



PUBLIC OPINION STRATEGIES

TO: INTERESTED PARTIES

FROM: LORI WEIGEL

RE: KEY FINDINGS FROM A SURVEY OF OMAHA RESIDENTS REGARDING TRANSPORTATION

DATE: DECEMBER 15, 2011

METHODOLOGY

Public Opinion Strategies is pleased to present these key findings from a statistically valid telephone survey of 400 city of Omaha residents conducted December 5-6, 2011. In order to ensure we were speaking with a stable population of residents who could play an active role in city decisions, the sample was of registered voters. The sample was distributed proportionally by council district, and is demographically representative of the overall electorate. The margin of sampling error for the full citywide sample is +/- 4.9%; margins of error for subgroups within the sample will be larger.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The results demonstrate that city residents support increasing funding for public transportation, sidewalks, and bike lanes in the city, even if it required a small increase in taxes. This is despite – or perhaps because – few city residents indicate having taken the bus or biked to work, school, for errands or to go shopping. Two-in-five have walked for one of those purposes though. In fact, beyond, road maintenance and repair, sidewalks and pedestrian crossings are seen as the next highest transportation priority for the city. Omaha residents also overestimate how much is currently being spent on bike lanes and sidewalks, but would increase that amount by one-third.

There is some tension in views regarding driving as the primary mode of transportation. A majority say they would like to spend less time in their car, and most feel they have no choice but to drive as much as they do. Rising gas prices would also significantly change their driving habits, even at relatively lower dollar amounts. At the same time, the majority also say they would still prefer to drive even if they had other transportation options. The chief reason provided by those who had not taken the bus was simply that they have a car at their disposal instead.

KEY FINDINGS

TRANSPORTATION MODE

- **Almost all Omaha residents who work outside the home or attend school get to their location as the driver of a private vehicle.** Nearly two-thirds of respondents either work outside the home (60%) or are students (3%). Fully 96% of these respondents indicate that they get to work or classes as the driver of a private vehicle. Most commuters are not driving for exceedingly long, especially in comparison to what we see in some larger metropolitan areas around the nation. Only 14% indicate spending 30 minutes or more in their car in their typical one way commute.

Minutes in Typical One Way Commute

Minutes	Among Commuters
Less than 15 minutes	39%
15-29 minutes	46%
30-44 minutes	9%
45 minutes to one hour	4%
One hour or more	1%

- **Residents are more likely to have walked as a means of transportation other than a car for commuting, running errands or going shopping.** Half of residents say that they have never biked or taken the bus for these types of tasks, but only 28% indicate never having walked to work or school, for errands or shopping.

Mode	% Taken in Last Month	% Used Ever	% Never Used
Walked	41%	31%	28%
Biked	8%	37%	55%
Taken bus	6%	38%	56%

Age is one of the greatest predictors of participating in these activities, with those under age 35 the most likely to say they have walked in the last month for these purposes (54%), biked (13%) or taken the bus (8%). Participation tends to decline so that those ages 55 or older are least likely to have used any of these alternative modes of transportation.

- **Those not utilizing alternatives to driving have a number of reasons, but convenience and access are primary.** Those who have not taken public transportation in the last month are most likely to indicate their reasons for not doing so as having/preferring a car (32%), it is not convenient from their house (26%) or that it is not convenient to where they need to go (20%). Those who have not walked for these purposes in the last month say it is because it is too far (51%), prefer car (16%), they have a medical condition that prevents it (13%), or it takes too long (12%). Similarly, those who have not ridden a bike tend to say they don't own a bike (28%), it is too far (21%), too cold/weather (14%), medical condition prevents it (14%) or prefer their car (12%).

Notably, safety, condition of paths and bike lanes, traffic/drivers' behavior and other such issues receive minimal mentions as reasons for not having biked, walked or taken public transportation.

