

Raising Taxes to Hire Police Seen as Option

Neighborhood council leaders surveyed say they would support an increase or finding ways to cut waste to expand the Los Angeles force.

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A survey of Los Angeles neighborhood council members found that most support raising taxes to expand the police force, although a substantial number also believe money might be saved by eliminating waste, representatives of the mayor's office said Saturday.

The survey, conducted by the city Department of Neighborhood Empowerment as well as the mayor's office, found that 39% support expanding the police force by 1,000 officers with a half-cent increase in sales tax, and an additional 28% support paying for it with a combination of taxes and efficiencies.

However, a sales-tax measure would require a two-thirds popular vote for approval, and the 67% favorable response in the survey appears to leave little margin for error.

Indeed, those surveyed were the most active and knowledgeable residents, elected by their neighborhoods to serve on the councils, so the results do not necessarily reflect how the average voter will respond.

Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa said he reads the survey as a validation of his long-held opinion that residents want to see City Hall cut waste before they will consider paying more for services.

"I think it's very important for people to see the city is changing, that there is a real commitment to a fiscally prudent city government," Villaraigosa said. "We haven't ruled out the idea of an increase in revenues, but we have not decided on one either."

The survey was sent to 1,688 elected board members on the city's more than 80 neighborhood councils, and 466—or 28% — of the leaders responded.

The results, delivered at City Hall to a budget workshop of about 150 neighborhood council members, showed support varied by geography. Among South Los Angeles leaders, 53% support either the sales-tax increase or a combination of higher taxes and efficiencies.

"I support the sales tax increase because we need more police officers," said Dorothy Napoleon of the Southwest Neighborhood Council. "There is a lack of police officers in the southwest area."

In the traditionally conservative north San Fernando Valley, most neighborhood leaders did not support higher taxes for police, while 70% of south Valley leaders favored using

taxes to hire more police.

"I think we need some kind of increased revenue, but I won't necessarily say it's a sales tax," said Paul Hatfield of the Valley Village Neighborhood Council.

Hatfield questioned the validity of the survey because he said it appeared to include leading questions, and responders had to choose from groups of priorities bundled together.

Deputy Mayor Larry Frank told the neighborhood activists Saturday that the survey was designed to get input on tough questions facing the mayor.

"These are real questions we are struggling with," Frank said.

The mayor said the survey results would assist him in drafting the city budget for the fiscal year beginning July 1.

"The survey is a continuation of our effort to get as much feedback [as possible] from communities about what the budget should look like," Villaraigosa said.

On other questions, 41% of respondents citywide supported raising the trash collection fee by \$7, and 22% supported an additional \$22 fee, the amount needed to fully recover the city's cost of trash collection.

But in South Los Angeles, 64% opposed any increase in trash fees.

Mayoral aides said the survey results gave them some pause about whether to pursue tax and fee increases, especially large ones.

"Clearly we won't be passing around a collection plate," Benjamin Ceja, associate finance director for the mayor's office, said jokingly. But he said he reads the survey results as, "People understand that trash disposal is a valuable service and the city needs to recover some cost."

Ceja said a look at additional revenue is needed because of budget problems, including the need to contribute an extra \$200 million next year to city employee pension funds.

When asked about budget priorities, survey respondents ranked "livable neighborhoods" highest, followed by "improved traffic flow," "economic development" and "homeland security and public safety." Last year, respondents ranked public safety first.

Ceja said the inclusion of schools in the "livable neighborhoods" category may be responsible for its top showing.

The budget priorities differed depending on where the leaders lived.

Mayor Villaraigosa said he will meet with representatives of the neighborhood councils Feb. 18 to further discuss the survey results and how they should be reflected in the budget. The mayor must submit his budget to the City Council in April.

Councilman Dennis Zine, who addressed the neighborhood council leaders, said their input could determine which services are cut and which are expanded: "We are looking for what you folks think is important to the communities."