



AUGUST 5, 2010

## Survey of Local Elected Officials Indicates the Strain of the Current Economy

Every few years, *The Elway Poll* conducts a survey of local elected officials in the state to find out how city and county governments are doing. We also use it as a barometer of the state's communities, from the point of view of their elected leaders. This month we report on a survey of 447 local officials (267 city and 180 county) who completed our on-line questionnaire. We have used basically the same questionnaire each time, so this report compares current opinions to those from 2005 and 1999.

Much to no one's surprise, the economy dominates local officials' current outlook. It is having a significant negative impact on the communities as well as the ability of local government to deliver services.

The first substantive question in the survey asked officials what they saw as some of the "most important issues or opportunities" in their community over the next 5-10 years. The question is open-ended—response can answer any way they like. Six out of 10 cited an issue related to local government budgets. The only other category to come close was Economic Development.

Five years ago, budget issues also topped the list, but only 35% mentioned them. In the halcyon days of 1999, only 15% mentioned budget related issues – ranking it 3rd or 4th on the list of concerns. Growth management was the top concern then.

Infrastructure is of growing concern, up to 22% from 7% in 2005. If water issues are included (part environmental, part infrastructure) then infrastructure issues were named by about 1/3 of these officials.

The graphs on p.2 reinforce the concerns about infrastructure: in every region of the state, officials who said their infrastructure was getting worse outnumbered those who said "better" by about 2:1. Ten years ago, the numbers were even.

Outside of the economy and infrastructure concerns, these findings indicate that most local governments are managing to deliver services to their citizens. Most said they still had adequate resources to deliver most services (p.3.) although compared to 5 and 10 years ago, there are fewer services, and lower quality.

There is a "chewing gum and bailing wire" sense of how they are managing. Most have done, are likely to do, or are considering every strategy they can think of to make ends meet (p.4). Between 1/3 and 1/2 have already reduced reserves, reduced employee hours, and transferred funds. The most common next things to look at are new revenue sources, securing additional flexibility within existing programs, eliminating services and trying to negotiate labor concessions.

*The Elway Poll* wishes to thank The Association of Washington cities, The Washington state Association of Counties, and the Washington Association of County Officials for making this unique survey possible.

MOST IMPORTANT ISSUE	1999	2005	2010
<b>BUDGET</b> Revenue Tax Base Ability to Provide Services	15%	35%	59%
<b>GROWTH MGT</b> Growth Management Land Use / Prop. Rights UGA / UGB	29%	15%	17%
<b>TRANSPORTATION</b> Transportation/ Traffic Streets / Roads	14%	12%	13%
<b>ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT</b> Attracting Business Employment Community Development	25%	11%	42%
<b>INFRASTRUCTURE</b> Improvements Sewers Capital Improvements	11%	7%	22%
<b>ENVIRONMENT</b> Water issues	15%	6%	15%
<b>PUBLIC SAFETY</b> Crime Criminal Justice Funding Law Enforcement Funding	7%	6%	9%
<b>GOVERNANCE</b> Unfunded Mandates Leadership Distrust of Govt	8%	5%	9%

