

**Ottawa County Citizen Survey**  
**March, 2006**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY and**  
**DEMOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS**

**March 22, 2006**

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## METHODOLOGY

**EPIC ■ MRA** administered interviews with 400 registered voters residing in the Ottawa County, Michigan, February 9 - 14, 2006. Respondents for the interviews were selected utilizing an interval method of randomly selecting records of published residential telephone numbers. The sample was stratified so that every area of the county is represented in the sample according to its contribution to general election turnout. Interviews were terminated if the respondent indicated that he or she had not voted in at least one of the two most recent November general elections.

In interpreting survey results, all surveys are subject to error; that is, the results of the survey may differ from those that would have been obtained if the entire populations were interviewed. This “margin of error” quantifies the degree to which random sampling will differ from a survey of the entire population, and takes into account, among other things, the disposition of individuals who do not complete the interview. That is, the opinions of those who are not randomly selected or who affirmatively decline to be interviewed, are no more or less likely to be different – within the margin of error – than the opinions of those who complete an interview and are included in the sample. The size of the sampling error depends on the total number of respondents in the particular question.

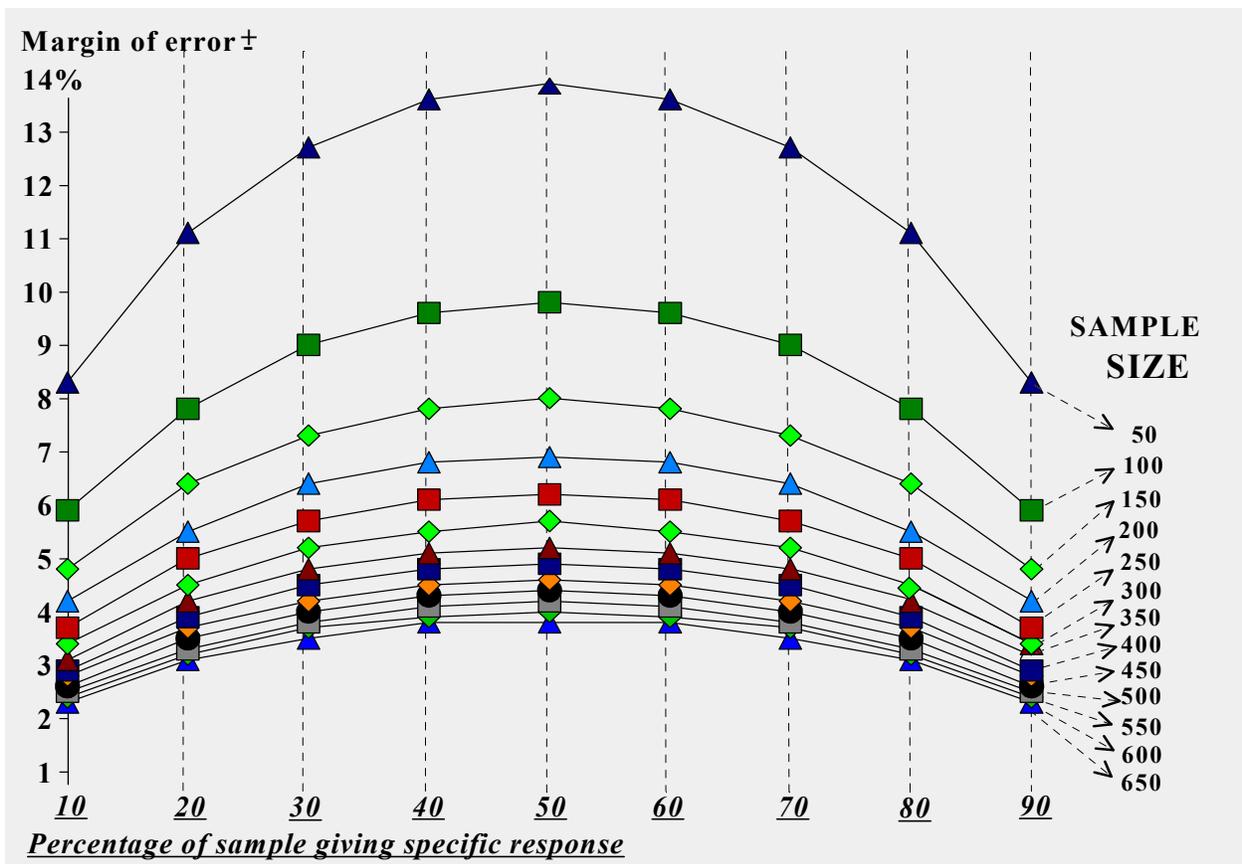
For example, 51 percent of all 400 respondents indicated “yes” when asked if they would vote “today” for a half mill increase to replace lost state revenue, (Question #19). As indicated in the chart below, this percentage would have a sampling error of plus or minus 4.9 percent. This means that with repeated sampling, it is very likely (95 times out of every 100), the percentage for the entire population would fall between 46.1 percent and 55.9 percent, hence 51 percent  $\pm 4.9$  percent.

The table below represents the estimated sampling error for different percentage distributions of responses based on sample size.

EPIC ▪ MRA SAMPLING ERROR BY PERCENTAGE (AT 95 IN 100 CONFIDENCE LEVEL)

Percentage of sample giving specific response

SAMPLE SIZE	<u>10</u>	<u>20</u>	<u>30</u>	<u>40</u>	<u>50</u>	<u>60</u>	<u>70</u>	<u>80</u>	<u>90</u>
	% margin of error ±								
650	2.3	3.1	3.5	3.8	3.8	3.8	3.5	3.1	2.3
600	2.4	3.2	3.7	3.9	4.0	3.9	3.7	3.2	2.4
550	2.5	3.3	3.8	4.1	4.2	4.1	3.8	3.3	2.5
500	2.6	3.5	4.0	4.3	4.4	4.3	4.0	3.5	2.6
450	2.8	3.7	4.2	4.5	4.6	4.5	4.2	3.7	2.8
400	2.9	3.9	4.5	4.8	4.9	4.8	4.5	3.9	2.9
350	3.1	4.2	4.8	5.1	5.2	5.1	4.8	4.2	3.1
300	3.4	4.5	5.2	5.5	5.7	5.5	5.2	4.5	3.4
250	3.7	5.0	5.7	6.1	6.2	6.1	5.7	5.0	3.7
200	4.2	5.5	6.4	6.8	6.9	6.8	6.4	5.5	4.2
150	4.8	6.4	7.3	7.8	8.0	7.8	7.3	6.4	4.8
100	5.9	7.8	9.0	9.6	9.8	9.6	9.0	7.8	5.9
50	8.3	11.1	12.7	13.6	13.9	13.6	12.7	11.1	8.3



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

EPIC ▪ MRA was commissioned by the Ottawa County Board of Commissioners to measure public opinion about county government operations in a style akin to a “customer satisfaction” survey. In addition, there was interest in measuring residents’ sentiment toward a new millage for the purpose of replacing state revenue sharing funds that of late, have become increasingly scarce. In addition, there was interest in measuring opinion toward the renewal of an existing millage assessment dedicated for parks.

