

Survey of Residents and Property Owners



Introduction

Community planning is best when residents of the community in question are actively involved in the planning process, but stimulating the involvement of citizens is a complex and challenging task. A key consideration is the introduction of biases that result from the self-selection that occurs when people decide whether or not to participate in public meetings. Simply put, information from public meetings tells about the views of people who attend public meetings, which may or may not be representative of the views of all members of a community. Accurately representing community residents' views is a challenging task, and to achieve this goal the City collaborated with Jeffrey H. Taylor and Associates and the Center for the Environment at Plymouth State University, who coordinated a team of researchers to design and conduct a scientifically valid random sample survey of residents and property owners in Berlin, NH.

To meet the need for social data in this master planning process a random sample, scientific survey of residents and property owners of the City of Berlin was conducted. The development of the survey was a participatory process where the needs for the research and the topics to be examined to meet those needs were identified through consultations with staff from Jeffrey H. Taylor and Associates, other project team members, but most importantly, a steering committee comprised of over 20 people that included residents, city officials and employees, and other parties interested in the City of Berlin Master Plan process.

The involvement of the steering committee was essential in the survey process, as the diverse and extensive input into survey content the steering committee provided ensured the questions in the survey would produce needed and usable information. While the project team provided input for the content of the survey, the questions asked are a direct reflection of the many drafts of input the steering committee representatives provided. Their considerable efforts were essential for the success of this research, and the project team thanks all those who took the time and care to provide input to improve the process.

Conceptual Context and Research Methods

The survey of the general public in the City of Berlin is a scientifically designed survey project that has produced information about residents' perceptions of issues and desires for the future. The information was collected and analyzed to improve understanding of the public's

perceptions to provide the master plan project team, the City of Berlin, residents, and other interested parties with recommendations about how they might continue to work to plan for the future of Berlin. To achieve these goals the project used a multi-stage approach to design the research.

The initial stage of the project involved an extensive review of available information about Berlin and other communities facing similar issues. Press releases, newspaper articles, informal interviews with key informants, and peer-reviewed scholarly and professional research was reviewed to develop an understanding of the regional issues and to identify important considerations. This information provided a foundation for the design of the research, and frequent consultations with project team members and the steering committee ensured that the research maintained a focus that results in findings that can be used in the master plan process.

Once background information on the issues was collected a literature review of works on planning was conducted to determine key issues to be examined in the research. Most importantly, the steering committee provided extensive input in the questionnaire design. This effort helped ensure that the data collected was of maximum utility for the planning process, and was the information was used to develop the self-administered questionnaires used in data collection. In the interests of space, time, and utility the literature review was used to design the research, but results are not presented as a separate section in this document.

Survey Administration and Data Analyses

The self-administered questionnaire survey was administered to residents and property owners in the City of Berlin. In an effort to be as inclusive as possible the sample was created from a combination of property tax records and voter registration lists to ensure those who do not own property in the city, but live there were included in the sample.

To develop the sampling frame the research team obtained a current property tax and a list of registered voters in Berlin with the help of the City of Berlin. Once obtained, these records were reformatted in compatible Excel files so the records could be combined to draw a random sample, which was a very labor-intensive process. This was undertaken to ensure the best possible representation of residents and property owners in the City of Berlin to ensure maximum generalizability of the information collected. In cases where property tax records had more than one name a single name was chosen at random to enable customized delivery of the questionnaire.

Once these records were obtained and identically formatted the samples were randomly selected; randomized numbers are assigned by excel, are sorted in numeric order, and the sample is drawn from the top of the list. Ultimately the randomly selected sample size was 900.

The survey was administered using several techniques intended to enhance response rates; these included customizing letters, multiple waves of contacts with carefully timed reminders, providing information about the need for responses, as well as other techniques. The sampled population is sent a total of four contacts. Prior to sending the survey, a letter is sent that informs them about the project, the coming questionnaire, and the importance of their response. In about

a week the second contact is sent. This includes the questionnaire, a cover letter with additional information about the project and confidentiality, and a postage paid return envelope for returning the questionnaire. A postcard is sent within the next two weeks as a reminder to complete and mail in the questionnaire. A final letter reiterating the importance of responses that also contains a replacement questionnaire and return envelope are sent within one to two weeks of the reminder postcard.

