

CRITIQUE OF HOUSING ATTITUDES SURVEY
(for Allied Neighborhoods Assn.)
(News Press 6/27/05)

This newspaper recently reported on a survey commissioned by the Santa Barbara Regional Economic Community Project. The survey results were interpreted as supporting the proposition that "most residents are pro-growth when it comes to affordable housing".

There was some interesting data unearthed by this survey, but not such as to support the proposition that Santa Barbarans have turned on their heels away from long held attitudes about restraints on growth, for the sake of the high-density housing initiatives now on the table.

As its main finding the survey purports to reveal that a majority is willing to accommodate an increased level of development if it leads to provision of "affordable" housing. One would expect support for such a noble sounding goal, especially in an area where escalation in housing prices is one of the hot-button concerns.

But to jump from that to the conclusion of public support for *those particular housing initiatives now being implemented* is quite a leap!

Most of us know that the results of any survey are susceptible to manipulation through the selection (or omission) of questions, and the way they are posed.

Ask yourself: What assumptions underlie seemingly objective questions about affordable housing efforts - assumptions that a person contacted in a 50-question telephone survey would have little time or opportunity to consider, much less critically evaluate?

One assumption is that the housing initiatives under current consideration *can actually produce* the desired result. The respondent is tacitly asked to assume the existence of such a practical possibility: that the housing initiatives might yield results substantial enough to benefit him/her, directly or at least indirectly.

If the possibilities upon which a survey seeks opinion might not, in fact, exist, then the survey is effectively meaningless.

The respondent is not provided with any significant details, in which the Devil often dwells.

For example, would as many have answered the way they did had they been apprised of such details as the following:

- ❑ That the affordable housing is to be provided as part of developments containing far, far higher numbers of "market rate" units; this is the way the current incentive-based ("exclusionary"/bonus density) programs work.
- ❑ That all the new residents moving into the housing will add to the population and generate local economic activity leading to the need for more "workforce", thus only exacerbating the problem.
- ❑ That nobody has quantified the problem - attempted to come up with an approximate "target" number of how many "workforce" people were in need of housing – or estimated whether the initiatives might produce sufficient fruit to make a substantial dent in the problem? (You'd expect that someone would, given that most of those surveyed indicated a desire to not limit the target simply to firefighters, police, teachers, etc., but to include "all types of occupations, equally".)
- ❑ That the type of small-unit, dense, in-city developments envisioned in the initiatives might not appeal to tastes of the target "workforce", who might move to the remote suburbs anyway, preferring the "American Dream" of the freestanding house and yard, and accepting the commute in the bargain? That is, after all, still the popular choice.
- ❑ That long-term eligibility and price controls are extremely difficult to enforce adequately?

Did the survey include a question as to whether the respondent would support the commitment without the additional governmental resources necessary for adequate enforcement? Perhaps it should have, since in response to another of its questions, 53 percent of the survey participants affirmed their awareness of fraud in existing government housing programs.

The survey asked about willingness to support more dense development for the sake of moderately priced units, but omitted the key qualifiers necessary for a meaningful answer: How much more density, and where? It didn't ask if the respondents would favor dense housing projects if such housing were in - and contrasted sharply with the development patterns of - their own neighborhoods.

Those polled - nearly two thirds - favored a vote of the people before any new development could be built *outside* the urban boundaries. Curiously, they were not asked about the possibility of extending the same courtesy of a vote to those living *within* urban areas – those most directly impacted by the anticipated new high-density developments.

An indication of a possible bias in the survey was the trotting out an often-asked question to renters and young college grads: "Would you leave the area if you couldn't

buy a home?" Any surprise that 79 % would have affirmed the American Dream, and afforded the doomsayers more fodder for the "middle class flight" threat by means of so loaded a question?

We who offer this response do so not out of motivation for obstructing community-benefiting measures; quite the contrary. An ECP Board member undoubtedly had us (neighborhoods) in mind in condemning "a bunch of individual fiefdoms", but in fact we are everybody's neighbors.

And we are concerned with the very real effects the growth generated by these initiatives could have on the quality of life in this wonderful community. We are far from being the "small vocal minority" referred to by one of the survey's vocal supporters. We are members of neighborhood organizations from all areas of the south County, and we raise our voices to try to keep this place – its rare combination of semi-rural spaces and intimate cities - from turning into another impersonal urban expanse, populated by strangers rather than neighbors.