CAPTURING COMMUNITY PERCEPTION THROUGH SURVEYS
A case study featuring Fayetteville, AR

Understanding how residents perceive their communities—the good and the bad—is crucial to helping local decision makers adapt strategies and policies to meet community needs. Because perceptions of sustainability can vary widely within a community, a community perception survey can be a useful way to gauge overall satisfaction within a jurisdiction and may help to identify performance gaps in existing programs and services.

Community-wide surveys are a great way to better understand community conditions and needs and can be used to empower citizens to participate in the local decision-making process. When done correctly, a survey should capture a range and diversity of voices that may not regularly be heard by the local government. However identifying the right questions to ask and putting together a statistically relevant and non-biased survey can be difficult. The best practices and nationally recognized standards of the STAR Community Rating System (STAR) can help city and county staff members to build a better community perception survey.

FAYETTEVILLE, AR

In 2016, the City of Fayetteville’s Sustainability & Resilience Office conducted a community-wide survey to address two distinct needs. The first was to inform an upcoming strategic planning process for the City Council. “We timed the survey to be available prior to our Council’s strategic planning retreat so that they could take the public's long-term economic, environmental, and social priorities into consideration,” said Rachael Schaffner, Fayetteville’s sustainability project coordinator. The second goal of the survey was to address data gaps revealed through the city’s 2014 certification results. “We were able to combine all of the [STAR] survey-related outcome and action items into a single survey to streamline the data collection process in the future,” said Schaffner.

The Sustainability & Resilience Office started building the survey by first reviewing the evaluation measures in STAR and picking out any measures that require the use of a survey for reporting. They also reviewed the city’s certification results to identify gaps and STAR outcomes and actions that could benefit from additional public engagement and survey data.
Fayetteville staffers also reached out to peer communities to learn about best practices for surveys. “We found that many other certified STAR communities had great examples and question banks that we could draw from,” said Schaffner. After an outline of the survey was compiled, meetings were held with other city departments to be sure their needs were captured. “Many of these conversations were guided by where Fayetteville did or did not receive credit in our 2014 certification process,” said Schaffner.

Once the survey was complete, it was distributed to residents using a variety of channels, to ensure a strong response rate across different demographics and neighborhoods. The survey was posted on social media sites, and postcards with a URL to the survey were sent out to 3,000 community members. In-person public outreach was conducted at farmers markets and local libraries. Finally, city staffers made sure that low-income areas were oversampled, as research shows that response rates are often lower in these populations, and the city wanted to ensure that all neighborhoods and voices were represented.

The final number of survey responses was 1,402 from across the city's many neighborhoods. “Overall, we had responses from over 1.5% of our total city population which we see as a great response rate! We were pleased to gather responses from so many citizens and to be able to have a respondent pool that closely resembles the makeup of our city,” said Schaffner.

The city has posted the survey results on the local government's webpage, so that all residents and community partners are able to access and view the results. Interested parties can also view the question bank, survey comments, and maps summarizing the responses online. An overview of the results has been shared with city government stakeholders including the City Council, Police Department, Parks & Recreation, Communications, Transportation, and Engineering.

One goal of the survey was to address gaps from the city’s previous STAR certification. “We asked questions regarding Outcome 4 of the Public Parkland objective, which asks that the community ‘demonstrate that 66% or more of surveyed residents visit a park at least once a year.’ From our respondent pool, nearly 98% of residents indicated that they visit a park each year,” said Schaffner. “Even in the categories where we did not meet the required benchmark, we found that the survey successfully helped us identify where we may need to direct future funds, conduct outreach, create policies, etc.”

The results of the survey are being used for a variety of purposes. Fayetteville’s City Council has already used the survey results as a guide for strategic and long range planning. The city also plans to develop a community equity profile, which the survey will inform going forward. The results will also help guide the city’s STAR recertification process later this year.
"One early and exciting application of the survey results has been in Fayetteville's Community Policing division, where officers are using the geographic analysis of public safety data to do targeted outreach in areas of the city where trust in law enforcement was found to be weakest," said Schaffner.

Photos courtesy of the City of Fayetteville.

ABOUT STAR

The STAR Community Rating System (STAR) is the nation's leading comprehensive framework and certification program for evaluating local sustainability, encompassing economic, environmental, and social performance measures. Local leaders use the rating system's evaluation measures to assess their current level of sustainability, set targets for moving ahead, and measure progress along the way.

For more information on how to get started using the STAR Community Rating System in local surveys and other community engagement initiatives, please contact:

- Aaron Lande, Member Relations Manager
- Email: aaron@starcommunities.org
- Phone: (202) 742-3232