

CALL TO ORDER

First Selectman Lisa Heavner called the special meeting of the board of selectmen about the findings of the recent town survey, conducted by GreatBlue Research, Inc., to order at 5:33 p.m. on Monday, June 29, 2015. The meeting was held in program room 1 at the Simsbury Public Library, 725 Hopmeadow Street, Simsbury, CT. Also in attendance were selectmen: Sean Askham, Cheryl Cook, deputy first selectman Nancy Haase, Chris Kelly and Mike Paine. Board of finance members in attendance included: chairman Peter Askham, vice chair Nick Mason, Linda Schofield and Moira Wertheimer. Staff included Tom Cooke, director of administrative services. The meeting was taped and broadcast by SCTV.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

All stood for the Pledge of Allegiance.

PUBLIC AUDIENCE

Joan Coe, a 40-year resident of town, said she was concerned that the most important issue for Simsbury residents, about the town charter and the idea of a town manager form of government, was not reflected in the survey. She said the issue has been discussed for decades and the survey was a chance to get some feedback and guidance on the topic.

She had several questions on the survey and how it was conducted, in particular as it related to the senior/community center. She said residents did not give the town any conclusive evidence in the survey that the senior center should be built at performing arts location. She said there are alternatives and the taxpayer should not be unduly burdened by a new senior/community center when a renovated Eno Memorial Hall would serve the purpose. She was also concerned with what would happen to the town's Aaa bond rating if the new facility is built. She said the town cannot serve two conflicting groups, the senior and the performing arts, at one location. She said town leaders should lead and renovate Eno for the seniors.

PRESENTATION

Seamus McNamee, senior director, research at GreatBlue, and Nicole Gaona, director of research at GreatBlue, based in Cromwell, CT, gave a presentation about the town survey and its findings. Mr. McNamee gave a history of the company and then discussed the research methodology – 400 completed surveys (from 4,000 calls), 68 possible questions, survey conducted May 19-28, 2015, etc. A survey was done in 2008, by a different company, and GreatBlue used much of that blueprint, with adjustments, for this survey so comparisons could be made. The telephone interviews were conducted after it was confirmed the person lived in one of the sections of town. All respondents were current residents. Both he and Ms. Gaona then went over the key findings.

Key findings included:

- Overall quality of life in Simsbury was rated very highly (97.3%). The most notable difference over 2008 was an increase in residents rating it as “excellent” (+10.3%).
- Satisfaction with Town resources was highest for library services (99.5%), fire and emergency services (98.7%), and parks and recreation offerings (98.4%). Dissatisfaction with Town services was related to website usability, police presence, and road maintenance.
- Preservation of open space and areas dedicated to pedestrian use were top priorities for residents, placing high importance on “preservation of elements of Town ‘character’ such as views of the ridge or bike/pedestrian walkways” (87.4%). In addition, residents rated the Town's efforts to do so very positively (92.3%).

- The location of the Senior/Community Center was regarded with high importance by most residents (69.3%) with a similar segment (60.3%) reporting the location voted by the Board of Selectmen would either “increase visitation” (19.8%) or “no change, would continue going” (40.5%).
- The resources available to seniors and the general public at the Senior/Community Center were more important than the location (78.0%). Offering programs, such as health activities and recreational activities, to the entire community in addition to the seniors would “increase visitation” for 41.5% of residents.
- When asked to rate willingness to pay an increase in taxes to support the proposed budgets for the Senior/Community Center; 58.0% of respondents supported at least some tax increase to support the Center (\$5 million, \$8.5 million, or \$12 million). This fell to 44.0% of respondents when considering just the \$8.5 million and \$12 million facility price points, and 34.8% when considering only the \$12 million facility and the applicable tax burden.
- Familiarity with economic development issues experienced a significant decrease since 2008 (-8.3%). This in turn may have resulted in a relatively low rating of “economic development efforts” made by the town (56.7%).
- A shift in preference of receiving communication occurred with a heavier emphasis on electronic delivery or Internet searches. Residents also expressed great interest in the Town developing a high-speed fiber optic Internet network throughout the Town.

Mr. Kelly had a question on the math of the 58 percent senior center figure, bullet point six from above. It was explained how that number was arrived at.

Mr. Mason asked if that meant 42 percent were not in favor of a tax increase for a senior/community center. Mr. McNamee said 25.5 did not support any increase for a senior/community center. There was a bit more discussion on this slide and how to look at the numbers.

Mr. Mason asked about familiarity with economic development issues, which experienced a decrease, and asked if there were any questions about The Hartford insurance on the survey. There were no questions related to The Hartford in the survey.

Ms. Gaona noted the increase in residents rating the town’s quality of life as “excellent” from 59.7 percent in 2008 to 70 percent in 2015. She also noted satisfaction with town services, with 99.5 percent of residents satisfied with library services, the top spot. But even the lowest rated, the town website at 89.8 percent satisfied, she said, was a solid number.

Ms. Schofield said one of her take aways from the survey was that residents love open space but are not willing to pay more for it. Mr. Kelly said he had a different perspective. You start with residents wanting things and then through the education process can come into some alignment with the costs associated with what they want.

There was discussion of the finding that residents would tolerate some tax increase for a senior/community center. Ms. Heavner commented that depending on when/how something like that takes place there may be a way in how it’s structured/bonded where there could be a tax decrease.

Mr. McNamee noted that there was an opportunity to gain some younger support for the senior/community center.

Ms. Cook said she was called and participated in the survey, but said the interviewer had a conversational tone during this part of the survey, which she found disconcerting, as it was not a neutral position. Ms. Haase said she heard from someone else who had a similar experience. Mr. McNamee asked for details so he could look into the issue.

Ms. Schofield said she had concerns respondents misinterpreted the senior/community center visitation question, number 30, as the numbers did not add up. Mr. McNamee said the question was more geared toward future visitations based on programming.

Ms. Haase asked if the survey included any question about mixed-use development. It did not

Ms. Schofield noted answers to questions, 44, 45 and 46, which dealt with local property tax increases, sent a strong message from the taxpayer about taxes being the biggest problem facing the town. Mr. Kelly said it was the highest percentage response to any issue.

Mr. Mason asked a question about slide 20, what “health activities” meant. Is it exercise or blood pressure screenings? Mr. McNamee said it was an open-ended question, with 12.5 specifically saying a fitness room, for example, and more general answers were put in the “health activities” bucket.

Ms. Cook said, as a person who was surveyed, she wanted more specifics about some of the questions mentioning a question about apartments.

Peter Askham asked about programming costs for the senior/community center. Ms. Schofield had a question on operating costs as well. Mr. McNamee said both of those considerations were included in the price points used in the survey.

All in attendance thanked the presenters and for the information provided.

ADJOURN

Ms. Haase made a motion to adjourn at 6:23 p.m., which Sean Askham seconded, and all voted to adjourn.

Respectfully submitted,
Stephanie Riefe