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Critical Issues 2005

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Table 1. The Metropolitan Critical Issues Ranking, according to the General Public

2004	2002
1. Strong economy and jobs	1. Lifelong quality education
2. Access to affordable health care	2. Strong economy and jobs
3. Lifelong quality education	3. Access to affordable health care
4. Visionary, credible leadership	4. Police, fire, and other public safety concerns
5. Police, fire, and other public safety concerns	5. Visionary, credible leadership
6. Protection and enhancement of the environment	6. Protection and enhancement of the environment
7. Diverse, integrated transportation system	7. Diverse, integrated transportation system
8. Valuing diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds	8. Containing growth, UGBs
9. Containing growth, UGBs	9. Valuing diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds
10. Diverse, affordable housing	10. Diverse, affordable housing

Table 2. The Metropolitan Critical Issues Ranking, according to the Opinion Leaders

2004	2002
1. Strong economy and jobs	1. Strong economy and jobs
2. Lifelong quality education	2. Lifelong quality education
3. Access to affordable health care	3. Visionary, credible leadership
4. Visionary, credible leadership	4. Diverse, integrated transportation system
5. Diverse, integrated transportation system	5. Access to affordable health care
6. Protection and enhancement of the environment	6. Protection and enhancement of the environment
7. Containing growth, UGBs	7. Containing growth, UGBs
8. Diverse, affordable housing	8. Diverse, affordable housing
9. Police, fire and other public safety concerns	9. Police, fire and other public safety concerns
10. Valuing racial and ethnic backgrounds	10. Valuing racial and ethnic backgrounds

by Craig Wollner, Professor, Associate Dean, College of Urban & Public Affairs, Portland State University
Deborah Elliott, and the staff of the Survey Research Laboratory, Portland State University

INTRODUCTION

Biennially, the Institute of Portland Metropolitan Studies (IMS) undertakes to identify the most compelling concerns, problems, and dilemmas facing citizens of the Portland metropolitan region. The region is defined as Clackamas, Columbia, Multnomah, Washington, and Yamhill Counties and Clark County in Washington. IMS staff analyzes the results of two Critical Issues List surveys, one of area residents at large conducted by the Survey Research Laboratory (SRL) of Portland State University (PSU), and the other a mail survey of regional opinion leaders. The opinion leaders are elected and appointed officials serving in jurisdictions throughout the six-county metropolitan region, academic experts in regional affairs, and citizen activists. The two surveys are compared and contrasted for points of congruity and contrast between the two cohorts surveyed. Staff completed 374 phone surveys of the general public; 424 of the region's opinion leaders mailed back responses. This essay presents the results.

The comparative results in the 2004 survey cycle, which are summarized in Tables 1 and 2, yield a number of interesting insights:

- For the first time since 1994, education is not the most critical issue to either or both of the survey groups, although it continues to be a preoccupation of both opinion leaders and the public.
- The most important issue for both groups is a strong economy and jobs.
- Affordable health care continues to be an issue of great concern to both opinion leaders and the general public.
- Police, fire, and public safety is not an item of the highest priority to either group despite the well publicized threat of terrorism.

In what follows, we discuss these findings in greater detail. The exact wording of each of the issues, as voiced by the telephone surveyors and printed in the mail survey for ranking by respondents, is bolded in the text of the essay.

In the interest of brevity, this essay omits discussion of frequencies, sample size, error and confidence, and other data. The entire report on the Critical Issues List survey of the general public by the Portland State University Survey Research Lab and of the mail-back survey can be viewed at: <http://www.upa.pdx.edu/IMS/home/homeindex.html>.

QUALITY OF LIFE

A separate question was asked on both surveys: "on a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate overall quality of life in the region, with 1 being the worst and 10 the best?" The average rating for each of the groups surveyed is below.

