

## A SURVEY AS A METHOD OF IDENTIFYING CITIZEN NEEDS

- Surveys are relatively inexpensive way to gather information from a large number people.
- Surveys can be conducted in person, distributed and completed in groups, sent by mail, or conducted by telephone.
- Surveys can provide individual views that are not influenced by others as can occur in a group discussion.
- Respondents can be chosen to include many different points of view.
- The questions and responses generally have to be short and succinct.
- Surveys may not supply sufficient information to fully understand an issue. They may tell us what is, but not why. Surveys may need to be combined with other methods such as group discussion to explain why the situation occurs.

### Surveys require skills in wording of questions

- Questions may be poorly worded or too complex so the respondent doesn't understand what is being asked.  
Ex.: Industries use two types of natural resources to produce consumer goods and services, those that are renewable and those which are not renewable. Which best describes your feelings about how natural resources should be used?
  1. Use renewable resources at a slower rate than what supplies can be renewed and conserve all nonrenewable resources.
  2. Use renewable resources at a rate that supplies can be renewed and conserve nonrenewable resources whose future supply seems threatened.
  3. Let use of renewable and nonrenewable resources be decided by the needs of industry regardless of how fast they are being used.
- Questions may contain more than one concept  
Ex.: Do you favor increasing job opportunities in the community by providing potential new industries with state tax incentives and the county building them new buildings? The previous question is also a bad example of including more than one concept in a single question.
- Forced choice questions may not include all of the possible answers  
Ex.: Which of the following sources of farm credit do you use?
  1. Family member or relative
  2. Dealer
  3. Farm Credit Agency
  4. Other Individuals(Did not include "banks" as an option.)
- The way the question is worded can bias the responses  
Ex.: Do you favor increased government spending on airport security to insure the safety of the traveling public against terrorist attacks?

- Ranked items can be more difficult to analyze  
Ex.: The question, “What are the five most important issues facing the county?” is easier to handle than, “Rank the top five issues facing the county.” In the analysis it is easier for you to rank items in the first question based on their frequency of mention than it is to weight the items in question two based on whether they were ranked first, second, etc.

The interpretation of findings is critically important

- Data analysis requires skills.
- Findings are subject to interpretation.
- Narrative answers often are difficult and time consuming to summarize.
- The analysis is time consuming if there is a large number of respondents and many questions (For example, 20 questions responded to by 100 people represent 2,000 responses to be summarized.)

The following are some methods of describing the findings:

- Frequency (Fifty people said the issue was important.)
- Percentages (Sixty-five percent said it was important.)
- Rank order (Of the issues identified, health care ranked the highest.)
- Comparisons (Education ranked higher than health care.)

### **A possible method for using surveys in securing citizen input.**

An efficient method for securing input from a broad cross-section of the population is to start by utilizing the contacts that are represented on the County Extension Council or program councils. Council members are likely to be members of other groups such as Farm Bureau, PTA, Homemakers Clubs, churches, Chamber of Commerce, civic organizations, sports leagues, the Health Department, elected officials, interagency council, etc. The first task would be to see how many groups are represented among council members. Each council member could then take copies of the survey and have them completed in the different group settings and bring them back to the council for compiling. If certain segments of the population are not represented on the Council (members should be recruited in the future), the agents or representatives of the council could take them to those groups.

### **Activities:**

1. Have the group discuss the pros and cons of using a survey for collecting citizen input for the POW process.
2. Practice writing a survey question to determine the most critical problems facing the community.
3. If a survey is to be used, discuss who should be surveyed and the best way to get their input.