### -- Questionnaire Frame

An obvious starting point for gauging “customer satisfaction” is to inquire about attitudes toward county services in general and to determine if they perceive, in a broad sense, whether or not things are going well in the county. In addition, measurements of what respondents believe is the biggest problem facing their county government and questions going to perceptions about specific county agencies, departments, and programs are instructive. In order to accurately assess public opinion regarding possible tax options, it is necessary to probe attitudes regarding relative tax burden, and to investigate top-of-mind responses to general likes, dislikes, and preferences.

### -- Overarching Conclusion

On the whole, Ottawa County residents are well-pleased with the level of service they receive from their county government. For instance, nearly three-out-of-every-four respondents believe that Ottawa County is headed in the “*Right direction*”, as opposed to being on the “*Wrong track*”. County government receives even higher marks from respondents who are asked to rate the job that’s being performed in the delivery of services. In open-ended questions asking respondents to cite the biggest problem needing attention or to name a deficiency with county services, “*Undecided*”, is the largest single category. Similarly, when respondents were read a list of fifteen different activities and services in which county government involves itself, only two of the categories – providing economic development and checking the pace of land development – recorded majorities calling for “*More*” to be done.

There is not an inordinate anti-tax sentiment among county residents, with better than two-thirds offering that they believe the level of local taxation is, “*About right*” in return for what they receive in services. Likewise, given a hypothetical choice between the competing interests of maintaining the current level of services even if it means raising taxes or, keeping taxes low even if it requires reducing services, a very narrow plurality opts for the latter approach.

In an open-ended question asking what they “*Like*” the most about living in Ottawa County, better than half offered one of four distinct responses going to the amount of “*Green space*”, “*Quality of life*” and “*Proximity to Lake Michigan*”. The majority of the remaining categories in this response set could arguably be placed in one of the three named responses, or one very close to it in meaning. And to reiterate an earlier point, one of the two county delivery categories in which a majority of respondents believed the county government could be doing “*More*”, was in the area of “*Protecting . . . farmland and open space . . . from development*”. Thus, it is clear that Ottawa County residents are keenly aware of, and appreciative for, their unique physical locale and its aesthetic value.

Consistent with their awareness of their special surroundings and their lack of a “knee-jerk” opposition to taxes, there is great popular support for a renewal of a one-third mill assessment dedicated to county parks. This is not to say, however, that the voters are pushovers on any assessment question. While there is a small majority support on a new – and hypothetical – half-mill assessment to replace lost state revenue sharing funds, the Board of Commissioners would surely act at its own peril should it move to levy this assessment unilaterally. When asked if the Board should unilaterally act to levy this assessment, as it is legally empowered to do, such action would be in spite of the wishes of two-thirds of the electorate who would oppose such action in lieu of a popular vote.

The end of maintaining the current level of service delivery is certainly a possible undertaking, in large part because the environment with which the Board of Commissioners is operating is not unduly hostile to taxation. The caveat here, of course, is that the purpose(s) for which the request is made is clearly articulated, and in line with the priorities of its citizens. Backing this assertion is the fact that the indicators that might spell trouble for renewal of an existing assessment are not present, and requests for additional financial support, while viewed at with skepticism, can be advanced. Obviously, such a general statement could easily be applied to many locales, but the data outcomes from specific questions unmistakably point to an electorate that is ready to listen to a segment of government that has been traditionally obscure, but is increasingly more front and center in the lives of its constituents.

### QUESTION-BY-QUESTION RESULTS

#### -- Right Direction or Wrong Track?

In a question that is commonly used in national and statewide polls, this survey measured county residents’ sentiment regarding their home county, by asking: “*Overall, do you think that Ottawa County is headed in the right direction, or, do you think that things are pretty seriously off on the wrong track?*” respondents – by an overwhelming 71 percent – indicated that they believed the county was headed in the “Right direction”. With 13 percent saying they were undecided on the question, only a very small 16 percent thought that the county was on the “Wrong track”.

Cross tabulation analysis reveals a general trend of younger residents being more likely than the norm to report “*Right direction*”, than older residents. Subgroups saying “*Wrong track*”, in proportions greater than the norm included: Those who said their taxes are “*Too high*”, Women over 40 years of age, and those in households with an income of \$25,000 or less.

Voters were even more sanguine about the direction of their local government. Over three-quarters of respondents (76%) said they believed their home city or township was headed in the “Right direction”, as opposed to the 18 percent who believed it was on the “Wrong track”.

Subgroups saying “*Wrong track*” in disproportionate numbers were: Those believing their taxes are “*Too high*”, those who would vote “No” on the park millage renewal, and respondents who describe their residence as “urban”.

#### -- Biggest “Top of Mind” Problem

Respondents were next asked to identify the single biggest problem facing the residents of their community that their local or county government must address. “Undecided”, at 20 percent

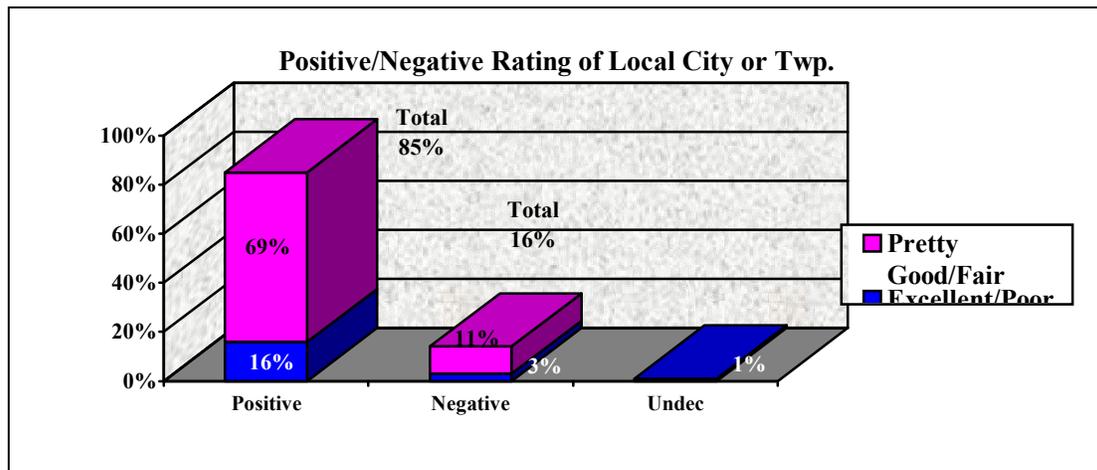
topped the list of identified “problems.” Among the specific problems cited, “Jobs” and “Schools” shared the top spot at 13 percent, followed closely by “Growth/Sprawl” at 12 percent. Significantly, the next closest specifically named problem – “Roads” – registered at only six percent, with no other single issue rising above five percent.

