

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Albemarle County 2002 Citizen Survey

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In January and February 2002, the Center for Survey Research at the University of Virginia conducted a telephone survey of 703 residents of Albemarle County, Virginia, on behalf of the County's Board of Supervisors and executive management.

The purposes of the survey were to determine residents' opinions about quality of life in Albemarle County and about the importance of goals for the County's strategic plan, to assess citizens' satisfaction with a number of services the County provides, their attitudes toward the County government, and to measure citizen opinion about policies for managing growth.

A survey with similar purposes was conducted for the County of Albemarle, also by the Center for Survey Research, in 1994. While the 2002 survey was not designed to be a replication of the 1994 survey, we have compared the results of the two surveys where appropriate.

Summary of Method

At the outset of discussions about the survey, a committee of Albemarle County government staff members created a topical outline, from which CSR generated a questionnaire. Before it was finalized, comments were solicited from the survey committee, senior members of the executive staff, and the County Board of Supervisors. Two pretests were conducted to refine the survey instrument and adjust the length.

CSR used Random Digit Dialing (RDD) to contact County residents. The survey calling was conducted January 24 through February 10, 2002, and resulted in 724 completed interviews, a response rate of 28 percent. During the analysis phase, respondent's self-reported area of residence showed that several respondents lived in the City of Charlottesville, and several in

surrounding counties. Those were eliminated from the data set as ineligible. The final number of completed interviews of Albemarle residents was 703, and yields a sampling error of ± 3.7 percent.

Data analysis for this survey included breaking down the responses for all opinion items by demographic subgroups, in order to determine whether there were statistically significant differences between them. Statistically significant differences are those that probably did not result merely from sampling variability, but instead reflect real differences within the County's adult population.

The following demographic variables were used in our subgroup analysis: length of residence in the County, employment status, presence of children under 18 in the household, education level, household income, race/ethnicity, age, gender, homeownership, and geographic area of the County. Significant differences in survey responses by sub-group are discussed in the full report. The survey results are briefly summarized below.

Quality of Life in Albemarle County

First of all, it is clear that Albemarle residents very much like Albemarle County as a place to live. Respondents were asked to rate the quality of life in the County on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the best possible place to live, and 1 being the worst.

- The mean rating was 8.10, somewhat higher than the mean of 7.92 in the 1994 survey. This change represents a statistically significant improvement.
- Seventy-three percent rated the County's quality of life an "8" or better.
- Eighteen percent rated the County a "10."
- Those most likely to give a high rating to the County were those who had lived in Albemarle longer, who were older, who owned their homes, were working part time or were retired, the highly educated and the most affluent. Rural residents rated the County higher than those living in the development areas.

Goals for the Strategic Plan

Because the County is preparing to update the strategic plan, we asked respondents to rate a list of 20 possible goals as "very important," "somewhat important," or "not that important." Computing the mean response for each goal on this three-point scale allows a ranking

of the items by importance. We also compared the percent of residents who considered each item very important.

- 90 percent of our respondents said that providing quality education was very important, giving it first place among all the goals in importance, with a mean rating of 2.88 on the 3-point scale.
- Providing education was followed by safety items: fire service (2.85), protecting water quality (2.84), and providing police services (2.75).
- County residents also believe that preserving the environment is important. In the top half of the goals list are preserving natural resources and open space (2.60), and preserving farmland and forested land (2.57).
- Providing services for the elderly (2.61), recreational programs for youth (2.52), and supporting affordable health care are also important (2.52).
- In the lower half of the list were additional social items: programs for troubled youth (2.49), encouraging affordable housing (2.40), providing support for people in need (2.33), and supporting affordable child care (2.31).
- Promoting economic growth (2.22) and supporting cultural opportunities (2.19) were the two least important goals on the list.

Satisfaction with Services

To report results on satisfaction with County services, we combined the percent “very satisfied” with the percent “somewhat satisfied.”

