

Press Release
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Special Survey Of The Central Valley: Bad Air Days! Air Quality, Traffic, Other Growing Pains Hit Fast-Changing Central Valley

Yet... Residents Still Like Where They Live; Stark Intra-Region Differences Emerge; Technology Twist: Latino-White Digital Divide Grows

SAN FRANCISCO, California, June 27, 2006 — Air pollution, and its perceived health threats, is one of many growing pains afflicting California's Central Valley, according to a survey released today by the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC), in collaboration with the Great Valley Center. Yet, despite the growth – and increasingly negative views of air quality, traffic, and other conditions – residents in the Valley continue to like their communities and are relatively upbeat about the region's future.

“The Central Valley is going through an amazing transformation,” says PPIC survey director Mark Baldassare. “Residents are definitely feeling the stresses of growth but, at the same time, seem to believe they are part of something big, forward-moving, and promising.”

On the stress side is angst about air pollution and its consequences. Since 1999, the number of residents who say air pollution is a big problem in their area has jumped 17 points (28% to 45%). In a ranking of the most important issues facing the region, pollution and air pollution (14%) top crime (12%), population growth (10%), the economy (9%), immigration (7%), and flooding (7%). But perhaps the most troubling manifestation is how much the proportion of residents who cite asthma or respiratory problems for themselves or a family member has grown in the past three years – from 37 to 49 percent. Moreover, the South San Joaquin Valley has been much harder hit than other areas: A majority of its residents (58%) cite asthma or respiratory problems, and nearly half (48%) believe air pollution poses a very serious health threat to themselves and their families.

Residents are also increasingly grim about other growth-related strains: More than twice as many say traffic congestion is a big problem in their area today than did in 1999 (48% to 23%). Moreover, the percentage who rate their local streets and roads as excellent or good has plunged 18 points to 40 percent. Far more people see the loss of farm and agricultural lands as a big problem today than did in 1999 (42% to 23%). And since 2001, the belief that finding affordable housing is a big problem has nearly doubled, from 26 to 51 percent. Residents' perspective on the big picture has also been affected: The share that believes the region is going in the right direction has fallen from 63 percent in 1999 to 50 percent today.

Yet, despite the upheavals of change and accompanying anxieties, there's still no place like home. Nearly three-fourths (73%) of Central Valley residents rate their community as an excellent or good place to live – the exact proportion as in 1999. When asked if their quality of life has gotten better or worse over the past five years, more say it's gotten better than worse (28% to 22%), and nearly half (48%) say it has stayed the same. "In times of such pervasive change you'd expect to see larger numbers reacting more negatively," says Baldassare. "Instead, residents seem to be acknowledging both the good and the bad – and are cautiously optimistic." One reason for optimism may be how much the region's economic confidence has been restored: Almost half (48%) of residents rate the economy as excellent or good – a major improvement over 2003 and 2004 ratings (35% and 38%, respectively).

One Central Valley – Four Different Worlds?

An important caution: Valley-wide numbers can be deceiving. Attitudes vary significantly across different parts of the Central Valley – enough to make responding to growth a tough proposition for policymakers. "What's happening is not simply about collective change, but about the emergence of increasingly distinct locales with very different problems and priorities," says Baldassare.

Consider some key, and conflicting, intra-Valley views:

South San Joaquin residents (48%) are much more likely than North Valley (16%), Sacramento Metro (25%), or North San Joaquin (33%) residents to say air pollution is a very serious health threat to themselves and their families.

In Sacramento Metro, 65 percent of residents say traffic congestion is a big problem, while only one-quarter (25%) of North Valley residents agree.

When it comes to transportation priorities, 42 percent of North Valley residents say local streets and roads should be the top priority, compared to just 22 percent of those in Sacramento Metro. Conversely, Sacramento Metro residents are more likely (38%) than those in the North Valley (22%) or South San Joaquin (23%) to favor public transit.

The lack of well-paying jobs is seen as a big problem by only 28 percent of Sacramento Metro residents – but it causes a good deal of concern in the North Valley (55%), North San Joaquin Valley (52%), and South San Joaquin Valley (48%).

Lack of affordable housing is a big problem for majorities of residents in the North San Joaquin (59%), Sacramento Metro (55%), and North Valley (51%) but less so for residents of the South San Joaquin Valley (43%).

Almost twice as many North San Joaquin residents as North Valley residents consider population growth and development to be a big problem (43% to 22%).