**-- Biggest “Prompted” Problem**

In a test similar to the top-of-mind “biggest problem” question, respondents were read a list of ten “. . . problems and issues residents of Ottawa County say they are concerned about.” They were then asked to identify the single issue that personally concerned them the most. In results similar to the “top-of-mind” responses, “Providing economic development and jobs” was by far the single most identified issue of concern, with 32 percent of respondents selecting this issue. Trailing in the remaining spots by at least twenty points were, “Controlling traffic congestion” (12%), “Controlling unplanned development and sprawl” (11%), and “Improving the quality of area schools” and “Keeping local taxes and fees low” (10% each). The remaining five recited issues were in single digits, with three percent undecided.

**-- Rate your Local (City/Township/Village) Government**

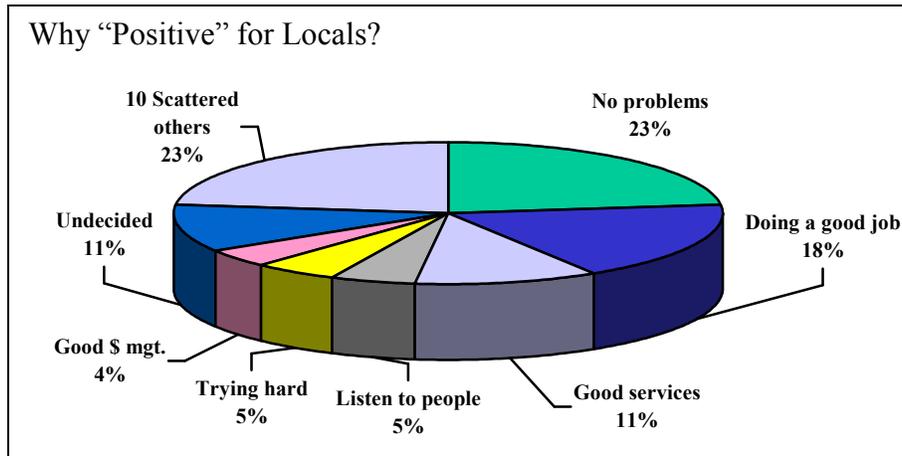
In keeping with the “Right direction” and “Wrong track” results, respondents gave an overall “Positive” rating to the job being done by their local government by an overwhelming 85 percent rate. That is, respondents were asked to give their local government a “Positive” rating of “excellent or pretty good”, or a “Negative” rating of, “only fair or poor”. The graph below demonstrates the lopsided positive rating, but it also illustrates that the intensity of this sentiment is held back, as shown by the portion of the “Positive” rating that is attributable to an “excellent” rating.



Subgroups issuing a “Negative” rating in proportions higher than the norm included: Those who believe their taxes are “Too high” and those voting “No” on the parks renewal.

**-- Reasons for the rating**

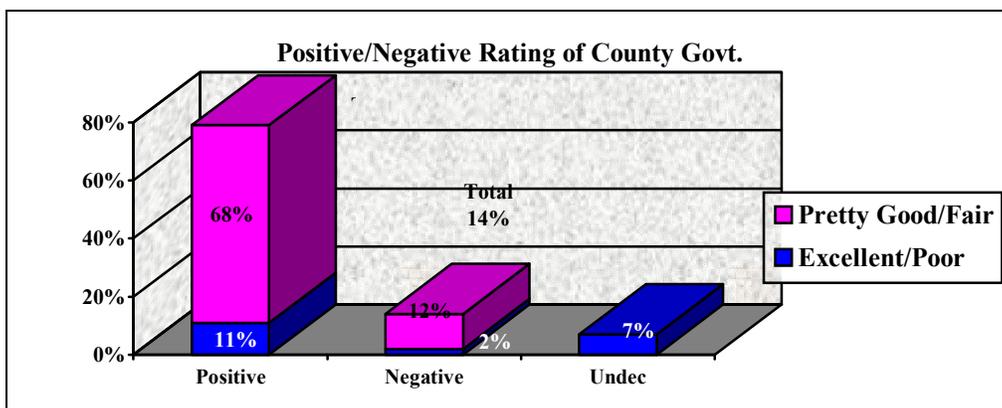
As a follow up to the Positive/Negative rating question, respondents were asked to give their reason for issuing the rating that they did. The following pie chart illustrates the portion of the positive rating responses attributable to specific reasons:



With only 14 percent issuing a negative rating, a breakout of the fifty-six responses into individual categories is not particularly illuminating.

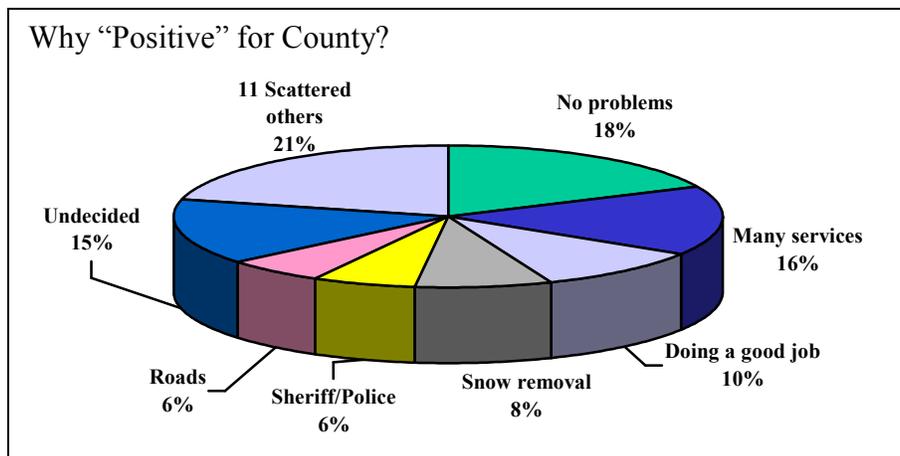
**-- Rate your County Government**

Mimicking the ratings issued for their local jurisdictions, respondents also issued "Positive" ratings for their county government by an overwhelming margin of 79 percent to only 14 percent "Negative". However, as with their rating of their local government, respondents were reluctant to issue the highest, "excellent" rating. The graph below illustrates the point:



### -- Reasons for the County Rating

The following pie chart illustrates the portion of the positive rating responses attributable to the specific reasons asked for in the follow-up question:



### -- Rate the County's Handling of Finances

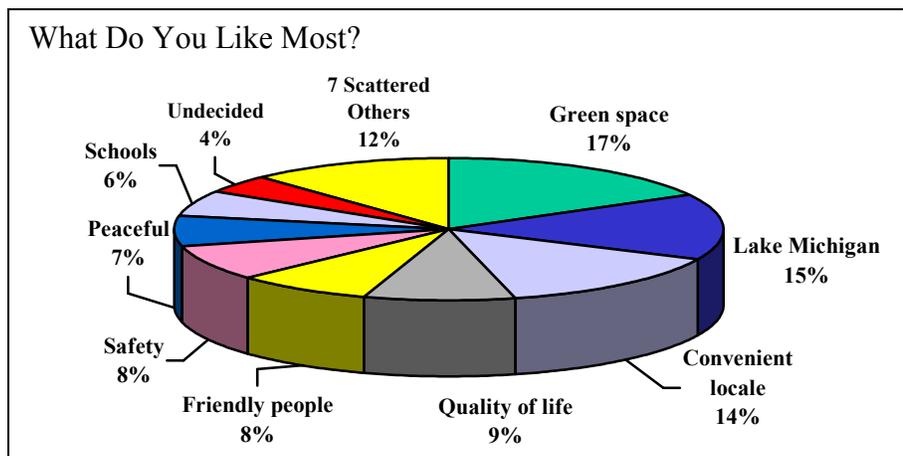
In a question designed to zero-in on a perennial, albeit amorphous, complaint often lodged against every level of government, respondents were asked to give the Positive/Negative rating to the County in its management of finances. While the 60 percent "positive" rating lags behind the stratospheric general ratings given to the county and local governments earlier in the interview, it is, still, a very strong majority of residents who find favor with the county in its handling of this always contentious aspect of governance. Moreover, it is significant to note that the somewhat lower "positive" rating does not translate into a concomitantly higher "negative" rating, since in this test, it remains at a very low 15 percent – just a point higher than the general "negative" ratings. The difference is made up in the 25 percent who are "undecided" on the question.