- **A majority say they would like to spend less time in their car.** Fifty-four percent (54%) agree with this view, with 23% saying they strongly agree. Only 42% disagree with the statement that "I would like to spend less time in my car." Notably, 60% of commuters who drive their personal car say they would like to spend less time in their car, jumping to 70% of those who spend 15 or more minutes commuting each way.
- **While 72% say they have "no choice but to drive as much as they do," a nearly equal number (74%) agree with the statement that "Even if I had more choices in transportation, I would still prefer to drive."** These views may be seemingly inconsistent, but corresponds to a strong sense we see in communities across the nation that residents like having choices and options. However, those who have used alternative modes of transportation in the last month are less likely to say they would prefer their car (56% agree among those who have biked; 63% among those who have taken the bus; and 67% among those who have walked).

- **Residents also say that they would rethink their driving habits if the price of gas increases.** Two-thirds say they would reconsider if the price of gas went to \$5 or less (34% at \$4). Only 8% flat out say they would not or could not change their driving habits. These views bear a close relationship with household income, as those who are lower income are more likely to indicate that gasoline hitting even \$4 per gallon would dramatically change their driving habits. That income distinction disappears at the highest gas increase amounts:

% Total Would Change Driving Habits (By Income)

\$ per gallon	Under \$40k	\$40-80k	\$80k+
\$4 per gallon	51%	36%	23%
At \$5 per gallon amount	80%	71%	57%
At \$10 per gallon amount	95%	92%	89%

TRANSPORTATION AND QUALITY OF LIFE

- **There is a sense that transportation features of a community are important to quality of life, but that other aspects of a community – crime rates and schools in particular – are more important.** Each feature we tested related to transportation had a majority saying it is “extremely or very” important, with the exception of being able to walk to stores and restaurants (41%) and low levels of traffic congestion (40%). It is worth noting that the latter in particular is potentially something more acutely valued in its absence, given that in high congestion cities like Atlanta, we often hear vivid stories about how traffic does affect quality of life.

Community Characteristics	% Extremely Important	% Extremely/Very Important
Neighborhoods safe from crime	59%	95%
Good quality public schools	58%	90%
Affordable apartments or homes to live in	35%	85%
A neighborhood park you can walk to	23%	59%
Convenient to the interstate or major roads	20%	57%
A short commute to work	19%	50%
Low levels of traffic congestion	14%	40%
Convenient to public transportation	13%	52%
Being able to walk to stores and restaurants	12%	41%

There are some important distinctions in attitudes:

- Those with the longest commutes of 30 minutes each way or more are most likely to say that low traffic is important to quality of life (66% extremely or very important, ranking it fourth for these respondents of all characteristics). They also rate “convenient to public transportation” more highly than other residents (51%).
- Council district 4 residents are most likely to say “convenient to public transportation” is very important (67% extremely or very important).
- Men and women rate almost every single characteristic the same.

- Younger residents under age 35 are most apt to say that being able to walk to stores and restaurants is important (48%).

TRANSPORTATION PRIORITIES

- **While road maintenance and repair tops priorities for city residents, sidewalks and pedestrian crossings are a higher priority than new roads.** Respondents were asked to rate a number of different potential means of transportation for city residents on a scale, where 0 means that it is not a priority at all, 10 is the highest priority and 5 is neutral. As the following table illustrates, more than two-in-five residents rate road maintenance the highest priority, followed by sidewalks, new roads, public transportation and lastly bike lanes, as evidenced in the following table:

**Priorities for Transportation
(On a Scale From 0/Not a Priority to 10/Highest Priority)**

Priorities	% 10	% 8-10	Mean
Road maintenance and repair	39%	70%	8.0
Sidewalks and pedestrian crossings	24%	50%	7.0
New road construction	17%	41%	6.4
Public transportation choices and options	12%	31%	6.0
Bike lanes, bike trails, and bicycle parking	10%	26%	5.4

Notably, despite the age distinctions in who is utilizing alternatives to driving, there is almost no age distinction in priorities. There are also relatively few geographic distinctions. Those in Council District 3 are most likely to rate sidewalks (59% 8-10 in priority), public transportation (42%), and bike lanes (35%) highly. Those in District 4 (57%) and 5 (56%) are most likely to rate new roads higher than other areas of the city.