General Public:	7.78
Opinion Leaders:	7.36

A DISCUSSION OF COMPARATIVE RESULTS: the general public and the opinion leaders

The Top Three Issues

The foremost concern of the region's general public over the last eight years, as revealed by these surveys has reliably been the state of education. Although education generally has topped the issues list for the opinion leaders as well, they dropped it to second place in 2002, identifying "**Developing and maintaining a strong economic infrastructure that provides stable, family-wage jobs, and a fair, equitable tax base to support public services**" as their greatest priority. This year both surveys revealed that the economy/jobs issue is the number one concern. This finding is understandable because the state and regional economy, based significantly on manufacturing and other ailing sectors, has so far refused to recover from the 2001-2002 recession with the speed or power of other parts of the nation. As the region's economic woes drag on affecting households, local and state treasuries, and businesses and industries, both the public and its leaders clearly agree that the situation must be dealt with swiftly and efficiently. For some among the general public, the issue of the recovery focuses not as might be expected on creating more jobs, but on reforming tax policy so as to stimulate job creation. Two basic polarities exist: one respondent claims that the correct approach is "redesigning state tax policy so that . . . we have a sales tax and that we balance taxes among sales, property and income. I think this is the number one first priority for supporting all these critical issues." On the other side, a respondent urges "reduction or elimination of a lot of the taxes because they limit growth." Com-

mentary by opinion leaders also reflects the theme of tax fairness and simplification, although their analysis sometimes looks beyond taxes as a driver of the labor market and economy. “Metro’s regional planning is hurting the city’s economic opportunities—time to eliminate them?” one respondent asks rhetorically. “Jobs, jobs, jobs,” asserts another, going on to recommend “revision of economics away from corporate outsourcing and toward regional small manufacturing with all kinds of incentives for this shift.” Another blames the environmental sensitivity of the region for poor economic performance, noting that Portland has “wonderful fresh air, green trees, access to the Columbia River, but [it’s] difficult to make a living here—very few family wage jobs.”

The second leading issue this year for the public is **“access to affordable health care for all sectors of the community”** as compared to 2002 when it was #3. For the opinion leaders, health care is #3, moving up from the fifth position in 2002. Occupying the second slot for them is **“lifelong quality education.”** The strong showing of this issue in both polls tracks with the upward spiral of health care costs locally and nationally over the last several years, the growth in numbers of the uninsured in the region on both sides of the Columbia and the nation (including cuts in benefits and the shrinking of the rolls of the Oregon Health Plan), and the devaluation of the health benefits packages of the employed thanks to inflation, characterized by more stringent stop loss provisions resulting in higher deductibles and restrictions on providers.

At the same time, the opinion leaders’ choose **“ensuring lifelong quality education (pre-K-12, community college, college, graduate school) that is accessible to all, addresses different learning styles, and supports the regional workplace”** as their second most critical issue (the public ranked it third). Their concern for this issue, which has chronically topped both lists as the region’s most critical issue, indicates the extent to which it remains a matter of deep concern for both groups. Clearly, events in the two years following the 2002 surveys, including budget shortfalls, erratic test scores under the No Child Left Behind Act, dramatic gestures such as cutting school days in order to meet budgets, emergency surtaxes, and the like have done nothing to push the problem to the back burner for either group. “Oregon is in an education crisis right now...” one member of the public states flatly. “The way the state legislature is responding to the funding needs [of schools],” notes another respondent, “school boards don’t know how much money they have to work with until the legislators decide and it hasn’t been working out

because they decide too late.” One expresses concern about the teaching of values in the schools, calling for **“freedom for the Christian community to express its values—to be taught in schools or, at least, private schools.”** Another points to **“class size and affordable and realistic wages for teachers”** as major issues.

Several people among the opinion leaders take the opportunity to champion the development of a regional university of national distinction. Opinion leaders also put forward a sense that education is central to all issues. “If we don’t invest in education,” according to a respondent who captures this view, “then we can’t succeed in these other areas.”