Nevertheless, Residents Agree on Key Policy Issues, Local Government

Surprisingly, despite the diversity of attitudes, Central Valley residents across sub-regions line up on many key policy issues and hold similar views of local government. For example, most residents give their city government excellent/good (39%) or fair ratings (41%), while very few rate them as poor (14%). Strong majorities of residents also rate their parks (69%), police protection (64%), and public schools (56%) as excellent or good. While the numbers vary somewhat among sub-regions, majorities in all parts of the Valley have positive views of these services.

There is also agreement about the sources of the Central Valley's problems. Most residents believe misguided government spending (64%), too much growth in the wrong places (54%), and lack of regional planning (50%) are key sources of trouble. When asked specifically about planning for growth, two-thirds (66%) agree that new housing should be built in developed areas to preserve open space, and a strong majority (57%) say it should be built near existing jobs to reduce traffic and congestion.

Infrastructure Bond A Hit; Standing Ovation for Region's Preschools

Disagreement all but evaporates on the subject of the \$37 billion package of bond measures slated for this November's ballot: Three-fourths (75%) of adults and 69 percent of likely voters say they would vote yes on the package if the election were held today, including large majorities of Democrats (78%), independents (76%), and Republicans (66%). And the failure earlier this month of Proposition 82, which would have created a public preschool program, may not be of much concern to Central Valley residents: 61 percent rate the quality of preschools in their area as excellent or good, 57 percent say the availability of preschool is excellent or good, and nearly half (48%) say preschool affordability is excellent or good. Even higher numbers of Latinos give preschool positive ratings (quality 70%, availability 65%, affordability 63%). "This is quite remarkable and raises some interesting questions because Latinos are one of the groups policymakers and educators have traditionally believed are underserved by preschool programs," says Baldassare.

Digital Divide Widens Between Latinos, Whites

However, when it comes to computer and Internet use, Latinos severely lag behind whites in the Central Valley – and the digital divide appears to be growing. Today, there is a 37-point difference between the proportion of Latinos (55%) and whites (18%) who say they never use a computer; in 2001, there was a 27-point gap (53% to 26%). Currently, two-thirds (66%) of whites say they often use a computer at home, work, or school, compared to less than one-quarter (24%) of Latinos. The disparity in Internet and worldwide web use is even wider: The percentage of Latinos (64%) who never access the Internet or use email is nearly triple that of whites (23%). This 41-point difference is much larger than the 31-point difference that existed in 2001.

“When it comes to both computers and the Internet, usage among whites has grown over the past five years, while among Latinos it’s dropped or stayed the same,” says Baldassare. “This is a particularly important disparity for state leaders to consider because computer literacy will be a major requirement of California’s future job market.” Given their low usage rates, it’s not surprising that two-thirds (66%) of Central Valley Latinos say they do not have any type of personal computer in their homes, compared to less than a quarter (23%) of whites.

More Key Findings

Latinos More Upbeat — Page 6

Latinos are considerably more likely (48%) to say the Central Valley will be a better place to live in the future than residents generally (38%).

Tax Impasse — Page 12

Although a majority (61%) of likely voters say they would vote to raise the local sales tax for transportation projects, the number still doesn’t meet the state’s two-thirds requirement.

Shielding the Environment — Page 15

Large majorities of residents favor protecting wetlands even if it means less commercial and recreational development (73%), restricting the development of housing on flood-prone land even if it means less available housing (67%), restricting urban development on farmland even if it means less available housing (65%), and creating more marine reserves off the California coast (57%).

Power of Television — Page 18

Forty-five percent of residents get their news and information on the Central Valley from television – followed by newspapers (31%) and trailed distantly by radio (8%) and the Internet (6%).

About the Survey

The Central Valley Survey is a special edition of the PPIC Statewide Survey and an ongoing collaborative effort of PPIC and the Great Valley Center. It is the sixth survey in a series intended to raise public awareness, inform decision makers, and stimulate public discussions about issues related to the Central Valley. Findings of this survey are based on a telephone survey of 2,002 adult residents in the 19-county Central Valley region interviewed between May 3 and May 11, 2006. Interviews were conducted in English and Spanish. The sampling error for the total sample is +/- 2%. The sampling error for subgroups is larger. For more information on methodology, see page 19.

Mark Baldassare is research director at PPIC, where he holds the Arjay and Frances Fearing Miller Chair in Public Policy. He is founder of the PPIC Statewide Survey, which he has directed since 1998.

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