Subgroups issuing a "Positive" rating in numbers larger than the norm, included: Under 10-year residents, College educated men, Those in the 56-64 age category, <\$25,000 and >\$100,000 household income.

Disproportionate "Negative" ratings came from: Those believing their taxes are "Too high", and "No" voters on the park millage renewal.

**-- What is liked the most about living in Ottawa County**

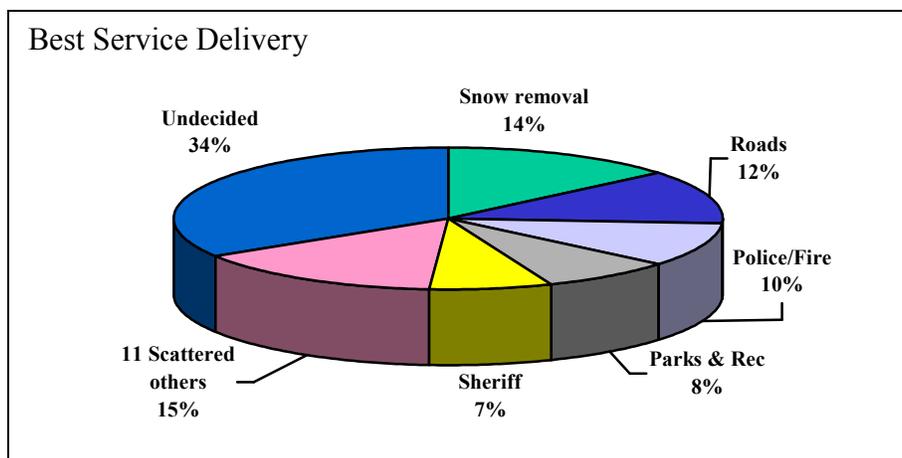
In an open-ended question, respondents were asked what they liked the most about living in Ottawa County. Unlike most other open-ended questions, “Undecided” did not even come close to double digits, with only four percent of respondents not being able to come up with something specific in answer to this question. The pie chart below, illustrates the major categories of responses.



The list-leading “Green Space” response (17%) to this open-ended question serves to validate the relatively high ranking that “Growth/Sprawl” and “Controlling unplanned growth” occupy in the prompted and unprompted “*Biggest problem*” questions posed earlier in the interview.

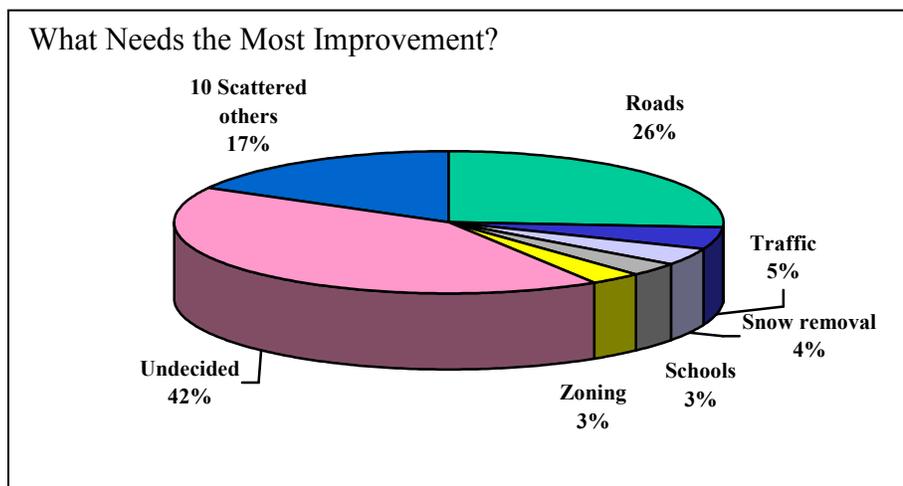
**-- Ottawa County does the best job at providing . . . ?**

Respondents were asked to name which specific county service they believed the county does the best job in delivering. Over one-third (34%) were unable to cite a specific service and said they were “undecided”. “Police/fire” and “Sheriff” combined for seventeen percent of the responses, with “Snow removal” and “Roads” at 14 percent and 12 percent respectively. “Parks & recreation” claimed the fourth spot with eight percent. The remaining named services scattered in single digits across eleven specific service categories.



### -- What County Service Needs the Most Improvement?

In an encouraging result for public servants, over four in ten respondents (42%) were unable to identify a single specific service area in need of improvement. Less encouraging from the Board of Commissioners' perspective -- since they have so little direct control over the delivery of the service -- is the fact that over one-quarter of the respondents (26%) mentioned "Roads" as needing the most improvement, making this specific service area the leader in those specifically mentioned. More than fourteen other specific services were mentioned, but none reached a level of greater than five percent.



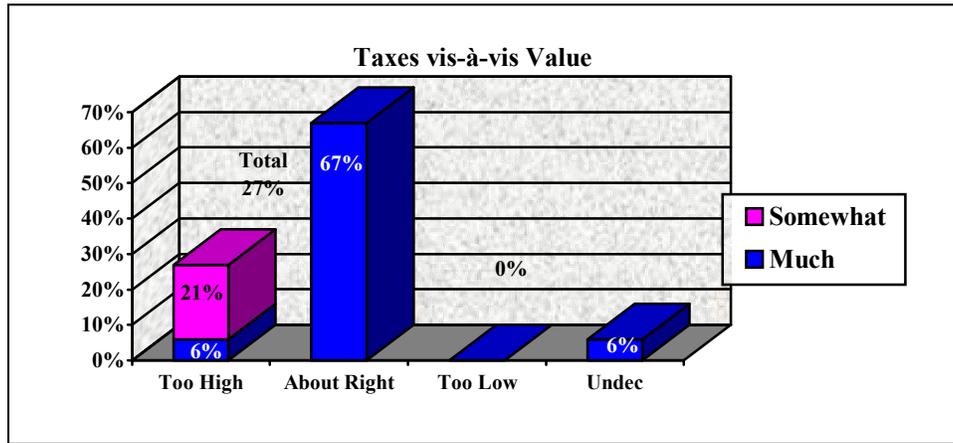
Subgroup categories disproportionately higher than the norm for "Undecided", include: "Seldom/Never" voters in special elections, Those believing their taxes are "Too high", "No" voters on the revenue sharing recapture vote, Older women, and those in households of \$25,000.income or less.