A proportion of the surveys sent to potential respondents from the original sample were returned as “undeliverable” due to inaccuracies in records or other issues. In order to maintain our original sample size, the undeliverable surveys are replaced by the next names on the lists and the same method was implemented to deliver these surveys. After the replacement wave of mailing, 15 of those addresses were invalid, the final sample size was 885. Of the 885 questionnaires sent to valid addresses, 433 were completed and returned for an overall response rate of 48.93%.

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To ensure honesty in responses participation in the survey was confidential, and all the information respondents provided in response to questions on the questionnaire was anonymous. Participation in the survey is confidential because direct appeals were made to residents using property tax and voter registration data provided by the City of Berlin, and the responses were tracked to ensure that people who had returned the survey did not receive additional mailings. Once a survey was returned that recipient’s name was removed from the mailing list, and the tracking of this information without revealing who participated in the survey constitutes confidentiality. In contrast, the information people provided on the questionnaires was anonymous, as once a questionnaire was received it was removed from its return envelope and placed in a bin with other returned questionnaires, and there is no information present that could link it with a particular individual in the City of Berlin. These protections of the information provided anonymity for respondents’ answers to questionnaire items.

Online Survey Using Survey Monkey

An online survey using a subset of the questions was also made available to increase the potential number of responses during this process. The majority of the respondents, 87%, to the online survey were students at Berlin High School who participated as part of a course requirement.

Observations, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Berlin has undergone dramatic changes throughout its history. The city is highly valued by many residents who are strongly attached to the community, and the community continues to adapt to changing economic and environmental conditions. The results of the survey effort are encouraging, and the survey has raised awareness of the planning effort and given residents an

opportunity to express their views and desires for the future. Several results are of particular importance for understanding the views of residents for the creation of the master plan, and this conclusion highlights those important points.

Key Findings

As a whole there are many encouraging findings for future efforts to engage in community planning from the survey, and all conclusions below are based on the findings reported. Only very important findings and interpretations of their implications are succinctly presented here, and conclusions are organized by the research questions identified to guide this research. We encourage users of this data to use the complete document and information found in the Appendix as a reference resource for data on a variety of topics.

Identify residents' and landowners' perceptions of the importance of specific objectives for planning for the future of the City of Berlin (Sections 1 and 2 of the questionnaire)

In these sections of the questionnaire the importance of specific planning objectives were rated on a scale where 1 = not at all important and 5 = very important.

- Responses indicate that of all planning objectives, maintaining low property taxes was the most important, with widespread agreement on this issue (mean = 4.72).
- Facilitating opportunities for the expansion of local businesses was the second most important objective (mean = 4.65).
 - There was strong support for planning objectives that would facilitate opportunities for technology based businesses (4.55), and for promoting Berlin as a destination for outdoor recreation (4.48).
- Protecting natural resources in Berlin is also a very important planning objective to respondents (4.54).
- Planning objectives given the lowest relative importance were creating more green space downtown (3.63), and facilitating industrial business development on the pulp mill site (3.36).
- Responses indicate that sentiments about industrial development on the mill site are polarized and quite strong, with 34.13% of respondents rating the objective as very important, and 15.87% rating it is not at all important. There are a large number of neutral opinions (24.04%), but outside of that respondents have strong sentiments. Given these results, outreach on this issue is essential, and transparency in the processes affecting the mill site and clarity in the reasoning behind the decisions made are important elements of successful outreach on this issue.
- There was also not strong support for facilitating non-industrial uses of the mill site (3.87), relative to other planning objectives.
- It should be noted that all planning objectives respondents were asked about received above neutral importance overall, so rankings should be viewed in a comparative manner.
- Given the importance of the issue in the community, it should be noted that creating opportunities for renewable energy generation (4.18), and promoting alternative energy technologies (4.37) were also considered relatively important planning objectives.

- Respondents with lower annual household income saw ensuring that forestry is a part of Berlin's economy as more important than those with higher annual household income.
- Individuals with lower annual household income placed increased importance on facilitating industrial development.
- Individuals with lower annual household income saw protection of natural resources as more important.
- With all questions of taxation (in all questionnaire items about taxes), politics correlated so that those who described themselves as more liberal showed less concern, or more willingness to pay more in taxes.

Overall, facilitating business development is the most desired planning objective, as long as a balance with conservation in is maintained. Based on responses to the survey as a whole, it appears many respondents feel that many of the issues the City of Berlin needs to address will be surmountable if economic development takes place.