The Leadership Challenge

For the public, **“visionary credible leadership at all levels that engages citizens in public decision making”** is #4. In previous polls, this issue consistently received a middling rank from both groups, but no matter where they rank it, survey respondents have always revealed dissatisfaction with the current crop of leaders and a longing for a new group with greater charisma. In the 2004 iteration, the members of the public who choose to comment seem more hostile toward the leadership than respondents in previous polls. One remarks that “the leadership is too intent on being politically correct and too beholden to private interest groups [and] not looking at the entire region.” Another demands getting “more reasonably thinking people in government that doesn’t tell people what they have to do.” Past surveys have yielded a great deal of discussion on leadership from the opinion leaders. Strikingly, they offered only a few terse comments in the 2004 survey. One asserts that visionary leadership is lacking and laments, “in this . . . partisan and political climate, I have no illusions [that new leaders coming to the fore] can occur any time soon.”

Perhaps summing up the predominant sentiment of opinion leaders, one wrote, “We are living in an Eden, yet one at great risk of blowing it due to a lack of courage, vision, and leadership.”

Safety and Security in a Time of War

In the 2004 edition of the surveys, the public placed **“police, fire, and other public safety concerns”** at #5, whereas the opinion leaders ranked it ninth. These rankings are consistent with the two groups’ attitude about the issue over time

(public safety concerns were at #4 for the public in 2002), although in 2000, prior to September 11, the public ranked this issue #3. The consistent disparity in rankings is perhaps explained by the prominence given to crime in local news coverage, which commands the attention of the public at large. Opinion leaders, on the other hand, tend to be more aware of the actual declining trend line of crime in the region over the last decade and more sanguine. They emphasize less direct strategies for combating crime. One comment reflects this approach: “Police, fire, and public safety would be less overwhelming in a society where jobs were available and crime wasn’t viewed as necessary for some segments of the population.” Or, as another puts the matter, “policing becomes easier where economic goals are met.” Perhaps intending a joke, one respondent comments cryptically that “there are too many killer cops and not enough cafes” in the neighborhood.

Still, the anxiety over crime among the public has not disappeared. One public respondent demands “make it safer! The police [should be] more accessible and doing what they’re supposed to be doing.” Another remarks that “the whole police department is corrupt [and practices] racial intimidation. Clackamas County is the worst regarding racism and racial intimidation.” In light of the history of the last three years, it seems curious that only one member of the public and none of the opinion leaders comment about the need for better security to combat terrorism.

Protecting and Planning the Environment

“**Protection, restoration and enhancement of the environment**” rates #6 with the public, the same weight given by the opinion leaders. For both groups, this concern has lessened since 2000, when it ranked # 4 for the opinion leaders and #5 for the public (it was #6 for both groups in 2002). Over the period since the last survey, concern has deepened over a number of issues crucial to a healthy environment—wetland loss, air and water quality, the Willamette River Superfund site, for example. Now, however, neither group seems to regard the environment as one of the region’s more pressing concerns. A small segment of the public is tired of the emphasis on environmental quality and says so plainly: “[We] need to get rid of some of the tree huggers,” one respondent asserts. Some are concerned about the toll of development on the environment. A representative comment observes, “I see us having more development in a way that puts environment second. Development should be slowed. We should have more LIDS (low impact development).” Others worry about air and water quality.

In 2004, the general public sees “**supporting an expanded, diverse, affordable and integrated regional transportation system that reduces congestion and moves people and goods safely and efficiently**” as the seventh most critical issue, while the opinion leaders rank it at #4. This disparity represents the consistent views of the two groups on the importance of moving people and freight through the region. The strong profiles of light rail and the overall success of Tri-Met and CTran bus service seems to satisfy the public despite their unhappiness over increasing traffic congestion throughout the region. Many opinion leaders tend to see the stubborn dependence of citizens of the area on the car as an important obstacle to the highest level of livability and sustainability. Still, a number of people in the public complain about various aspects of the regional transportation system, often in somewhat vague terms. For example, one individual demands more public transportation; another says that “traffic is horrendous. It [traffic lights] needs to be coordinated.” Another objects to the loss of Greyhound service to the coast and the eastern reaches of Oregon, which poses a particular hardship for the elderly. Opinion leaders voice more specific concerns. One calls for “a critical review of what Metro’s transportation planners projected and what they delivered, in terms of transit ridership and capital costs, between 1980 and 2000.” Another criticizes the quality and availability of handicapped transportation and parking in downtown Portland, especially since “Metro and [the] state stress the importance of the central city for all.” Another calls for transportation planning that includes Clark County.

