Mayor's Office Again Seeks Input on City Priorities

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By NANCY HICKS / Lincoln Journal Star

Lincoln Mayor Chris Beutler wants your advice in setting priorities for city services.

Should road building be a higher priority?

Are neighborhoods getting the kind of support they need?

You can weigh in with a simple 10-minute online survey, or take an hour or two to learn and give feedback on a more sophisticated strategic plan.

For the sixth year in a row, Beutler is seeking citizen input through an online survey on the relative importance of eight service areas.

In past years the survey has focused on the budget, and in 2010-11, the majority of the 2,700 participants said they didn’t want pools and libraries closed and were willing to tolerate a modest property tax increase to keep that from happening.

Usually, about 1,000 people take the survey.

One year, the administration learned that people who did so were unwilling to pay a much higher price for snow removal on side streets after a 2-inch snow and would rather stick with the policy of clearing the streets only after at least 4 inches, Beutler said.

This year, the off-year of a two-year budget cycle, there is no specific controversy, so Beutler is using the public survey for a more sophisticated look at city strategic planning.

This year's Taking Charge survey mirrors what city officials have to go through, but allows people to decide how much time they want to spend on it, said Alan J. Tomkins, director of the University of Nebraska Public Policy Center, which has designed the surveys.

“This is more of that conceptual input used in business and governmental strategic planning,” he said.

It allows people to give feedback on the city’s success in achieving its goals, the mayor said.

“Are we doing enough to keep the crime rate low? Are youth programs doing what they should to give kids activities?”
The survey also asks people to weigh in on topics including energy programs and city performance overall.

The administration will follow up the online survey with a community conversation at which people will be invited to talk about the issues. Those who want to participate in that can sign up online or call the mayor’s office.

The city will pay about $40,000 for the Public Policy Center’s work on the survey and later community discussions, Beutler said.

"That's three-tenths of 1 percent of our budget," he said.