

## Unit 5 Referendum Committee Community Telephone Survey November 2007

### Executive Summary

In October-November 2007, UNICOM·ARC conducted a telephone survey of Unit 5 residents drawn from a random sample of registered voters in the District. The purpose of the survey was to learn about public perceptions of and priorities for Unit 5, particularly with respect to a possible referendum on behalf of the District.

Five hundred (500) interviews were completed, and a sample of this size yields an overall error margin of  $\pm 4.4\%$ . This executive summary outlines key findings of the survey in narrative form. Complete results of each question asked are included elsewhere in the final report.

#### Referendum questions

Respondents were asked about two potential referendum questions for Unit 5, and majorities favored each proposal. Respondents were first asked about these possible referenda near the start of the survey:

- [First/Next] is a possible building bond proposal Unit 5 School District that would build two elementary schools, one middle school, expand and renovate Sugar Creek Elementary School, and make renovations to eight other elementary schools. While an amount for this proposal has not been determined, assume for the purposes of this question that it would be a \$90-\$100 million bond proposal. If an election were held today, would you strongly favor, favor, oppose or strongly oppose this referendum? (57.8%, total favor)
- [First/Next] is a proposal by Unit 5 School District that would raise the District's tax rate by ten cents to fund operational expenses and address cash flow. If an election were held today, would you strongly favor, favor, oppose or strongly oppose this referendum? (56.2%, total favor)

When asked to reconsider these two proposals near the end of the survey, support rose slightly, with three in five (60.8%) favoring the bond proposal and a similar percentage (58.8%) favoring a tax rate increase.

#### Public issues

Respondents were asked how strongly they agreed or disagreed with several statements about "public issues." Fewer than half (46.2%) of respondents agreed that "people like me can't afford to pay higher property taxes, no matter how good the cause." We frequently include this statement in referendum-related surveys to measure tax resistance in a community, and this

percentage is lower than we typically see. It is not uncommon for the percentage of respondents who agree with this statement to be ten or fifteen points higher than this figure.

As one might expect given recent events in the community (such as the construction of the U.S. Cellular Coliseum and Heartland Community College's building efforts), respondents felt strongly about the need for public referenda on raising taxes. Nine in ten (89.4%) agreed that "I don't think cities, school districts or community colleges should raise taxes without asking voters for their approval."

High percentages of respondents agreed with two statements about the importance of supporting public schools and the need for more resources in Unit 5:

- With all of the growth in our area, it stands to reason that our local school district needs more resources than they have in years past. (80.8%, strongly/somewhat agree)
- Supporting public schools is the best thing we can do to protect the investment we've made in our homes. (77.8%)

There was *not* a general sense among respondents that there is room in Unit 5's budget to make cuts without affecting the quality of education it provides. Fewer than half (45.4%) of respondents agreed that "there's room to cut from our school district's budget before students and staff would feel the impact."

### **Statements about the referenda**

Respondents were read nine different statements that might be made by "people who favor or oppose these proposals." Respondents reacted most strongly to two statements that touched on the effect of a school district on the community:

- We've always taken pride in our area for being a good place to live and raise a family. We must continue this tradition by supporting our schools and these proposals. (82.8%, strongly/somewhat agree)
- We've all seen what happens to rapidly growing cities that don't take care of their schools. We can't let that happen here in Unit 5. (81.8%)

Two statements related to the ongoing growth in the District also resonated with approximately four in five respondents:

- All students in the District will benefit from adding more classrooms and eliminating crowded conditions. (79.0%, strongly/somewhat agree)
- It is projected that Unit 5 will grow by 300 students per year over the next ten years. We must keep up with growth by building schools and adding classrooms. (78.6%)

When respondents were read statements that addressed the tax rate itself, the reasonable nature of the cost to homeowners garnered a more positive response than the timing of the referenda:

- For a homeowner whose home has an appraised or market value of \$150,000, these referenda would require an additional investment of about \$130 a year, or about \$2.50 a week. That's not much money to protect the quality of our schools and our community. (65.8%, strongly/somewhat agree)
- Unit 5 hasn't had an increase in its tax rate to pay for operational expenses since 1983. It just makes sense that an increase is needed now. (57.2%)

In order to determine whether three particular issues were red flags that ought to be of concern to the committee, respondents were read three negative statements about the referenda in this section. In only one case did more than half of respondents agree with one of these statements, and none emerged as a significant red flag:

- I'm willing to support the District, but these proposals are just asking for too much. (51.8%, strongly/somewhat agree)
- I'm tired of taxing bodies raising property taxes without giving voters a choice. I'm sending a message and voting 'no' on these proposals. (47.0%)
- I just don't trust the Board of Education to handle additional tax dollars wisely. (40.4%)

### **Grading the District**

The survey results suggest that local residents think highly of their local school district. Three quarters (73.2%) of respondents graded Unit 5 as an "A" or "B." More than seven in ten (72.2%) respondents agreed that "people move into our school district because of the reputation of our local school district." Respondents also indicated satisfaction with the job that the District does with the revenue it receives, as four in five (81.4%) respondents agreed that "our students receive an excellent education for the taxes we pay to our local school district."

