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Poll Finds Schools, Safety Top Area's List

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Residents, Especially in N.Va., Call Transportation Major Long-Term Concern

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Washington area residents say solving their transportation needs is the region's most pressing long-term challenge, but they appear most willing to spend additional tax dollars and resources on improving schools and making neighborhoods safer, a new survey has found.

A telephone poll conducted in February on behalf of the Greater Washington 2050 Coalition, made up of government, business and planning officials led by the Metropolitan Washington Council on Governments, also reflects concerns that could be intensified by the economic malaise: Creating good jobs, increasing access to health care and helping people in need followed education and public safety as top priorities.

Although 54 percent of the 1,313 adults selected at random cited transportation as one of their top two concerns, improving commuting choices ranked ninth out of 16 priorities.

"It would have been easy for us to focus on transportation and land use, because that's what we do and what we care a lot about," said Dave Robertson, executive director of the Council on Governments. "But this is a more sophisticated and knowledgeable community looking carefully at crime and schools and social issues."

The poll, whose findings will be presented at a news conference today, was conducted Feb. 10-20 by the Annapolis-based OpinionWorks and has a margin of error of plus or minus 2.7 percent. The Council on Governments paid $75,000 for the poll.

The coalition, established last year, launched the survey to establish regional priorities to help guide planning and cooperation over the next several decades, Robertson said. Although the council often examines data and does statistical analyses, it has rarely ventured into opinion polls and focus groups, two of which were composed as part of the survey.

Area residents expressed a largely positive view of Washington, with 31 percent calling the region an "excellent" place to live and another 47 percent calling it a "good" place, with just 5 percent citing it as "poor."

In a report card assigning letter grades, residents gave the region the highest marks when it was described as "a community that respects people of all backgrounds" and having "interesting arts and cultural opportunities." The region scored most poorly when it came to offering housing that "people of all incomes can afford."

In the long term, homeland security, immigration and environmental issues ranked low among priorities, the survey said.

The coalition did not release a breakdown of the results based on race, age or gender, and only some geographic results were provided in a copy of the report obtained by The Washington Post. Although transportation was ranked as the chief long-term concern, that feeling was far more prevalent among Northern Virginia respondents, 68 percent of whom cited it. That number swelled to 84 percent in Loudoun County.

But just 48 percent of Maryland residents cited transportation as a top concern and just 26 percent in the District, where residents presumably do far less commuting.

When it comes to how residents view their tax burdens, fewer than 42 percent of residents in Montgomery and Prince William counties and the District call the burden "fair." The percentage who thought taxes are fair in Fairfax and Arlington counties, by comparison, was 59 percent. The survey covered the District and the counties of Arlington, Alexandria, Fairfax, Montgomery, Prince George's, Frederick, Loudoun and Prince William.

The coalition intends to take its report on the road, Robertson said, visiting local governments and civic groups in the region to present the findings over the next several months.

"Sometimes it's difficult to pull ourselves from the day-to-day to look long-term. That's our aspiration," he said. "If we worked to lay out a broad vision, is there going to be support for that?"

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