Diversity

This year the public positions “**Recognizing, valuing, and involving persons of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds in our community and government decisions**” at #8, assigning it more importance by one spot than in the 2002 poll. Diversity ranked tenth for the opinion leaders in 2004, repeating its position in 2002 but dropping three places farther down the list than in 2000. Over the decade to date, diversity has become more important to the public (it was #9 in 2000) and less so to opinion leaders. For the public, this development is probably a function of the pressures of in-migration from a variety of ethnic and religious groups as revealed in the 2000 census and confirmed by simple empirical observation. For the opinion leaders, the relatively trouble-free transition to diversity over the period perhaps offers proof that the region’s citizens are capable of tolerance, and hence

they exhibit a low level of anxiety. There are some random negative comments about illegal immigration and homosexuals, but the public was, overall, remarkably sanguine about this issue at a time when the census shows diversity growing rapidly in the region.

Urban Spaces and Housing

One of the more interesting comparisons in the 2004 survey is the position of the public on the issue of **“containing growth within the Portland-Vancouver urban growth boundaries while maintaining quality of life both inside and outside the boundaries.”** The public ranks this problem #9, as compared with the opinion leaders, who see it as the seventh leading issue. In light of the November 2 vote and Oregon’s overwhelming passage of Measure #37, which won in the urban, suburban, and rural counties of the region, this result is not a major surprise. Perhaps most significantly, the measure is widely believed to negate the Urban Growth Boundary (UGB). Thus, the relative lack of concern among members of the public for the potential for sprawl is not unexpected. In any case, both groups offer a number of comments on growth. “Good urban design is very important to create an infrastructure for jobs and other things,” remarks one member of the public. Another calls for “maintaining the character of neighborhoods. The older neighborhoods (inner SE and NW) should not be made into cookie cutter developments.” “Residential and workplaces need to be [isolated] for a better quality of life,” asserts yet another. “It’s too congested.”

The opinion leaders are divided on this issue. Some see the UGB as too restrictive, resulting in an erosion of the quality of life in the area. One observes, “Zoning is going the wrong way. Stop the 3,500 foot lots. Portland needs trees and you don’t get them this way. Think of more space like Ladd’s Addition: That’s the small town look that Portland should be. Do not try to make this NYC.”

The public places **“diverse, affordable housing close to jobs throughout the region”** in the tenth position, while the opinion leaders rate it the ninth most important issue. A respondent from the public worries that land available for construction has to be freed up. Linking the housing issue to the UGB and family wage jobs, this person contends that “they are decreasing the affordability of homes, and there will be a society of young people who won’t be able to afford homes. People working at the low-income jobs are not going to be able to afford a home.”

One opinion leader speaks for many in calling for “balancing gentrification of inner city neighborhoods with housing costs that make those neighborhoods unaffordable.” Another prescribes an affordable housing policy embedded in the creation of a “bi-state metropolis” with a balance between growth and management of growth.

CONCLUSION

Finally, it is worth noting that in this year more than others in the recent past, the opinion leaders see the issues as equally important or as inextricably linked to each other. As one opinion leader aptly puts the matter, “All of these issues are important. As elected officials we have to integrate all of the above into state policy.” Moreover, in this year more than in the past, both the public and the opinion leaders, explicitly and implicitly, call for true bi-state cooperation. One prevailing impression emerges from their comments: More than ever before, the Portland region is moving toward a unified view of itself as it confronts the most pressing problems. This heightened self-consciousness bodes well for discovering solutions.