200 residents responded. Results of the Dutchess County Budget Survey, which was conducted this summer, have been compiled and are now available on the County's website www.dutchessny.gov. Residents from throughout the county, including a wide range of age and income groups, responded to the survey and expressed support for more than 70 optional services and programs provided by Dutchess County Government. Residents indicated a willingness to pay a higher property tax rate to continue to support those services overall. However, residents were clear in their desire to see increased efforts to consolidate/reduce duplicative services provided by various levels of government.

One of the goals of the budget survey was to help educate residents about the programs and services provided by county government and how their tax dollars are spent to provide those services. 92% of respondents agreed that the survey was informative, with many residents noting they were unaware that as much as 77% of the county budget is for mandated, or non-optional, programs and services. A resident from Pleasant Valley noted:

"It was informative to see the different breakdowns and how much of the costs are "mandated" vs. optional. Which further highlights the need to address the "mandated" costs as well, since those costs chew the most dollars."

Since the County has little control over mandated programs and services required by state or federal law, the budget survey focused on getting residents' feedback about the optional programs and services provided, as these are the areas that the County can make spending decisions on. Optional service categories included public safety, health and mental health, services for aging veterans and youth, road repair and snow removal, parks and recreation, transportation and economic

development.

Residents were asked whether they “don’t support”, “support” or “strongly support” more than 70 optional programs and services. Respondents were then asked whether the county should reduce, eliminate or raise taxes to support the program/service. The majority of respondents expressed support or strong support for all of the programs and services in the survey, however residents were generally split on whether the service should be reduced or if taxes should be raised to support them. Out of a total 72 programs and services, the majority of residents indicated there were 17 they were willing to see taxes increased to support and 55 programs they were willing to see reduced. (There were no programs in the survey that a majority of residents indicated should be eliminated.)

The program area category results broke down as follows:

Public Safety (12 programs surveyed)

- 10% eliminate service
- 48% reduce service
- 42% raise taxes to support

Health & Mental Health (13 programs surveyed)

- 17% eliminate service
- 50% reduce service
- 34% raise taxes to support

Services for Aging, Veterans and Youth (15 programs surveyed)

- 16% eliminate service
- 42% reduce service
- 41% raise taxes to support

Road Repair & Snow Removal (7 programs surveyed)

- 6% eliminate service
- 45% reduce service
- 49% raise taxes to support

Parks & Recreation (8 programs surveyed)

- 19% eliminate service
- 53% reduce service
- 28% raise taxes to support

Transportation (4 programs surveyed)

- 23% eliminate service
- 46% reduce service
- 30% raise taxes to support

Economic Development & Planning (13 programs surveyed)

- 21% eliminate service
- 49% reduce service
- 30% raise taxes to support

Numerous respondents expressed frustration there was no option to “keep services at the same level”. County Executive Molinaro shared that frustration. “Over the past several years as the County has faced declining revenues and increasing expenses, belts have been tightened and the County has sought to do more with less to maintain the optional services that residents have come to expect. This year, we began the budget process with an initial, projected budget gap of nearly \$40 million. As much as we want to provide all of the programs and services at the same level, it cannot be done without an increase in revenues. Input from residents will help us make the tough decisions that are necessary.”

Chairman of the Dutchess County Legislature Robert Rolison said, “The response to this budget survey has been impressive and we are grateful to residents for providing insightful and honest feedback. Your comments and input are crucial for legislators as we work with County Executive Molinaro to make decisions about how to balance the budget and meet the needs and expectations of our residents.”

The majority of respondents (74.7%) supported some level of property tax increase in order to maintain optional county services, while 24.6% said they would not support an increase in the property tax. Based on survey responses, the average (mean) increase residents would support is 6.85% (approximately \$5 per month). The median and mode response was a 3% increase or \$2 per month. Residents stressed the importance of applying tax dollars as effectively as possible. A resident from Union Vale commented:

“I think most of the services that are optional are important and are the very reason living in Dutchess County is worthwhile. I do feel however that at times there is duplication of services. If there was more coordination some dollars could be saved. Although I said I was willing to pay more

taxes I also think that some of the areas where the county spends the most money could be reduced without adversely affecting services.”

Residents also emphasized the need for greater consolidation and the elimination of duplicative services to reduce costs during these challenging economic times. County Executive Molinaro agrees and noted, “The Executive budget proposal that I will submit to the Dutchess County Legislature in the next few weeks will be focused on answering the public’s call to end the duplication and redundancy of services, including consolidation of county departments and a new \$1 million competitive municipal grant program to incentivize local municipalities to offer consolidation and improved efficiency proposals. Our objective is to reduce the overall size of government, enhance service delivery and reduce costs for taxpayers.”

The budget survey was made available to residents on the County’s website, Facebook page and Twitter account from June 11th through August 31st. The survey was also available in paper copy at the Dutchess County Budget Office and Dutchess County Department of Motor Vehicle offices in Poughkeepsie, Beacon, Millbrook and Wappinger. Family Services, Inc. provided residents with a Spanish version of the survey that was available on the website. Thousands of emails were sent to residents who have signed up for electronic communications with Dutchess County Government. Local media and various organizations, such as the Dutchess County Regional Chamber of Commerce, Family Services Inc. and many others, were also instrumental in helping to promote the survey.

A resident from the City of Poughkeepsie summarized his thoughts on the budget survey process:

“I am impressed with the range of things that my tax dollar is expected to do. Most (are) worth my support. No matter what attempt is made to share the pain of reducing services many who will be hurt. I wish there was a way that every person that has to pay tax had to take this very enlightening survey, Good luck with the process in these bad economic times.”

“We are grateful to those who took part in the budget survey. This tool is one of many we are employing to continue engaging with our residents. The feedback residents have shared has been invaluable as we work to finalize the 2013 budget. We look forward to more of these interactive forums in the future,” concluded County Executive Molinaro.

The complete budget survey summary can be found on the County's website at <http://www.co.dutchess.ny.us/CountyGov/Departments/Budget/21603.htm>

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