Respondents also gave high marks to the job performance of District staff and officials. More than four in five (86.8%) rated the District's teachers "excellent" or "good," and solid majorities gave similar marks to District principals (76.8%), superintendent and central administration (65.8%) and the Board of Education (64.2%). We often find in similar surveys that teachers and building-level staff are rated highly by respondents, but it is not always the case that strong majorities give positive marks to an administration or Board of Education.

### **Awareness/communication**

Respondents were asked several questions to determine their general awareness about important issues related to Unit 5, as well as their perception of communication between the District and the community.

Majorities indicated that the District is doing an “excellent” or “good” job in communicating with area residents:

- Communicating with area residents (58.8%, excellent/good)
- Asking for public input (58.2%)
- Responding to public input (56.2%)

When asked about Unit 5’s financial condition, two in five (39.4%) of respondents said that it “needs additional revenue,” while a similar percentage (42.4%) said it had “just enough money,” and one in eleven (8.8%) said it has “more money than it needs.”

Fewer than a quarter (22.6%) of respondents indicated an awareness of “budget shortfalls that resulted in cuts in staff and curriculum” in the past four years. Half (49.8%) indicated that the District had “maintained its level of staff and curriculum” during this time, and far fewer (7.8%) said the district had “add[ed] staff and curriculum.”

Respondents had a very high level of awareness about enrollment growth in Unit 5. Nine in ten (89.0%) indicated that enrollment is increasing, and few believed that enrollment was remaining stable (6.0%) or declining (0.6%).

### **Conditions in the District**

When asked to rate conditions in Unit 5 in a number of different areas, respondents had generally positive impressions of the District. Facilities were a particular strong point in this section, with almost nine in ten respondents giving “excellent” or “good” ratings to “maintaining a safe and secure environment for students and staff” (86.8%) and “providing school buildings that are in good repair and physical condition” (86.4%). Seven in ten (71.2%) respondents also gave positive marks to “keeping up with computers and technology.”

Two thirds of respondents also gave excellent/good ratings to three items related to students’ classroom experience:

- Maintaining acceptable class sizes (68.2%, excellent/good)
- Providing enough classroom and instructional space (67.0%)
- Avoiding cuts to programs, curriculum and teaching staff (66.2%)

Majorities also gave Unit 5 high marks for the way it handles and distributes the resources it has available:

- Providing competitive salaries and benefits for teachers (67.4%, excellent/good)
- Making sure that resources are equitably distributed across the District (55.8%)

About three in ten respondents gave similar marks to the District on two items related to taxes:

- Keeping taxes affordable (59.8%, excellent/good)
- Spending tax dollars effectively (57.6%)

### **Priorities for the District**

Respondents were asked to assume that the District had “a variety of needs but not enough money to meet all of its needs” and read a list of nine possible needs that might be addressed. For each of these needs, respondents were asked to assign a priority using a seven-point scale, where a “7” indicated a top priority and a “1” indicated a very low priority.

Technology is often rated highly by respondents in similar surveys. “Keeping computers and educational technology up to date” was rated a high (5-7) priority by more than four in five (85.0%) respondents, and “increasing technology training for teachers and staff” was rated a high priority by three quarters (75.4%) of respondents.

As noted elsewhere, many respondents recognized the need to address rising enrollment in the District. More than four in five (82.4%) respondents placed a high priority on “adding teachers and staff to keep up with growing enrollment.”

A strong majority also indicated high priorities for items related to buildings and classroom space. More than seven in ten placed a high priority on “improving safety and security at various buildings” (73.4%). “Adding classroom and instructional space” (72.8%) and “reducing class sizes in many District buildings” (63.8%) were also priorities to significant majorities.

Restoring cuts were less likely to be priorities for respondents, with smaller majorities placing high priorities on “reinstating cuts made to curriculum” (57.8%) and “reinstating staff that have been cut in recent years” (55.0%).

Only half (50.8%) of respondents placed a high priority on “improving transportation.”

### **Conclusion**

The survey revealed a generally favorable environment for proceeding with referenda on behalf of Unit 5. Majorities favored both proposals tested in the survey, and respondents had a positive perception about the District and the way it is run. Significant percentages of respondents also recognized the growth in the District and the need to commit more resources to address it.

Among potential messages for a campaign, statements about the District’s role in the community resonated strongly with respondents. The need to address growth in the District was also a message to which high percentages of respondents reacted positively. With respect to the cost of a potential proposal, respondents were generally receptive to the amount when it was broken down to a weekly amount (\$2.50) and framed as a conservative proposal (“not much money to protect the quality of our schools and our community”).