

Issues and priorities #1

This is the 1st of a series of 6 columns.

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Ask the residents

I recently hired a Phoenix-based polling firm to do a series of surveys for my own civic, personal and business reasons. Later, I'll explain those reasons. It will take a series of six columns to cover this project and I'll do that over the next six days in this same space.

I picked a polling firm that used a 6,000 Lake Havasu City voter demographic because it produces highly reliable data in predicting outcomes of elections, referendums, and various measurements of issue and priorities. The same techniques are used in marketing research in general. But first, some of the key findings.

Sewer fees are a big deal in Havasu

By an overwhelming majority, 91% of my surveyed Havasu voters agreed that changes must be made to reduce current sewer fees. I found that to be an amazing level of response considering most opinion polls see splits in the range of 52-48%. A 60-40 split would be a land slide. But, as rare as it is, 91% is huge when polling voters on any issue.

Moreover, 73% would vote for a "sewer flat-rate" not tied to water usage. 70% preferred multiple methods of fees and taxes to reduce monthly sewer fees. 67% wanted everyone including those not hooked up to the system, to share the burden of paying for the sewer project. Clearly for any town, such high levels of agreement on any issue or priority are unusual.

Later this week, I'll present two more detailed columns on the sewer rate issues along with a summary of city council actions of last October 2012 and February 2013.

Better paying jobs as a key issue with voters

In another survey, 83% of Havasu voters wanted better paying jobs as a priority for the city. I'll get more specific on jobs and the Havasu economy in columns also to be published in this space over the next several days.

Tourism as big deal?

Hardly... Only 48% of respondents considered increasing tourism to be important for the city. Increasing winter visitors got a

lukewarm 43% of support. Only 21% considered increasing boating visitors to be important. And, growing spring break bottomed out at 9%.

All in all, these findings are quite unexpected in a town where the principal industry is tourism. I'll comment on these results and other data from my series of polls in the upcoming columns.

Fair warning...some of you won't like some of the findings. Some data and my analyses might be a bit controversial. But, having been a resident of Havasu for nearly a quarter century, I can stand the heat!

Column #2 will be in this same space tomorrow. I'll address why I bothered with all this work and expense.

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Issues and priorities #2

This is the 2nd of a series of 6 columns.

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Why bother?

Why should I bother with surveys of the issues and priorities of a key block of voters in Lake Havasu City? Well...it's kind of complicated.

Like...why did I bother to investigate a former city manager and his city finance director? You remember...the Havasu city official that paid his DUI fine in Kingman with a city credit card? To tackle that project I formed Manager Review, Inc with 120 members and built quite a large website to expose all the evidence.

Like...why did I bother to investigate the county and file a series of lawsuits? You remember...the open meeting law violations with the new county admin building in downtown Kingman? And, the study that advocated expanding and concentrating county government in downtown Kingman as a way to rejuvenate that area? Yup...and with our tax dollars!

Like...why did I bother to investigate that county college and file an ugly RICO lawsuit? (Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations laws.) That was the college with an 18-year track record of open meeting law violations. And, the group that took trips with spouses to Hawaii and other popular vacation spots...expenses paid with public monies. Yup...that bothered me.

Like...some of my more positive efforts to create HFHE and bring a university to our town. At least my wife and daughter thought those years of work (and a lot of DBU funds) were a better reflection of my personal commitment to public service.

So, ***Why bother?*** Yes...it's kind of complicated. But, it's what I do.

Understanding my town

I wanted the results of scientific polling because I wasn't sure that the information I was getting from news reports and minutes of city council activities were representative of the priorities of the voters.

Granted, a poll of 6,000 voters (actually a stratified sub-set of voters...voters that vote in every election), might not be representative of all Havasu citizens. Such as young people, visitors, short-term renters, property owners that vote elsewhere,

residents that do not vote, etc. Still, the group we polled has a lot of influence on our community

We can share

The survey results were such that I wanted to share some of the data and my impressions of that data with my friends and other residents of Havasu. So, over the next four days, I'll publish the results of my research and share some of my insights, one column each day.