# Community Indicators

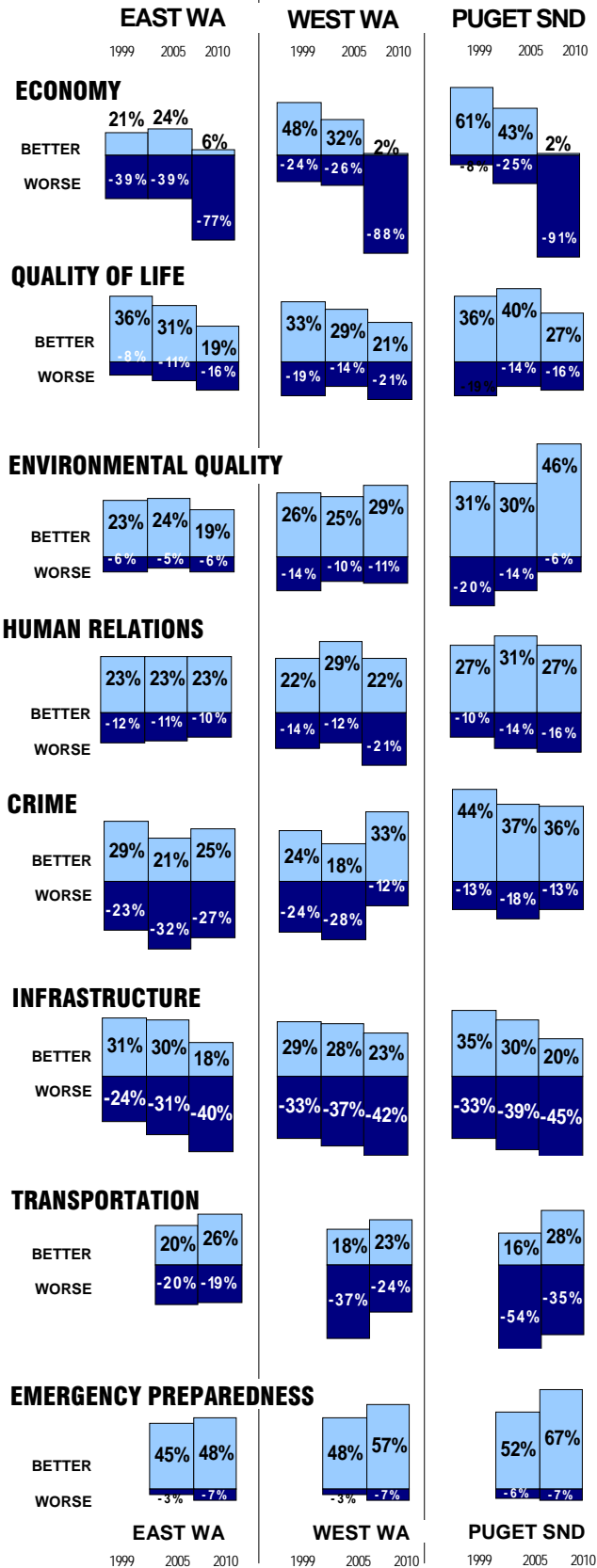
▲ chief reason to conduct this survey is to hear local elected officials' perspectives on their communities. Over the years, we have asked about 8 indicators of how things were changing in their communities. The graphs on the right compares this year's to those from 11 years ago, and 5 years ago. The results also compare answers from the central Puget Sound area, Western Washington outside of central Puget Sound and Eastern Washington.

We also ask whether local officials think that their community is getting ahead of other areas of the state, falling behind, or staying about even for 4 indicators. These results are presented in the graph below.

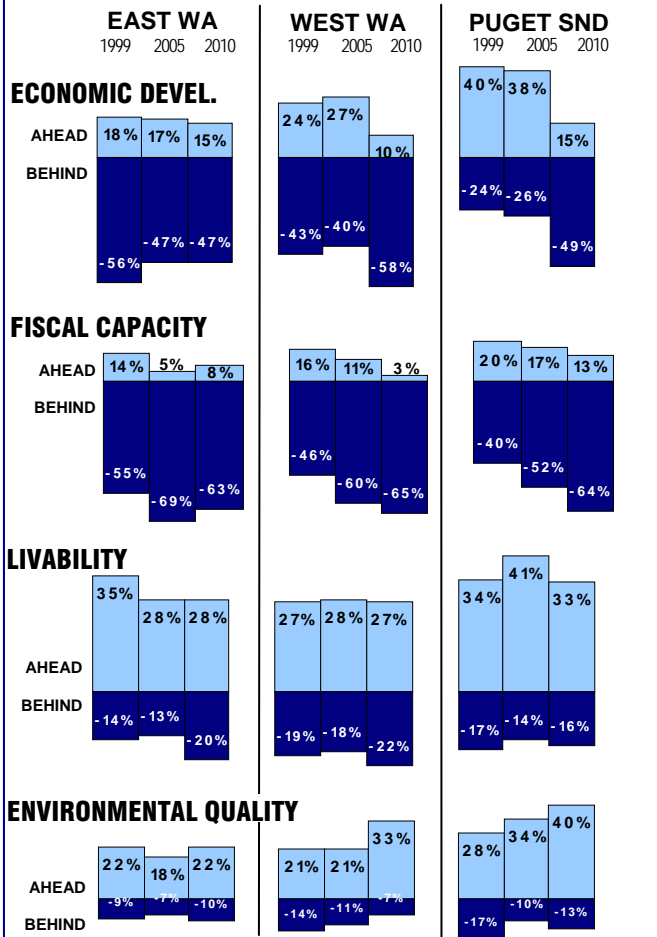
Like the other results from this survey, these indicate the drag the economy is having on local communities and local governments.