Determine residents' and landowners' satisfaction with municipal services in the City of Berlin (Section 3 of the questionnaire)

In this section of the questionnaire respondents' satisfaction with specific municipal services was rated on a scale where 1 = not at all satisfied and 5 = completely satisfied.

- Respondents are most satisfied with fire protection and prevention (4.26), Ambulance services (4.10), the library (3.95), waste removal services (3.90) and law enforcement (3.88).
- In contrast, respondents are least satisfied with road maintenance (2.30), community planning (2.92), and community zoning (2.99). Responses indicate that sentiments about these issues rank satisfaction below neutral (3).
- Respondents were reported moderate levels of satisfaction with public transportation in Berlin (3.10), and there were not significant differences between car owners and those who do not own a car.
- Satisfaction with most municipal services goes down with level of education.
- Older respondents indicated higher levels of satisfaction with most municipal services.

There is widespread satisfaction with most municipal services, and the on-going planning processes may address some respondents concerns with the issues that were identified. It should be noted that later questions in the survey indicate respondents do support the use of city resources, including tax dollars, for road and bridge maintenance.

Determine residents' and landowners' satisfaction with social services in the City of Berlin (Section 4 of the questionnaire)

In this section of the questionnaire respondents' satisfaction with specific social services was rated on a scale where 1 = not at all satisfied and 5 = completely satisfied.

- There is high satisfaction the availability of services for seniors (3.65) and with medical services (3.48) relative to other social services.

- Satisfaction was lowest with social services for teens (2.48) and social services for pre-teen youth (2.53).
- Older respondents showed higher levels of satisfaction with all social services.

Overall, respondents are less satisfied with social services in the City of Berlin than they are with the municipal services. An additional non-random web-based survey was completed by 433 respondents, the vast majority of whom are teens. Their responses echo the results here, and their comments also strongly support the need for more youth-targeted social services. In essence, the most common sentiment was that teens need activities, and that a growth of activities may also address some other issues among the teen age population.

Identify residents' and landowners' desires for specific land uses in the City of Berlin (Section 5 of the questionnaire)

In this section of the questionnaire respondents' desires for specific land uses in the future were rated on a scale where 1 = less of the land use than currently exists, 2 = about the same, and 3 = more of the specified land use in the future.

- Responses indicate a desire for more local businesses (2.91) and commercial development (2.83). The level of support for these land uses is extremely high.
- There is less support, but still a relatively high level of support, for industrial development (2.56), again indicating the importance of economic growth in the City of Berlin to respondents.
- Walking paths (2.70) and outdoor recreation areas (2.69) are also highly desired land uses in the future, and it should be noted that responses from the web-based survey, which was primarily completed by teens, were even more strongly in support of more outdoor recreation areas.
- Responses were less supportive of increased residential multi-family housing in the future (1.66), and high density residential areas (1.69). The existence of these land uses in the existing community most likely account for the response patterns.

Ascertain residents' and landowners' attitudes towards specific issues related to future development in the City of Berlin (Section 6 of the questionnaire)

In this section of the questionnaire respondents' level of agreement with statements about specific aspects of future development in Berlin identified by the steering committee were rated on a scale where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree.

- Responses indicate strong support for future development requiring a buffer zone around environmentally sensitive areas (3.90), and the establishment of design guidelines for new construction in the downtown area (3.82).
- Overall there was disagreement with the assertion that future development should include land on Mount Forist (2.70).
- Responses were relatively neutral about the placement of future housing developments along route 110 (3.11), and the assertion that future industrial development should be concentrated along East Milan Road (3.43). It should be noted that overall responses still indicate above neutral agreement with these statements.

- Older respondents were more likely to respond with higher levels of agreement that development should include land on Mt. Forist.

Determine the perceived importance of specific housing related issues for planning for the future of the City of Berlin (Section 7 of the questionnaire)

In this section of the questionnaire the importance of specific housing related issues for planning for the future of Berlin were rated on a scale where 1 = not at all important and 5 = very important.

- Demolishing unused structures (4.88), addressing issues related to absentee landlords (4.76), and ensuring buildings meet LIFE safety standards (4.75) are all very important issues to address in planning, according to respondents. The City of Berlin is actively addressing many of these issues.
- There is also support for preventing development on steep slopes (3.73).
- In contrast, low importance is placed upon encouraging clustered housing developments (2.51) among respondents.

Provide other useful information on specific issues relevant to the development of the master plan (Section 8 of the questionnaire, among other items)

In this section of the questionnaire respondents' level of agreement with statements about Berlin identified by the steering committee were rated on a scale where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree.

