



## Safety tops Lincolniters' priorities

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It's like ranking your children.

That's how the head of the Public Policy Center described Lincolniters trying to rank the importance of city services.

All city services — police and fire protection, libraries, parks and everything else — are important to Lincoln residents. And so deciding which ones to cut, in order to close a nearly \$6 million budget shortfall, isn't easy.

That's the Cliffs Notes version of a final report released by the mayor Thursday on his two-month effort to engage the public to help shape the municipal budget.

About 2,000 people were engaged, either via phone survey, online survey, focus group or town hall meeting.

In short, the "Priority Lincoln" process showed that people value city services, especially police and fire protection, and don't particularly want to give up or gouge any of them.

But — no surprise here — they're pretty resistant to increasing property taxes to balance the budget. That is, unless they spend time with city officials learning Budgeting 101, and learn that city services don't account for much of their property tax bill (14percent).

Beutler is about halfway done with crafting his 2008-2009 budget proposal — and a key question is whether he will propose a property tax increase. The results of "Priority Lincoln" indicate he might be able to sell an increase if he can educate the masses the way he did during town hall meetings.

Alan Tomkins, director of the University of Nebraska Public Policy Center which coordinated the studies, said he wasn't surprised that people were initially resistant to a property tax increase.

But he was surprised that many of those who learned more about the city's budget predicament were willing to pay more taxes to preserve services. However, that was their

last resort: people expect their government to look for efficiencies and innovations first.

Mayor Chris Beutler said before making cuts or increasing spending, the data has driven him to explore more partnerships with nonprofits and re-examine the status quo.

For example, police currently respond to all non-injury crashes on public property. Perhaps police officers' time could be better spent elsewhere.

Engaging the public is just part of Beutler's new approach to budgeting — called outcome-based budgeting. As part of that, city services will be measured against goals.

“You're going to see a remarkably different budget this year,” Beutler said.

However, finding efficiencies won't be enough to close a \$6 million budget gap. It's clear Beutler is going to show the community what services it stands to lose without more revenue.

“We have tough choices ahead in this next budget,” Beutler said.

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