- For the most general question, overall satisfaction with County programs and services, 92.7 percent of our respondents said they were satisfied. This finding represents a significant increase from 84.3 percent in 1994.
- Public safety items showed a very high level of satisfaction, with levels of satisfaction at 90 percent or better for emergency rescue, police and fire protection, and safety in business and residential areas. The highest level of satisfaction was for emergency rescue services, at 97.5 percent.
- The only safety-related item to show a lower satisfaction level was safety for walkers and bicyclists, at 68 percent.

- The satisfaction rating for the quality of education in the County schools was 83.7 percent.
- Efforts to protect natural resources and the environment received a satisfaction rating of 80.5 percent, while 79 percent of survey respondents were satisfied with the County’s efforts to preserve open space.
- The item with the lowest level of satisfaction was getting around by public transportation, with 58.9 percent of our respondents reporting they were satisfied. Only about two-thirds of our respondents felt able to rate public transportation.
- Efforts to manage growth also received a relatively low 64.3 percent satisfaction level. Still, when our respondents were asked about specific policies aimed at managing growth, the vast majority favored each of them, as we report below.

Attitudes Toward Government

On the whole, citizens of Albemarle display a positive attitude toward their government. Residents of Albemarle County trust their government more often than Americans in general trust their local government or the national government.

- About 68 percent of our respondents said they trusted the Albemarle government to do what is right most of the time or just about always. About 31 percent said they could trust the government only some of the time. Compared with national data about trust in local government, Albemarle County is far stronger. Nationally, about 49 percent of citizens say they trust their local governments most of the time or just about always.¹
- About 85 percent said they were satisfied overall with the value they received from Albemarle County for their tax dollar.
- Considering the interaction of taxes and services, two-thirds of our respondents (67.5 percent) favored keeping taxes and services at their current level.
- Slightly less than half of our respondents had contacted the County in the past year, but of those, more than half were very satisfied with the

¹ Thomas M. Guterbock and John C. Fries, *Maintaining America’s Social Fabric: The AARP Survey of Civic Involvement*. Charlottesville Virginia, The Center for Survey Research, 1997.

helpfulness of County employees, and an additional 28 percent were somewhat satisfied with them.

- To increase the convenience of interacting with the County, our respondents favored expanding the County website, creating branch offices, and increasing the hours of availability of services. They were less favorable toward an automated phone service and kiosks in public areas.
- About 80 percent of our respondents said they had access to the internet, and 44 percent of those had visited the County's website.
- Citizens said they would be interested in researching property records on the web, and in using the website to apply for permits. They were less likely to want to register for classes, pay fees, or reserve park space over the web.

Planning and Growth

Asked about policies directed at managing growth or land use in Albemarle County, the majority of our respondents favored them.

- Seventy-nine percent of those who expressed an opinion favored the concept of development areas, though 14 percent of all respondents said they had no opinion about this issue.
- More than two-thirds of our respondents favored each of eight other measures the County is considering or has instituted.
- The most popular, with 96 percent favoring it, is allowing localized services, such as stores, post offices, etc, in traditionally rural communities.
- The least popular item is the development of an interconnected street system in development areas. Sixty-eight percent of our respondents favored that policy.
- Seventy-four percent favored the ACE program for acquiring development rights (46.5 percent strongly favored ACE). Seventy-nine percent favored taxing agricultural and forested land at a lower rate in order to defer development. Restricting the number of lots into which a parcel can be subdivided was favored by 76.1 percent.
- Providing public amenities in development areas received support from 90.6 percent of respondents. Encouraging a greater variety and mix of housing

types in the development areas was favored by 83.9 percent of our respondents. Seventy-four percent favored encouraging a greater mix of offices, stores, restaurants, and other urban services with residential areas in the County's development areas.

- For some of these items, a significant number said that they had no opinion—indicating that the County could benefit from additional educational programs regarding planning measures.

Conclusion

The Center for Survey Research presents these findings with the hope that they will be of help to the government of Albemarle County as it moves forward with its strategic planning and decision-making. We believe that the citizen opinions expressed here can provide a useful tool in governing. The Board of Supervisors, executive management, and employees of Albemarle County can take pride in the high level of satisfaction and trust the citizens express. While this survey has also indicated where there is room for improvement, the residents of Albemarle are clearly pleased with their quality of life and with their government.