## In the last 4-5 years, have the following changed in your community:

[Gotten Better or Gotten Worse]



## Compared to other areas of the state, is your jurisdiction getting ahead or falling behind in terms of... ["staying even" not graphed]

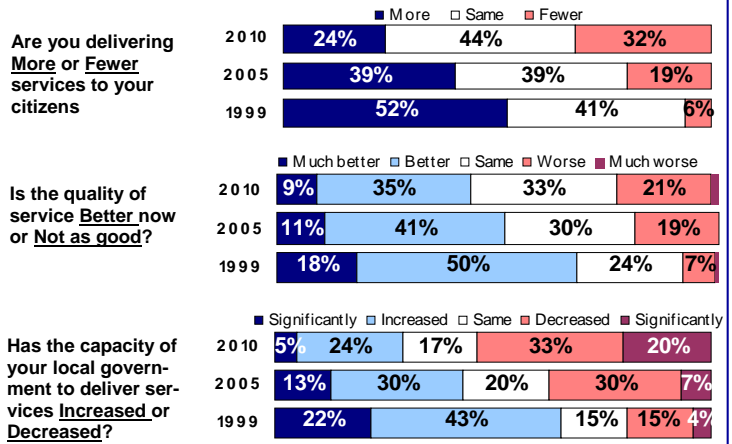


# Service Delivery

Compared to 5 and 10 years ago, these officials reported fewer services, or lower quality to their citizens as their capacity to deliver services has decreased.

Still, majorities reported having adequate resources to provide services in almost every category.

## Service delivery "compared to 4-5 years ago"

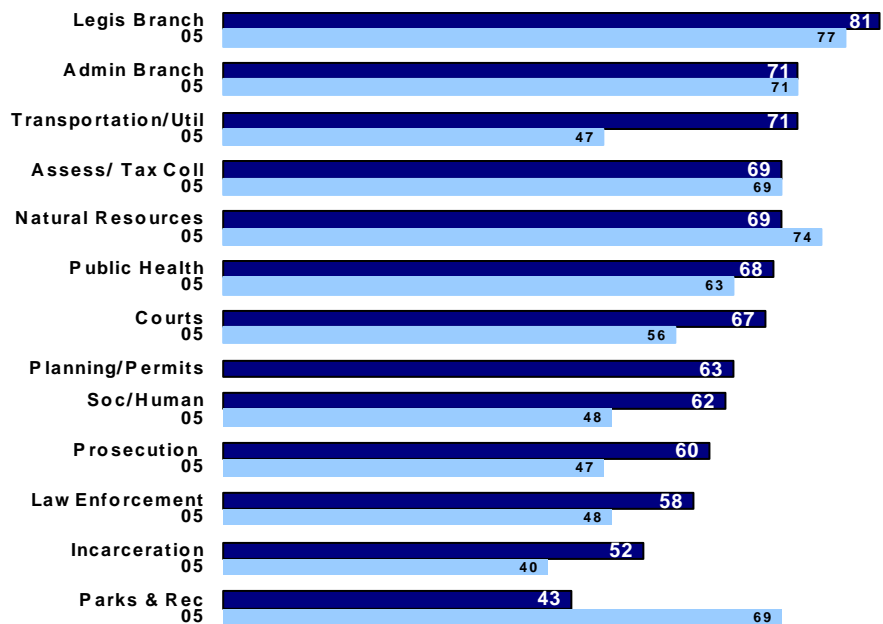


## County Services

Indicate the degree to which your county has adequate Resources to provide services in the following categories.

(4-point scale: Excellent, Adequate, Inadequate, Poor.)

"Excellent" + "Adequate" represented in the graph.