### -- Perception of tax burden

A good harbinger for the chances of passing a ballot proposal to raise property taxes lies in a community's perception of its current tax burden. Respondents were asked if county property taxes and other fees were, "Too high, Too low, or About right", given the number and quality of county government services they receive in return. If respondents said "too high", a follow-up question asked them if the taxes are "much" or "somewhat" too high.

Typically, those governmental entities having success in passing a ballot question to raise property tax assessments will exhibit a "taxes-too-high" score in the mid-20s percent range or lower. If a jurisdiction's residents respond in the 40 percent range or higher, then the environment is too hostile to have much hope of passing any tax increase. As the chart below indicates, the environment in Ottawa County leans more toward the former end of the spectrum, with just over a quarter of its residents believing their taxes are already "Too

high”. Significantly, however, less than one quarter of this total report that they are “much” too high.



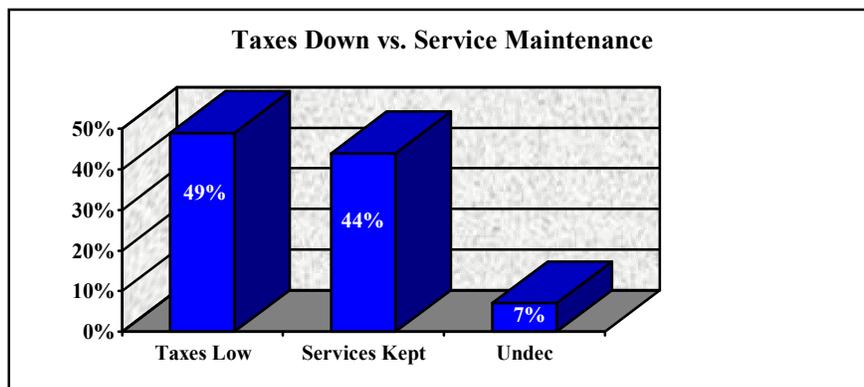
Subgroups reporting “Too high” in disproportionate numbers included: Those opting for reduced services in lieu of higher taxes; Those voting “No” on replacement revenue millage; Those voting “No” on park millage renewal; Women without a college education; and, Women over 40 years of age.

**-- Taxes vs. Service Levels**

Another indicator of the environment in which governments must discharge their obligations is in the answer to a hypothetical “Hobsen’s choice” question. In this survey, respondents were presented with two statements that offered possible reactions of the county government in the face of a budget shortfall, and were asked to select which of the two came closest to their view:

*“Keep taxes and fees as low as possible – even if this means a cut in services; or, Maintain existing services – even if this means a tax increase.”*

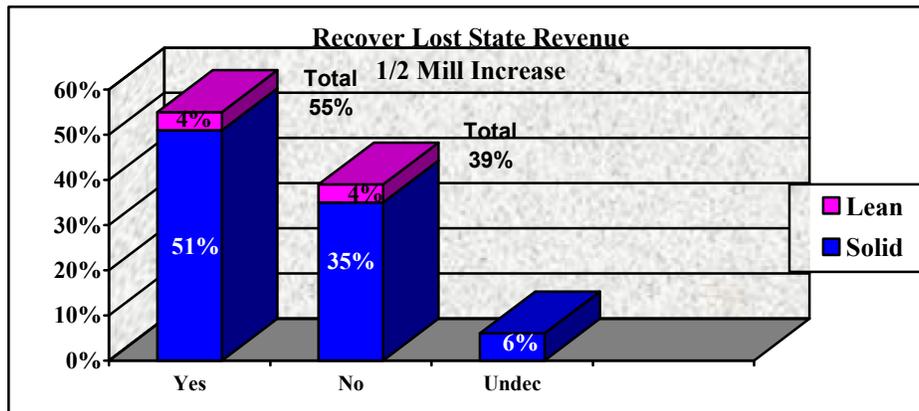
A bare plurality of 49 percent to 44 percent opted for the statement that would, “Keep taxes and fees low”.



Those opting for “Taxes down” in numbers higher than the average included: Those saying their taxes are “Too high”; “No” voters on the recovery of lost state revenue; and, “No” voters on the park millage renewal.

**-- “Vote” on Recouping Lost Revenue Sharing**

As a follow-up to the previous question about the voters’ preferred reaction to a hypothetical budget shortfall circumstance, a specific scenario was read to respondents, involving the reality of dwindling revenue sharing from the state. Respondents were told that a ½ mill assessment increase costing the average property owner an additional \$25 per year, would be necessary to make up for the loss. This description was followed with a question asking, “. . . if the election were held today . . .” would the respondent would vote “Yes”, in favor of a new assessment increase of ½ mill to replace lost state revenue, or “No”, to oppose it. As illustrated below, this more specific presentation results in a reversal of sentiment from the prior hypothetical question, and indeed, shows a majority (albeit not strong), who indicate support for a new tax.

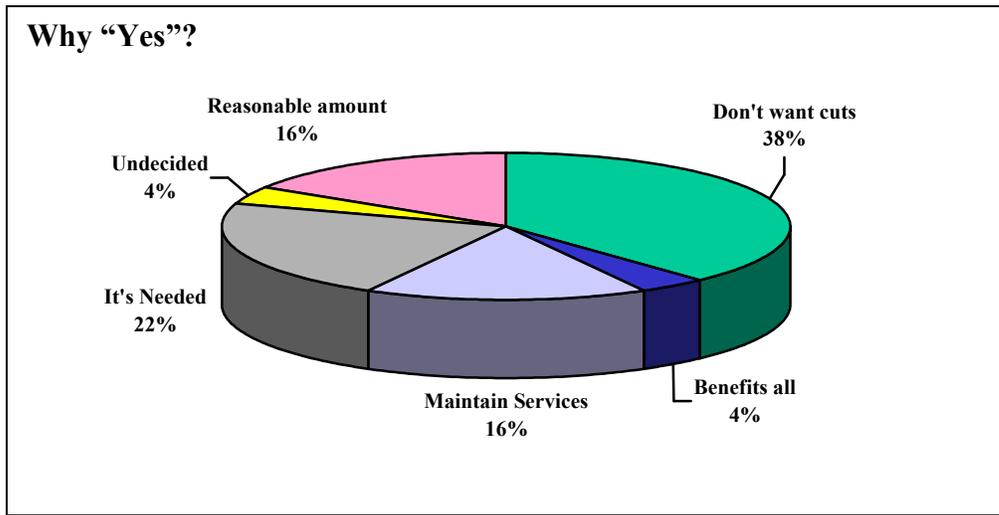


The “Lean” category refers to those respondents who were initially undecided, but were encouraged by the interviewer to try and decide one way or the other.