Column #3 will be in this same space tomorrow. I'll summarize the sewer rate forums conducted by the city council and staff.

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Issues and priorities #3

This is the 3rd of a series of 6 columns.

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Long-term city priorities

A recent TNH article on 4-17-13 summarized a city council meeting on long term projects. The council's priorities included *pavement rehabilitation, wayfinding, and vehicle replacement*. Not mentioned in the article was the new skate park, which is obviously a priority of the council. There was no mention of reducing sewer rates.

Sewer rate forums

City council and staff conducted three forums on sewer rates last October 2012, which were only lightly attended. It had been reported that \$446.89 million remained in total principle and interest to satisfy the sewer debt. At about \$20 million per year for P&I, that's quite a bit of overhead for a small town.

"Several alternate methods (options presented by city staff) including converting junior lien debt to property tax, funding all or a portion of the debt with a dedicated sales tax, funding all costs of sewer operations and debt payments using a flat rate and refinancing debt were discussed." TNH 10-28-12.

In a second TNH column; *"The burden of paying back the city's massive sewer construction project should be shared by everyone in Lake Havasu City, including those who aren't hooked up to the system, most residents agreed at a forum Tuesday afternoon."* TNH 10-31-13

Immediately, the question was raised as to whether or not the small groups attending those forums were in fact representative of the city as a whole.

After consulting with my research team and pollsters, we decided to scientifically and statistically test with voters, some of those city staff suggested alternate methods of reducing sewer rates as well as the concept of including all residents in the burden of paying for the massive sewer construction project.

As I noted in column #1 two days ago, 91% of my surveyed Havasu voters agreed that changes must be made to reduce current sewer fees. 73% would vote for a *"sewer flat-rate"* not tied to water usage. 70% of the surveyed voters preferred multiple methods of fees and taxes to reduce monthly sewer fees. 67% wanted everyone including those not hooked up to the system, to share the burden of paying for the sewer project.

Tomorrow, I'll summarize some key points of the 2-19-13 presentation by city manager Charlie Cassens on sewer rates and debt.

Column #4 will be in this same space tomorrow.

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Issues and priorities #4

This is the 4th of a series of 6 columns.

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Sewer rates/debt

Following are excerpts (in *italics*) from the city council meeting of 2-19-13. You can find the complete set of minutes on the city website.

Mr. Cassens listed the following options that were reviewed, considered, and analyzed:

- 1) Do nothing, leave rates as they are*
- 2) Move Junior lien debt onto property taxes*
- 3) Fund all or a portion of the debt with a dedicated sales tax*
- 4) Fund all costs of sewer operations and debt payments with a flat rate*
- 5) Refinance debt pushing payments over longer period of time, reducing annual payments but adding length of time debt is carried.*

Mr. Cassens said the option that would have the most profound impact on lowering the sewer bills would be to implement a dedicated sales tax that would be dedicated to paying down the sewer debt. (The temporary 1-cent sales tax passed by the voters in 2010 expires on May 31, 2013.)

Mr. Cassens said essentially the City has settled on Options 1 and 5.

He said the City is recommending that the sewer rate structure remain the same, as it is working and is paying the bills for the most part.

He said in the future, to keep the fund healthy, the City will need to implement a sewer rate increase in the three percent range.

Ask the residents

Hmm... Do nothing? Keep the sewer rate structure the same? In the future, increase the sewer rate 3%?

Why not ask the residents what they think?

I did ask the residents and by an overwhelming majority, 91% of my surveyed Havasu voters agreed that changes must be made to reduce current sewer fees. Moreover, 73% would vote for a “*sewer flat-rate*” not tied to water usage. 70% preferred multiple methods of fees and taxes to reduce monthly sewer fees. 67% wanted everyone including those not hooked up to the system, to share the burden of paying for the sewer project.