- **There is a sense that more is being spent on bike lanes and sidewalks than reality, and residents want even more than that allocated in this area.** Although when asked what “should” be spent, residents generally provide a higher number than what they estimate the city is currently spending.

As the following graph illustrates, residents want 21 cents of every transportation dollar to be allocated to pedestrian and cycling infrastructure, while they would have 52 cents spent on maintaining roads (their highest priority). It is worth noting that not everyone was asked every question seen in the graph below, so they were not asked to ensure total responses reached a 100% budget.

How much would you guess IS spent / How much would you say SHOULD BE spent

<i>Ranked by Current Spending</i>	Current Spending (Mean)	Should Spend (Mean)
Construction of new roads (half sample)	36.5 cents	40.7 cents
Maintenance for existing roads (half sample)	36.3 cents	51.8 cents
Bike lanes or trails and sidewalks (full sample)	14.2 cents	20.7 cents

- **In fact, when asked about sidewalks and bike lanes, 54% of respondents provide a figure higher than what they estimated the city is currently spending, only 13% provided a figure that was lower than their estimate of current spending.** (Note: this question was the only one asked of all respondents for each so it is the only one where we can make this comparison). This is predictably higher among those who have walked or biked in past month for something other than recreation. Fully 63% of those who have walked and 65% of those who have biked provide a higher figure for what they believe city spending should be in these areas than their estimate of current spending. That said, majorities (49% and 53%, respectively) of those who have NOT walked or biked also provide a higher figure.

- **Omaha residents are fairly divided over what the best reasons are to support expanding and improving their transportation options in the city.** When provided with a list of aspects of alternative transportation, there is no consensus as to the primary motivation for expanding these options.

- 23% To allow all people to get to their jobs, or where they need to go
- 18% To reduce our dependence on foreign oil
- 15% To provide more options
- 10% To reduce traffic congestion
- 14% To improve public health
- 6% To enhance safety for pedestrians and cyclists
- 5% To reduce obesity rates

- **Importantly, residents indicate a willingness to pay more in order to ensure that their priorities in transportation are met, even if it requires an increase in taxes.** The sample was split into two representative halves, with half of respondents asked about “increasing funding to expand and improve public transportation, sidewalks and bike lanes in Omaha” and the other half asked that same question with the following caveat: “even if it required a small increase in taxes or fees.” Fully 72% indicate they would support the increase in funding, and a solid majority of 57% would support this increase even if it required a tax increase. This kind of a gap is certainly typical, as a tax increase is typically one of the more difficult “asks” in survey research. So the fact that 57% continue to back up alternative modes of transportation even if it personally cost them more is significant.

The gap in support levels is particularly significant among seniors (20 point distinction), a sub-group which tends to be more cost sensitive.

However, the lack of distinction along typical lines such as income are perhaps the most interesting.

% Increase Funding (By Income)

% Support	Under \$40k	\$40-80k	\$80k+
Increase in funding	74%	75%	68%
Increase even if requires tax or fee increase	57%	58%	63%

IN SUMMARY

Overall, the survey demonstrates that residents are primarily relying on their car for commuting to and from work or school. Those that have used an alternative mode of transportation for commuting or to shop and run errands are most likely to have walked, with very few having biked or used public transportation. While there are a number of reasons for that, convenience and access are the primary obstacles. In fact, a majority feel they are driving more than they would like to and would like other choices.

Road maintenance is viewed as the primary priority for the city, but sidewalks in particular are seen as quite important – more important than new roads, for example. The majority of residents believe more funding should be allocated to sidewalks and bike lanes. They back up their conceptual support with a willingness to increase funding for these alternative modes of transportation even if it requires an increase in taxes or fees. They have a wide range of reasons why they think expanding these options is important.

All of that said, there is still a strong preference for driving a car among residents. They do view transportation as important to quality of life, but they rate it below other community characteristics such as crime rates and public schools. It is clear though that younger residents and certain neighborhoods are particularly interested in having alternative modes of transportation and walkable neighborhoods and so this may be particularly important to address for these residents.