Subgroups responding “Yes” in numbers above the norm included: Those responding that their taxes were “About right”; Those opting for “Maintaining services” over reducing them to keep taxes low; Residents of under 10 years; Voters under 40 years of age; Women under 40; all ‘younger’ Women; and Those who would vote “Yes” on the park renewal.

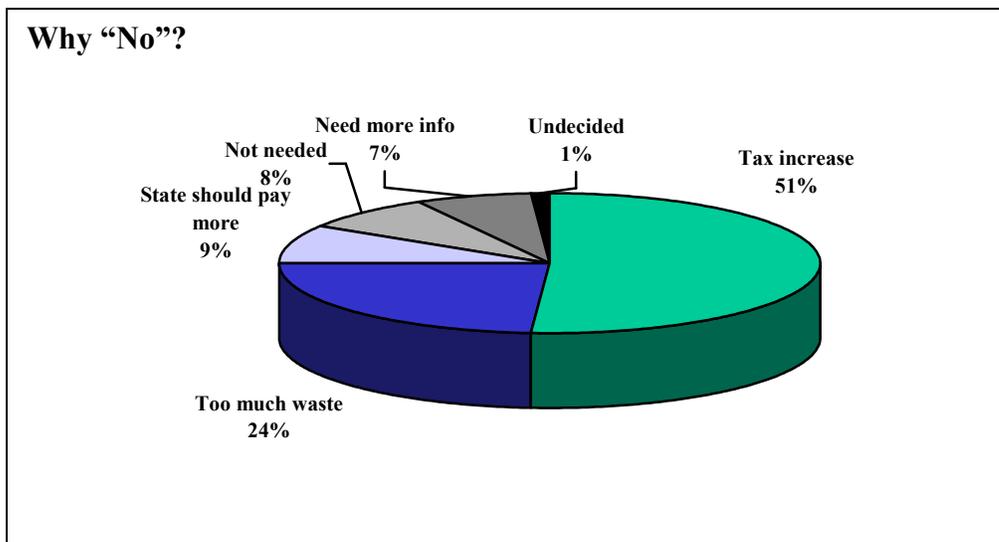
Disproportionate numbers of “No” votes came from: Those who believe their taxes are “Too high”; Women without a college education; Respondents opting for “reducing services” instead of raising taxes; and “No” voters on the park millage question.

This “Vote” was followed by a request for the respondents to indicate the reason they “voted” the way they did. The charts below illustrate the major categories for their rationales.



As can be seen, the vast majority of the “Yes” voters report some shade of wanting to maintain current levels of service as their reason for supporting the “Proposed” increase in property taxes.

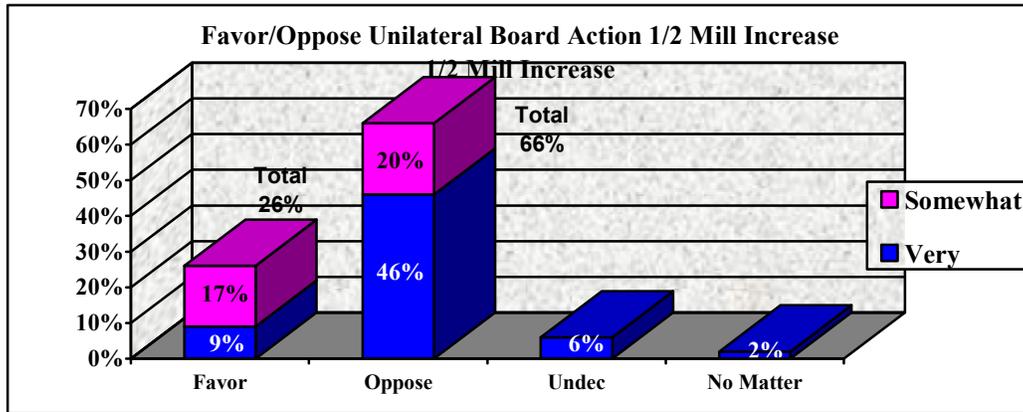
Similarly, opposition to the proposal is clearly rooted in the very fact of an increase, as evidenced by the combined 75 percent voicing the related responses of “Tax increase,” and “Too much waste”.



**-- Unilateral Board Action**

Following the “vote” on the ½ mill to recoup lost state revenue, respondents were informed that because the county does not currently levy the maximum amount allowed under the law, the Board could act unilaterally to increase assessments against property in order to make up for any shortfall in state aid. They were then asked if they would favor or oppose such Board action without putting the question to a popular vote. A strong two-thirds majority voiced their

opposition to such a notion with close to half of these saying they would “Very Much” oppose it. The chart below, illustrates voter sentiment on the question:



**-- Contact With a County Department**

Nearly four-in-ten respondents (37%) indicated that either they or someone else in their household had contacted a department or office in county government in the past year. Nearly two-thirds (61%) responded “No” to the question, and two percent were undecided.

Among those who responded “Yes”, that they or someone in their household had contacted a county office, the top agencies were:

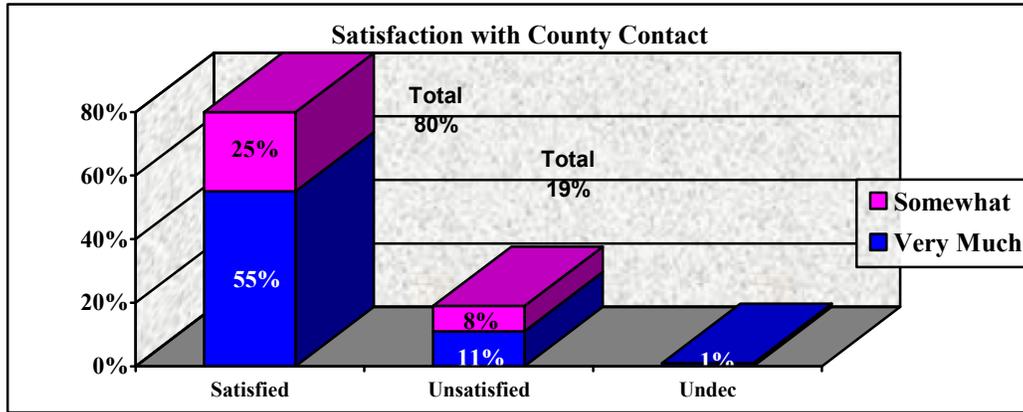
- Clerk 17%
- Health Dept. 13%
- Road Comm. 13%
- Sheriff/Police 12%
- Parks & Rec./Treasurer ea @ 5%

The remaining seventeen identified agencies or departments (some of which are not part of county government) were not mentioned by more than four percent of respondents, with five percent not being able to identify the specific agency they had contacted.

Almost all of these respondents either called the named department on the phone (62%), or paid a personal visit (33%). The remaining five percent either wrote a letter or sent an e-mail.