- Respondents agree very strongly that high speed internet access is important to the future well-being of Berlin (4.18).
- The statement that it is essential for Berlin's success to work regionally through cooperative efforts to share the talents and resources of other communities in the region was also strongly agreed with by respondents (4.07).
- Give the importance of the issue, it should be noted that there is largely neutral opinions about whether the creation of a casino would be a positive development for the future of Berlin if the state legally allowed communities to do so (3.33). Within those responses 51.89% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, 20.52% were neutral, 10.14% disagreed, and 17.45% strongly disagreed, indicating that this is a controversial issues around which there is not widespread agreement. The response pattern also indicates very strong sentiments about the issue.

Identify residents' and landowners' level of concern about specific issues in the City of Berlin (Section 9 of the questionnaire)

In this section of the questionnaire respondents' level of concern about specific issues in Berlin identified by the steering committee were rated on a scale where 1 = not at all concerned and 5 = very concerned.

- Responses indicate that residents are concerned about all the issues covered in this section of the questionnaire, with all mean levels of concern about neutral (3).
- Concerns were highest about the property tax rate (4.81), the county tax rate (4.71), the costs of city services (4.72), the costs of schools (4.56), and the availability of

- post-high school educational opportunities (4.26). There is overlap across some of these issues, such as school costs and tax rates.
- There was relatively low concern about the availability of low income housing (3.41) and the loss of open space (3.52), which likely is a product of the current amount of these land uses in the City of Berlin.
 - There was also relatively low concern about the process of getting a building permit (3.58).

Determine support for the dedication of city resources for specific purposes (Section 10 of the questionnaire)

In this section of the questionnaire respondents' were asked to identify their opinions about the use of city resources to achieve specific goals, and responses were rated on a scale where 1 = strongly opposed and 5 = strongly in favor.

- Overall levels of support were above neutral for all the activities listed, with little variance among them.
- Ensuring opportunities for recreational activities exist along the river through the city was most strongly supported (4.14), and preserving habitat for fish and wildlife was the second most supported use of resources (4.05).

Determine support for the dedication of tax dollars for specific purposes (Section 11 of the questionnaire)

In this section of the questionnaire respondents' were asked to identify their opinions about the use of their tax dollars to purchase property or easements for specific goals, and responses were rated on a scale where 1 = strongly opposed and 5 = strongly in favor.

- Levels of support were above neutral for all the purposes listed.
- Support was highest for the demolition of dilapidated structures (4.40), and for capital improvement projects to improve local roads and bridges (4.34).
- With most spending issues, whether social services, schools, or other issues addressed, political orientation correlated in a manner where liberals displayed increased willingness to see spending on schools, infrastructure, and services.

Discern residents' and landowners' perceived usefulness of various information sources to learn about the city and on-going activities (Section 12 of the questionnaire)

In this section of the questionnaire respondents' were asked to identify their opinions how useful various information sources are when they are looking for information about Berlin, and responses were rated on a scale where 1 = not at all useful and 4 = very useful.

- The sources of information identified as most useful by respondents include the local/regional newspaper (2.98), word of mouth (2.81), the City of Berlin internet site (2.59), and public meetings (2.48). Results indicate the City and others holding public meetings are doing a good job of reaching out to citizens, and have credibility when doing so.

- Government publications (1.94) and journals and magazines (1.92) were identified as the least useful sources.
- Older respondents indicated higher levels of usefulness for most information sources, internet was included among those. This correlation did not exist for word of mouth.

Conclusions from written comments received

Comments reflected several issues of importance to respondents. Most comments focused in six general subject areas.

- Concern over a perceived influx of individuals receiving government assistance as a burden on the city.
- Generalized need for new businesses and the jobs they create.
- The need to repair and upgrade road systems.
- Both positive and negative comments about the possibility of a casino.
- Both positive and negative comments about the current location and potential effects of the boiler project.
- The need for a visual clean up of the town of Berlin.

Conclusion

The data clearly indicate that residents are concerned about on-going changes in the City of Berlin, have strong desires for expanded economic opportunities, and are concerned about how changes may affect the community in which they live. There is a strong desire to ensure the beauty of the region and the economic vitality of the city into the future, and to work together as a community to achieve these goals. The conclusions and recommendations above represent one step in the process of developing a document, and more importantly a spirit, that can help the City of Berlin and its residents protect the places and ways of life they cherish into the future.