

Residents get \$200 for their two cents

San Mateo County tests feedback format to engage citizens in housing debate

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Article Created: 03/13/2008 03:43:08 AM PDT

Helen James, a retired elementary school teacher, had planned to pass the upcoming weekend quietly at her home in Pacifica, with a possible outing to help sell raffle tickets for the local Lions Club.

Instead, she'll spend all day Saturday and Sunday at Canada College, engaged in an in-depth discussion of housing issues with 399 other San Mateo County residents. James is no housing expert — like the others, she was selected at random and offered \$200 to participate in the invitation-only program.

"It was rather a surprise," James said of receiving the offer by phone last week. "It sounded like it might be a scam or something."

Eventually, the caller convinced James that the program— run by a nonprofit called Threshold 2008 — is legitimate, if unorthodox. Based on the concept of "deliberative polling" developed by Stanford communication professor James Fishkin, it's a novel effort to gauge public opinion on one of the county's most complex issues.

Most people agree that high housing prices are a problem in San Mateo County, explains Executive Director Greg Greenway. The tricky question is what to do about it.

The obvious solution is to build more housing, but

where? Build it on open space, and environmentalists will cry foul; build more densely on developed land, and the neighbors will rebel, citing traffic and other pitfalls of urbanization.

"The formal public process is not doing a good job of addressing the problem," Greenway says. When a major project is proposed, city officials are typically faced with competing arguments from the profit-driven developers and the not-in-my-backyard neighbors, with no good way to sound out the opinion of the community as a whole.

Enter Fishkin's idea of deliberative polling. It brings together a scientifically representative sample of the population — using the \$200 to lure those who otherwise couldn't afford to spend two days in policy discussions — to learn about all sides of an issue through seminars, debates and expert panels.

The participants are polled on their views twice — once before the two-day session and once at the end. By studying how their views change, the organizers can see not only how the public views an issue, but how a well-informed public would view it.

"It's one way of representing a silent majority," Greenway says. If the deliberative poll shows that such a majority supports certain policies, organizers can then put pressure on legislators to enact them.

Threshold 2008 has its roots in an earlier citizen organization called the Housing Nachos that pushed for the creation of the county's affordable-housing trust fund, HEART. But Greenway says organizers won't try to influence the poll's outcome.

He picked Fishkin's team for the project because of its reputation for scientific, unbiased

procedures that have produced influential results on everything from the future of the European Union to the plight of Gypsies in Bulgaria.

Fishkin said he's excited about the housing project.

"Some of the other projects we've done are a little more exotic, but this is a really good topic for citizen deliberation, because it's a difficult question that involves lots of trade-offs. It's not really something you want the experts to solve — you want a notion of what the people would support if they had a chance to really talk and think about it."

This weekend's deliberative poll is the first of three steps in Threshold 2008's multimonth, \$800,000 program, Greenway said. The second will be an online debate open to anyone who wants to join, and the third will be a series of locally based "community conversations" with the goal of moving toward some policy solutions.

For more information, visit <http://www.threshold2008.org>.

E-mail Will Oremus at woremus@dailynewsgroup.com.

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