

Deliberative Polling helps residents improve knowledge of affordable housing issues

BY KATHLEEN J. SULLIVAN

After polling communities all over the world about pressing public policy issues—healthcare in Italy, education in Northern Ireland, public works projects in China—Stanford Professor James Fishkin recently tackled a local topic: affordable housing in San Mateo County.

A scientific random sample of more than 200 county residents gathered March 15-16 at Cañada College in Redwood City to discuss affordable housing as part of a "Deliberative Poll," a process Fishkin developed for educating and consulting ordinary citizens about important policy issues.

Usually, Deliberative Polls show a "substantial and significant" change in knowledge and opinions among participants, said Fishkin, director of the Center for Deliberative Democracy at Stanford, who has conducted more than 50 such surveys over the last 15 years.

The results of the housing poll, conducted for the San Mateo Countywide Assembly on Housing Choices, were no different, Fishkin said.

In a Deliberative Poll, a random sample of people is polled on a specific topic. Then they are invited to a gathering to discuss the issue. Those who accept the invitation receive briefing materials, developed by an advisory group, that provide a balanced overview of the problem.

During the gathering, participants take part in small group discussions led by trained moderators, as well as in question-and-answer sessions with experts representing competing points of view. At the end, they are polled again to see how their perspectives changed.

Fishkin said the people who gathered at the recent event in Redwood City represented a "microcosm of ordinary citizens" who did not know much about the county's housing problems.

"In the first poll [a telephone survey], only 38 percent of the participants thought there was a need for more housing in the county," he said. "Obviously, they were not seriously engaged in the issue. Everybody who is engaged in the issue says housing is a terrible problem. The less informed they are, the more reassured I am that we have a random sample of people in the room."

In the second poll, taken at the end of the assembly, 68 percent of the participants thought the county needed more housing—a gain of 30 percent.

Greg Greenway, executive director of Threshold 2008, the nonprofit group that sponsored the poll, described that result as "huge progress" for the organization.

"That's our starting point—that the county isn't building enough housing," he said. "Our goal is to facilitate public dialogue about the problem. We don't have the solution, but we're trying to bring more people to the table to talk about it and find solutions as a community."

The results of the poll were released last week. Among its other key findings:

51 percent thought companies would move out of the county if new housing were not built, compared with 29 percent before the event;

68 percent thought vital services would suffer if teachers, firefighters, police officers and healthcare workers could not find affordable housing, compared with 46 percent before the event;

72 percent thought new housing should be located in already developed areas, compared with 61 percent before the event;

74 percent thought developers should be required to provide a certain portion of their homes at below-market rates, compared with 59 percent before the event.

San Mateo County, which has 705,500 residents, covers most of the peninsula south of San Francisco and north of Santa Clara County.

Stanford owns land in both counties and expects to open a new campus in Redwood City, the third largest city in San Mateo County, in 2011.

Fishkin said housing is a rich topic for a Deliberative Poll because it is a complex issue.

"What to do about affordable housing is not at all apparent," said Fishkin, who holds the Janet M. Peck Chair in International Communication.

"Every choice has its pluses and minuses. The tradeoffs are complicated. It involves competing values and competing visions. There is no single expert answer. The public's view that higher density is the answer came after really wrestling with all the alternatives."

The San Mateo County Deliberative Poll began with a 25-minute telephone survey of 1,800 randomly selected residents. Of those who took the poll, 238 participated in the assembly, each of whom received a \$200 honorarium for attending.

Fishkin said there were relatively few differences between the two groups.

The group that took part in the assembly was representative on most demographic factors, with only modest differences in age, income and education. There were no significant differences in race, ethnicity or gender. There were only small differences between the two groups on policy questions, with very few statistically significant differences.

Assembly participants received a 57-page briefing document, called a "participant guide," that described the housing problem facing the county:

"San Mateo County is a highly desirable place to live. Each year, demand for housing is growing faster than housing is being built. Experts predict that by the year 2025, San Mateo County will add 71,000 new households and 133,300 new jobs. This growth means that 73,000 new housing units will be needed. But if housing is built at the current rate, the county could face a shortage of as many as 49,000 homes by 2025. San Mateo County is also a very expensive place to live, as home prices for a two-bedroom house can top \$800,000."

The guide presented four choices for consideration: continue on the current path; improve the commutes for people who cannot afford to rent or buy homes in the county; open new land to development; and encourage the growth of higher density housing within existing communities. It listed the key elements of each option, as well as arguments for and against each one.

Participants also learned during the assembly that the average rent for a two-bedroom apartment is \$1,700 in San Mateo County.

Approximately 400 people attended the event, including the Deliberative Poll participants, moderators, elected officials and experts on land use, housing, transportation and environmental affairs. The full report is posted on Threshold 2008's website, as well as the website for the Center for Deliberative Democracy.

Threshold 2008 is inviting people who live or work in San Mateo County to take part in an interactive online dialogue on housing in April—the second phase of its campaign to increase understanding of the issue and get more people involved in developing policies and solutions.

"We want as many people as possible to sign up," Greenway said.

In May and June, the group will be holding a series of community conversations on housing. For more information, visit the group's website at <http://www.threshold2008.org>.



Related Information

- Center for Deliberative Democracy (<http://cdd.stanford.edu>)
- Threshold 2008 (<http://www.threshold2008.org>)