**-- Satisfaction With Performance**

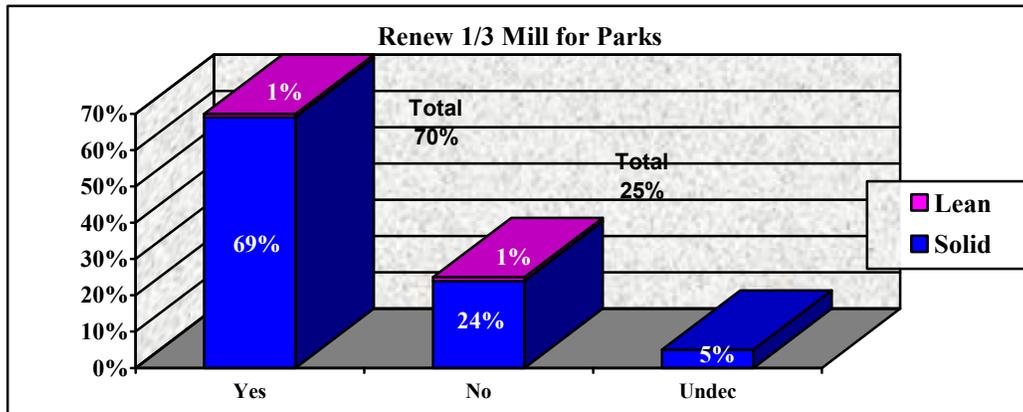
The overwhelming majority of the citizens who said their household contacted a county office indicated that they were satisfied with the response they received. The chart below, illustrates the intensity of feeling on the subject.



**-- "Vote" to Renew Parks Millage**

Respondents were informed that an assessment of one-third mill dedicated for the acquisition, development and maintenance of county parks and open spaces, and approved at the ballot in 1996, was set to expire. They were informed that the annual cost to a property owner with a taxable value of \$50,000 was a little over sixteen dollars. They were next asked if a 10-year renewal of this assessment were placed on the ballot, whether they would vote "Yes" to support the renewal, or "No" to oppose it.

By an overwhelming 70 percent majority, respondents indicated that they would vote "Yes" to renew the described millage. Moreover, as evidenced by the respective "solid/lean" results, voters have at this testing crystallized in their respective sentiments.

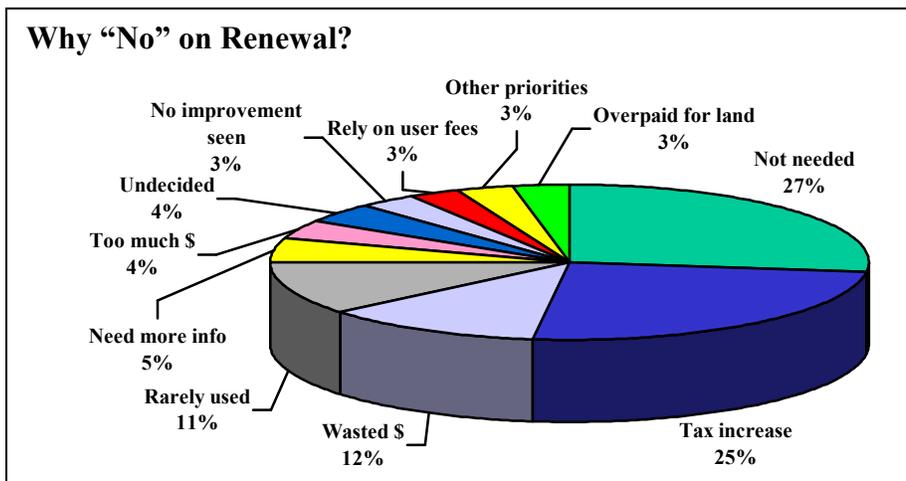
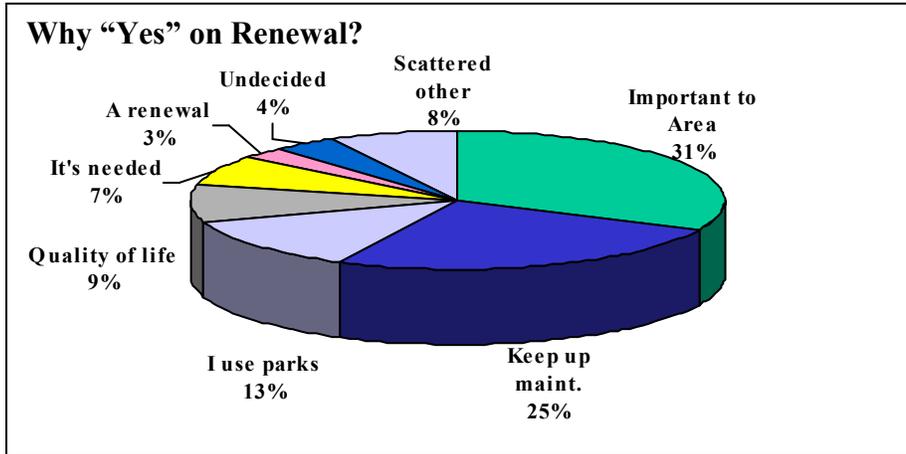


The "Lean" category refers to those respondents who were initially undecided, but were encouraged by the interviewer to try and decide one way or the other.

Support for this proposal came in greater numbers than the norm from: Those of under 10 years residence; College educated respondents; Those opting for maintaining services over reducing taxes; Women under 40 years of age; and, Those with household incomes of between \$75,000 and \$100,000.

Subgroups opposing the question in proportions greater than the average included: Those who believe their taxes are “Too high”; The 41 to 49 age group; Those voting “No” on the recovery of lost state revenue; Those in households of \$25,000 or less; and, Older respondents without a college education.

**-- Reasons for Your “Vote”**



**-- More, Enough, or Too Much?**

Following the “vote” on the renewal of the dedicated park millage and the follow-up for the reasons for their “vote”, respondents were asked to give their opinion as to whether or not the county was currently doing – Enough, Too Much, or if More needed to be done – in fifteen separate service delivery areas. In an effort to measure the level to which there is a belief that more needs to be done, respondents answering “More” were asked if that meant “Much More” or “Somewhat More” was necessary to address their concern. As a testament to the proficiency of the delivery of services, only two of the fifteen categories tallied a total of “*Much/Somewhat More*” of greater than fifty percent.

The following shows the top ten rankings of the services based on a descending total of “More”:

In the following areas, is Ottawa County doing Enough, Too Much, or Should More be Done?	More Should be Done			Enough	Too Much	Undec
	<i>Much</i>	<i>Smwht</i>	<b>Total</b>			
Protecting prime farmland and open space from commercial and residential development	29%	23%	<b>52%</b>	34%	4%	10%
Providing effective economic development programs to attract business and industry	18%	33%	<b>51%</b>	31%	2%	16%
Working with local governments to best plan commercial and residential development so excessive growth and sprawl can be avoided	18%	25%	<b>42%</b>	39%	2%	16%
Keeping county residents informed about county programs and services	16%	26%	<b>42%</b>	52%	—%	6%
Providing health care for uninsured and underinsured residents of the county	16%	17%	<b>31%</b>	27%	5%	35%
Working with local communities to control crime and drugs	7%	18%	<b>25%</b>	65%	1%	9%
Providing programs for juvenile offenders separate from adult prison	8%	14%	<b>22%</b>	37%	1%	40%
Providing mental health services	7%	14%	<b>21%</b>	41%	1%	37%
Maintaining <u>county</u> parks and recreational facilities	4%	14%	<b>18%</b>	76%	2%	4%
Providing effective county road patrol service by the Sheriff’s Department	4%	14%	<b>18%</b>	73%	3%	6%

Subgroups believing “More” ought to be done to protect farmland in numbers greater than the average include: Those in the 56-64 age group; and, Respondents in households of \$25,000 or less.