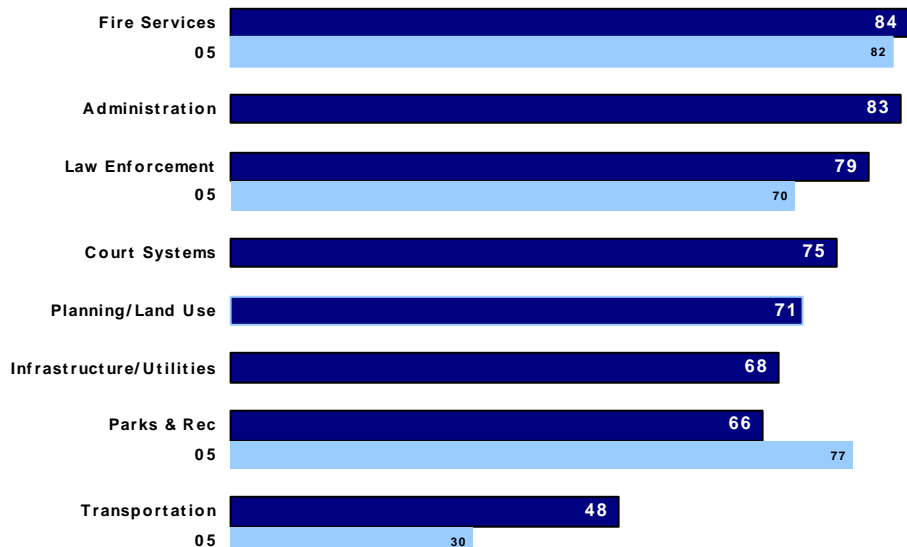
## City Services

Indicate the degree to which your city has adequate Resources and Expertise to provide services in the following categories.

Note that, for the Cities, the question asked about Resources and Expertise.

(4-point scale: Excellent, Adequate, Inadequate, Poor.)

"Excellent" + "Adequate" represented in the graph.



# What Now?

The national and state economy, with its resultant impact on sales tax revenue, combined with increasing cost of both employees and services, are having a “major negative impact” on local government’s ability to deliver services.

These local officials were looking everywhere for solutions. Of 12 strategies included, in this survey majorities have already done that, were likely to do it, or were thinking about it.

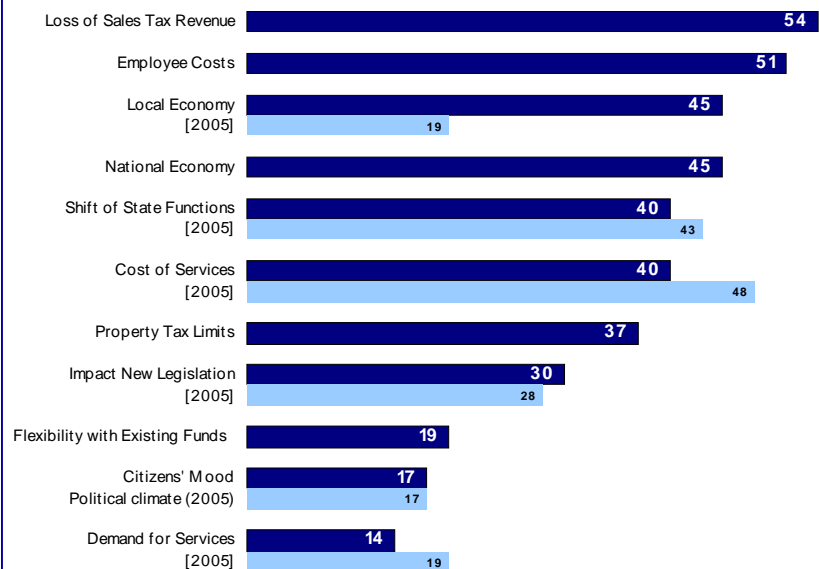
Sizeable pluralities said they had already reduced reserves, transferred funds and reduced employee hours. Many had done those things 5 years ago.