Ask the residents

Ok...so griping about the government is as American as apple pie. But, that's not what my surveys and this series of columns are about. For me, it was about scientific polling to insure the information I was getting from news reports and minutes of city council meetings were representative of the issues of importance and priorities of the voters. It would be good for our town if other citizens were to conduct similar polls and share the results.

Tomorrow in column #5, I'll share the results of another survey with data on better-paying jobs as a priority, the economy, tourism, main street, ASU, parks, and more.

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Issues and priorities #5

This is the 5th of a series of 6 columns.

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Ask the residents

I recently commissioned several scientific polls of 6,000 Lake Havasu City voters on their views and their priorities for our town. I presented some of those findings in my first four articles. Following are examples of questions and responses in another of my polls on various economic issues:

How important are these issues for Lake Havasu City?

1.	Increase tourism in Lake Havasu City?	
	Very important	48%
	Somewhat important	34%
	Least important	17%
2.	Which is more important to you?	
	Increase winter visitors	43%
	Increase spring break visitors	9%
	Increase boating visitors	21%
	Do not increase visitors and boaters	26%
3.	Having better paying jobs in Havasu?	
	Very important	83%
	Somewhat important	15%
	Least important	2%
4.	Improving our city parks and beaches?	
	Very important	43%
	Somewhat important	44%
	Least important	13%
5.	Improving Main Street?	
	Very important	29%
	Somewhat important	32%
	Least important	39%
6.	Expanding the ASU campus?	
	Very important	38%
	Somewhat important	40%
	Least important	22%

Why survey this group?

Keep in mind that the respondents are a sub-set or stratified sample of the total population of voters. Most polling companies looking at voter populations focus on those voters only, that vote in every election. The reason for that strategy is the reliability and validity that group gives to any effort to predict election outcomes. It's also an excellent group for some kinds of market research.

Tomorrow in column #6, I'll share my comments and impressions from the results of one of my surveys with data on jobs as a priority, the economy, tourism, main street, ASU, parks, and more.

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Issues and priorities #6

This is the 6th of a series of 6 columns.

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Survey findings on economic issues

1. *Increase tourism in Havasu?* This effort was important to only 48% of the voters. I find that response somewhat strange in that 83% considered better paying jobs in Havasu as very important. Perhaps the disconnect might be in an impression that a lot of tourism and hospitality jobs don't pay very well.

2. *Which is more important to you?* Only 9% favored increasing spring break. Only 21% considered increasing boating visitors as important. These two areas are critical to a number of businesses and their employees in our town. Increasing winter visitors got only a lukewarm 43%. It appears that our town's main industry is not wildly popular with the electorate. Strange...

3. *Having better paying jobs in Havasu?* This drew a surprising 83% response as very important. Is this priority coloring attitudes on tourism, boating, and spring break? Could it be a reflection of a sizeable number of low-middle-and fixed income families in Havasu? People that want and need better paying jobs? This dynamic is one we need to better understand. For sure, this issue needs to be addressed by city government and the agencies it supports.

4. *Improve our city parks and beaches?* 43% checked very important. 44% checked somewhat important. Strange...I would have predicted 70-80% on very important. Which is why it's sometimes good to ask the people who count...those that vote in every election.

5. *Improving Main Street?* For me, this response was a total disappointment. Only 29% checked very important. 39% checked least important. How to turn around those attitudes will be a challenge and one that I consider essential for city and business leaders.

6. *Expand the ASU campus?* 38% check very important. 40% checked somewhat important. Here again, I see a disconnect to the amazingly high proportion of respondents selecting better paying job for Havasu as very important. Colleges and universities are proven job creators of high caliber. Moreover, studies suggest a potential economic impact of \$150 million per year with a 6,000-student university campus. We have work to do...

This concludes my series of six columns on issues and priorities for Lake Havasu City. The entire series can be found on

my personal website, www.BillUllery.com. And yes, I'll be working on more columns. I do welcome invitations to speak to groups. Simply call me at 928-716-3014.

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