The “More” category for advancing economic development was selected disproportionately by: Those believing their taxes are “Too high”; Women under 40 years of age; Younger respondents without a college education; and, the 30-40 age group.

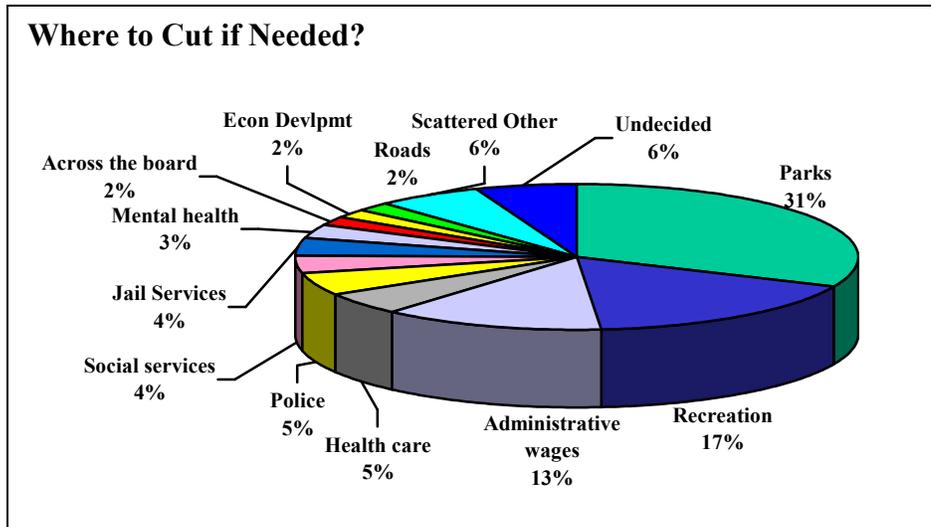
The need for “More” collaborative land-use planning is voiced by: Those who believe their taxes are “Too high”; and, Younger women, in numbers greater than the norm.

Younger women, and those in the 56-64 year old age group were disproportionately represented among those citing the need for “More” communication from county government.

-- Where to Cut if Needed?

In an open-ended question, respondents were asked to name, “. . . *what one, two or three county programs or services do you think should be cut . . .*”, if the Commission had to cut programs to balance the budget?

“Parks” was by far the most named program or service to be cut in the composite of the, up-to-three, that were named. At first blush this might seem counterintuitive in light of the results of prior questions pointing to an appreciation for the county’s aesthetics and the great support for renewal of the dedicated millage. However, respondents had just been reminded about the existence of an independent source of revenue for the maintenance of the county’s parkland, and had indicated a willingness to continue to pay for it. Therefore, their selection of “Parks” as an area to be cut in tight times for the general fund is not all that surprising. The next most named service area as a candidate for cutting was “Recreation” (a distant second), with “Administrative Wages”, coming in third. The pie chart below illustrates the respondents’ preferences:



-- Information Sources

In an effort to guide the county in the best means of communicating with its constituents, a question was posed to respondents asking them where they got most of their information concerning county government. Four newspapers dominated the responses, combining for 63 percent of the responses. These were:

Grand Rapids Press	21%
Holland Sentinel	17%
Grand Haven Tribune	11%
The Advance	14%

Television coverage came in sixth at 9 percent, with “Word of Mouth” and “County Newsletters” each receiving six percent.

While the County Commission makes an effort to communicate via cable television, nearly four-fifths of respondents (79%) report, “Never” having watched any of the broadcasts. Another ten percent report watching it, “Seldom”, with the remaining eleven percent scattered in the low single digits amidst, “Every two weeks”, “Once a month”, “Several times a year” and, “Once or twice a year”.

Similarly, the county’s web site has attracted attention from a little better than 25 percent of the respondents, with most of this cohort (17% of the total) reporting visiting it, “*Only a little*”. However, as with those who indicated that they had contacted a county office or agency in the past year, a very strong majority (77%), give it a “*Positive*” rating.

### **-- Selected Demographics**

The vast majority of respondents (73%) report calling Ottawa County their home for at least 15 years, with 60 percent of them claiming a county tenure of over 25 years. As is typical of many areas in the state, about two-thirds (63%) report having no school age children in their home. A slight majority (51%) describe their community as “Suburban”, followed by “Rural” at 30 percent, and “Urban” at seventeen percent.

The predominantly white cohort of respondents (96%), exhibit a fairly high level of formal education, with 40 percent having attained at least a bachelor’s degree, and 62 percent reporting some form of post-secondary education. Nearly all respondents (97%) report being homeowners, an even split of whom (50%) revealing that their household income was in the \$25,000 to \$75,000 range. Twenty-five percent report a household income in excess of \$75,000, with thirteen percent reporting income of \$100,000 or more.

As in all of its surveys of this nature, EPIC ▪ MRA attempts to stratify the male/female ratio in a manner that reflects conventional voter turnout based on gender. The attempt was again successful for this survey, with a female/male ratio of 53-to-47 percent.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Any number of indicators point to the fact that Ottawa County residents highly value their unique geographical location, and put a premium on maintaining what they consider to be a desirable quality of life. They are, for the most part, very satisfied with the operations of their local units of government and generally believe that they are receiving a good value in the way of services in return for their local tax dollar. Frugal, not stingy, might be a good way to characterize residents’ approach and attitude toward the delivery of, and payment for, county government services.

Against this background, and with the direct question regarding renewal of a parks millage receiving a very high level of support, there is every reason to believe that a ballot question asking voters for a renewal of the one-third mill assessment dedicated to the county’s parks will be approved. However, approval of a new millage for the stated purpose of replacing dwindling state revenue sharing dollars is not so certain.

Passage of a new 1-mill assessment to replace state dollars is viewed by residents as a tax increase and accordingly, a strong case justifying its need must be made. While it is true that the

question tested in this survey received a majority “Yes” vote, this support barely made it over the fifty percent mark – not a level that experience suggests would bode well for passage of a ballot question. Typically, support at or near the sixty percent level needs to emerge from a survey of this nature if the question hopes to withstand the kind of organized opposition that is apt to appear, and the actual atmosphere of an election season where the audience is not captive to listening to the rationale for the measure.

This is not to say that a 1-mill assessment could not pass. After all, there was a nearly even split between those who preferred reducing services in order to keep taxes low, and those who preferred maintaining services even if it required raising taxes. However, a strong education effort must be made to heighten awareness among voters that state revenue represented a significant share of prior county budgets and that this source is no longer available. That awareness campaign must then be followed by clear and convincing illustrations of which taken-for-granted services will suffer if that state revenue is not replaced. Those prerequisites are something of a tall order given the relative obscurity in which county governments have traditionally operated.