At least 1 in 5 were now looking into each of the 12 strategies listed, lead by:

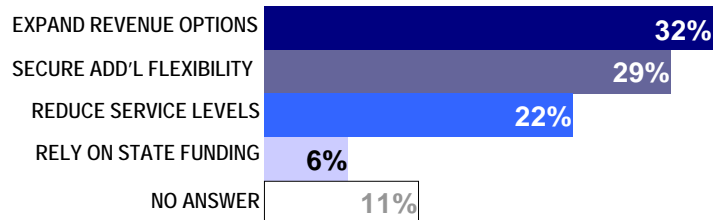
- Developing other revenue sources  
71% likely to do or looking at it;
- Asking voter to raise taxes (53%)
- Increasing fees (52%)
- Trying to get labor concessions (52%)
- Elimination of entire services (51%)

Tax increases will be internally difficult: 1/3 said they would not raise taxes or ask voters to do so.

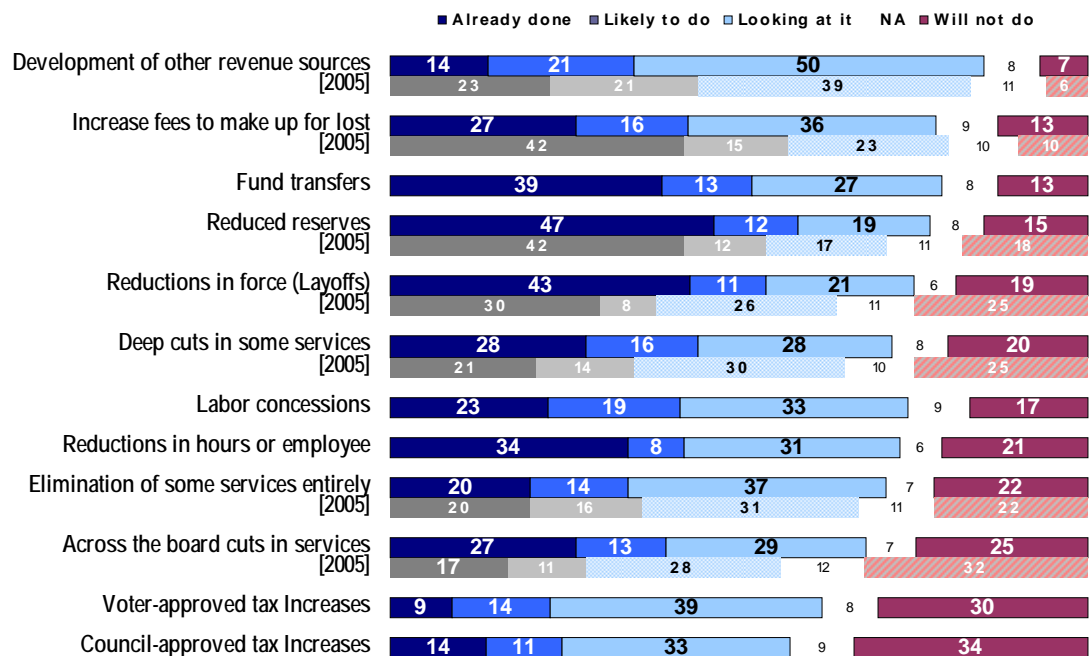
**Rate the following in terms of its impact on your ability to deliver services. (5 point scale. Only “Major Negative Impact” is represented in the graph.)**  
Bottom bars show results from 2005



**As state and local governments experience financial stress, would you rather...**



**In light of your current budget situation, have you already taken, or are you contemplating the following actions:**



# Citizen Engagement

Overall, these officials would say that the level of trust between themselves and their constituents as satisfactory. The responses on a 5-point rating scale from “very high” to “very low” form a perfect bell curve, with 43% saying “satisfactory.”

More than 2 in 3 believe their constituencies would give their local government positive ratings for accountability, efficiency and effectiveness.

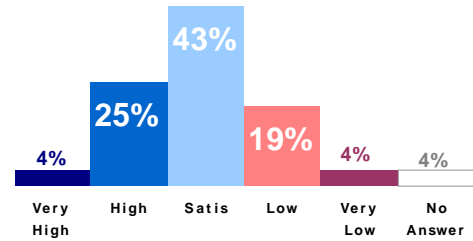
Substantial majorities thought their jurisdiction did at least a fair job of engaging citizens. Substantial majorities said their jurisdiction had:

- Mechanisms in place to enable citizens to make valuable contributions to local governance. 23% said that description fit them “very well” and another 51% said “fairly well”;
- A means in place to systematically hear from a representative cross section of their citizens (23% said very good description; 41% said fairly good);
- A “fair” (22%) or “very good” understanding of citizen priorities.”

