

Telephone poll yields some surprises for surveyors

By Grace Holman, Leader Staff

An opinion survey conducted Oct. 21-27 by the Anaconda-Deer Lodge County Study Commission yielded a surprise or two, confirmed some fundamental Montanan thinking, and let the county know most believe the A-DLC government is doing an "adequate job" in performance of governing.

Dr. Kenneth L. Weaver, director of the Local Government Center at Montana State University in Bozeman, said Thursday night at a meeting with the study commission the survey represents a reliable and valid expression of the prevailing opinion of county residents at the time it was conducted.

He made this assertion on the basis that the survey was compiled and conducted locally, with 15 election judges making the telephone calls to randomly selected households, at random hours, to obtain a mix of demographics.

Weaver praised the study commission members for their work in compiling the survey questions, and the callers for their adaptability to training and the subsequent calls.

"This was local people, making local calls, asking about the community, not some youth from New York selling encyclopedias," Weaver said. This created a sense of community, as did the survey done at minimal cost to the county, about \$2,000 rather than the usual up to \$20,000.

Callers received 356 valid responses, 58.6% of the total called. Of the 291 non-responses, 186 were due to no answer, the answering person

not a resident of A-DLC, too busy, or other miscellaneous reasons. Sixty-one respondents refused to participate for unknown reasons, and four refused to participate, saying they did not like government.

Weaver expressed some concern regarding the reasons 61 respondents refused to participate.

"It may reflect a bias... if all 61 did not respond because they do not like government," he said. However, he recommended the study commission not pay undue attention to the number.

Some lack of participation could have occurred because of answering machines, now the bane of pollsters, and, in Weaver's opinion, soon to be the death of survey taking.

Regarding the survey results, to be able to say, with 95% confidence, that between 81% and 91% of the county's residents believe the government is doing an adequate job is somewhat a surprise.

"People don't like government, but you're doing something right," Weaver said.

The response was a "gut reaction," not an intellectual response, Weaver noted. He added that residents "were given the opportunity to say, 'no,'" with the next question being, "Would you agree with the statement, 'Our city-county government generally spends our tax dollars wisely?'"

"'Tax' is used deliberately, a red flag, to elicit a negative response," Weaver said.

Other questions were paired, the second designed to confirm, or alter, the response to the first.

However, that acceptance of local government does reflect typical Montanan thinking, Weaver said. Other levels of government, state and federal, do not garner the confidence of local government, Weaver said.

The 87% positive response to the question, "should we continue to elect the chief executive," is a response that should not be ignored, Weaver said. He added he believes it is a part of the "learning curve" A-DLC has had since the merger of the city and county government in 1976. Almost 20 years later, in 1993, voters determined, in a 75% to 25% decision, to continue to elect the chief executive.

However, respondents apparently do not want the chief executive to have power or authority, as indicated by the overwhelming "no" to giving

the county's chief executive officer the right to veto actions of the commissioners.

The question made no reference to commissioners' override of a veto with one study commission member commenting that such would be inherent, and was not included because it is implied.

Weaver noted that the county arrangement is unusual, with the chief executive generally having more power, such as the veto and serving as presiding officer over commission meetings.

Veto power was axed by 54% of respondents, with 37% saying yes and nine percent missing or saying "don't know."

"A close call, but the 'nos' had it," Weaver said.