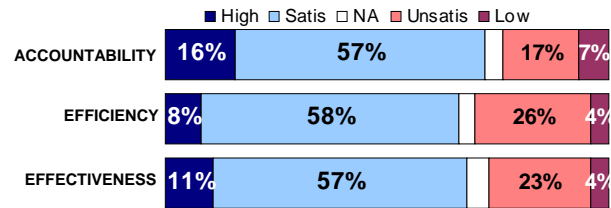
For the most part, they characterized their contact with the public in positive terms, although there was a third of respondent for each characterization who were on the negative side of the scale (graph below).

Most relied on traditional methods to “incorporate public ideas into planning and decision-making”: 83% used public hearings; 63% used citizen advisory committees and 51% used town hall meetings—a relative new comer in the citizen engagement tool kit. The more systematic methods (surveys, focus groups) were much less used.

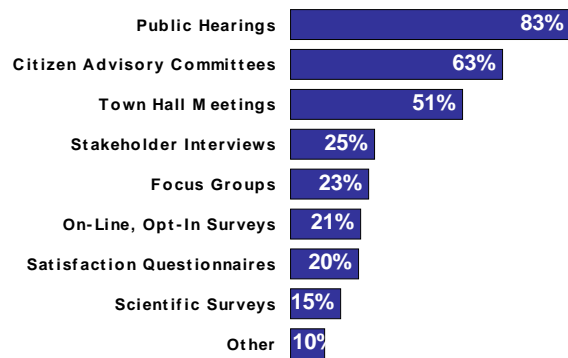
## What would you say is the level of trust between citizens and elected officials in your jurisdiction?



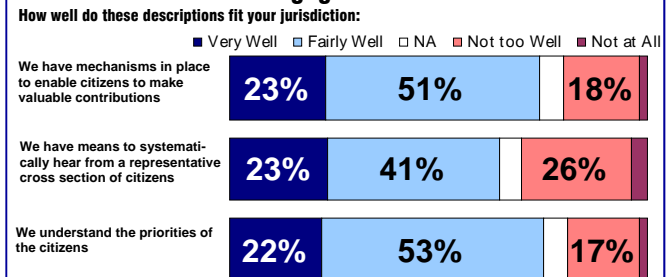
## How would your citizens rate your local govt, in terms of...



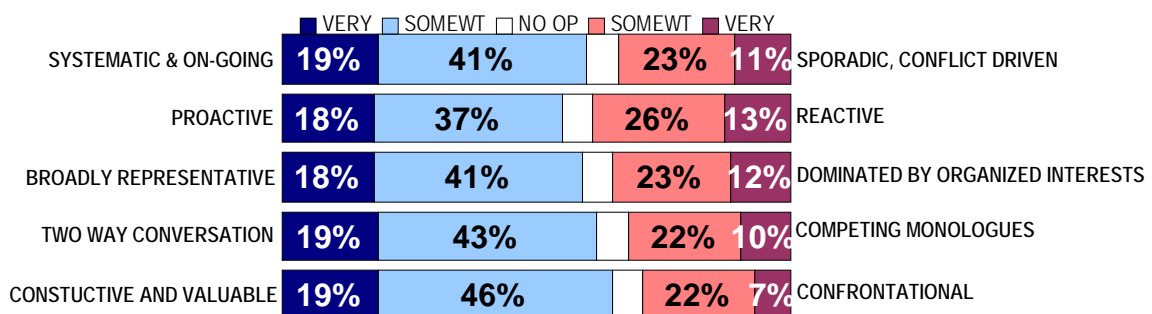
## What methods do you use to incorporate public ideas into planning and decision making?



## How well does citizen engagement work ?



## Would your council/commission’s contact with citizens be best described as more...



# Sample Profile

The data reported here are the result of an on-line survey of 447 local elected officials in Washington state between July 8-25, 2010. All city and county elected officials were invited to participate by The Assn. of Wash Cities, The Wash State Assn. of Counties, and the Wash Assn. of County Officials.

<b>POSITION</b>	
City Council Member .....	40%
City Executive / Administrator .....	19%
County Council / Commissioner .....	12%
County Elected Officer .....	28%
<b>REGION</b>	
Central Puget Sound (King, Pierce, Snohomish) .....	21%
Western Washington .....	43%
Eastern Washington .....	35%
<b>POPULATION OF COUNTY</b>	
500,000+ .....	22%
100 - 500,000 .....	25%
50 - 100,000 .....	26%
Under 50,000 .....	26%
<b>POPULATION OF CITY (City Officials)</b>	
100,000+ .....	3%
20 - 100,000 .....	23%
5 - 20,000 .....	35%
Under 5,000 .....	36%
<b>TENURE IN OFFICE</b>	
Less than 2 yrs .....	23%
3-4 yrs .....	21%
5-8 yrs .....	20%
9+ yrs .....	29%
<b>JOB SATISFACTION (Compared to 5 yrs ago)</b>	
Better Now .....	23%
Worse Now .....	16%
<b>TIME REQUIRED (Compared to 5 yrs ago)</b>	
Better Now .....	6%
Worse Now .....	40%
<b>COMPENSATION (Compared to 5 yrs ago)</b>	
Better Now .....	19%
Worse Now .....	17%
<b>PARTY IDENTIFICATION</b>	
Democrat .....	30%
Republican .....	31%
Independent / No answer .....	39%

# The Elway Poll

The Elway Poll is an independent, non-partisan analysis of public opinion in Washington and the Northwest available exclusively to subscribers.

**SUBSCRIPTION:** An annual subscription is \$250.

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## Positive Self-grades for Environmental Programs

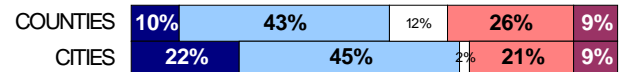
Majorities rated as generally successful their planning and implantation efforts for various environmental programs. The ratings were consistent across all 4 programs at both the city and county level. In each case, however, city officials were more positive in their rating than were county officials.

### ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES:

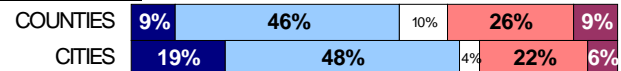
How would you rate the success of your planning and implementation efforts for...

■ Excellent ■ Good ■ NA ■ Fair ■ Poor

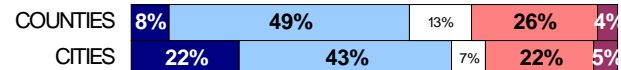
#### GROWTH MGT



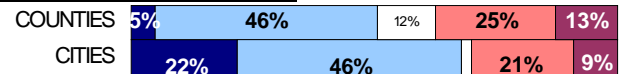
#### WATERSHEDS



#### SHORELINE MASTER



#### STORMWATER COMPLIANCE



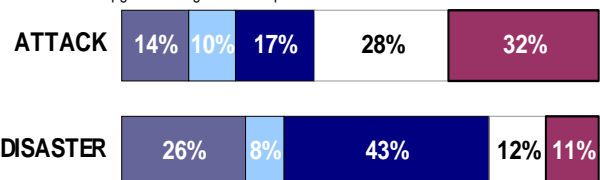
## Most Have Prepared for Natural Disaster, But Not Terrorist Attack

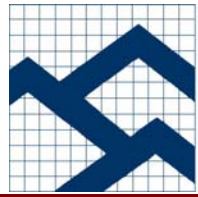
More than 3 in 4 said their jurisdiction had upgraded or implemented new programs to prepare for a natural disaster. Just 41% had done so to prepare for a terrorist attack.

Has your jurisdiction upgraded or implemented programs in the last 5 years to prepare for

(Natural Disasters / Terrorist Attack)

■ Upgraded Programs ■ Implemented New ■ Both ■ Don't Know ■ Neither





# The Elway Poll

*The Elway Poll* is the only independent, non-partisan analysis of public opinion trends in Washington state. Since 1992, it has measured changing public attitudes, analyzed the interplay of issues, candidates and opinions, and tracked political races. *The Elway Poll* creates information not available in any form, from any other sources. It includes:

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