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[CE SBAC] SBAC

1 message

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Mon, Apr 8, 2024 at 9:34 AM

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To the SBAC,

I've been doing my best to follow along during the various stages of this process. One of my most frequent pieces of feedback has been my firm belief that voters need to understand the return on the investment they are being asked to make: for each concept, how long will these facilities last, and what additional necessary expenditures can our town expect to make in the coming decades? Of course, these will be estimates, but even an estimate of magnitude is a *crucial* factor when considering such expenditures. Harriman [provided estimates for each concept](#) in the context of stated needs, using industry standard methodology. You have cited several reasons for eliminating these estimates from all subsequent communications. Regardless, you have had two months to amend and communicate this data and have yet to do so, despite the near constant drumbeat of public comment asking for it.

As we quickly approach the upcoming survey, I have grown increasingly concerned about this missing information. Additionally, the committee has insisted on including a 'straw poll' question in the survey, asking voters to rank their support for each concept. This question is included despite a seeming majority of the SBAC opposing such a question, despite the feedback from Harriman that such a straw poll would be misguided/could paint the SBAC into a corner, and despite the fact that the above information has been withheld from voters. How can voters be expected to make informed responses without this crucial information? If you present three options with no context for subsequent required investments, why wouldn't anyone just choose the cheapest?

To compound my anxiety, I was stunned by the language included in Bruce Lockwood's cover letter of March 28, introducing the survey and methodology. In very plain language, Bruce explains that the primary objective of the survey is to identify the preferred design. In other words, this is a vote on the option to advance.

For weeks on end, the members of the SBAC have insisted that this survey is NOT meant to be a vote on the design options - rather, an opportunity to compare voters' attitudes today to those collected during the last survey. I am left to believe either that Bruce has completely missed the mandate from the SBAC, that Bruce is inserting his own research objective/editorialization, or that the SBAC truly does intend to use the straw poll as the deciding factor in narrowing 3 concepts to 1.

2 of 8 SBAC thought it would be beneficial to conduct a second survey among town residents to test new concepts.

Research Objectives

The primary objective of the marketing research is to determine which of three building proposal concepts Cape Elizabeth voters favor and what adjustments, if any, need to be made. Specific points of learning could include, but would not be limited to:

- Determining the building proposal concept out of three presented Cape Elizabeth voters prefer;
 - Rate each of the concepts on a ten-point scale
 - Identify the most preferred concept
 - Identify any adjustments to the preferred proposal that need to be considered;
 - Gauge voters' engagement with SBAC information about the school buildings project;
 - Understand if voters feel more informed as a result of the SBAC communications
 - Assess voters' perceived importance of possible project outcomes; and
 - Collecting comprehensive classification /demographic information.
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It bears repeating at this point that Bruce Lockwood is by no means a neutral third party. As a Cape Elizabeth resident and taxpayer, he has a clear financial interest in the outcome of this survey, the SBAC's recommendation, and the determination of what concept that goes to referendum. I raised my concerns about this conflict in a previous message but received no response. I can only conclude that the SBAC is not concerned about this conflict, or simply feels that it is too late to "change lanes." Neither explanation provides much comfort. The fact that his cover letter so clearly contradicts the messaging from SBAC on the purpose of the survey does nothing to bolster credibility - to say nothing of his grammatical errors and editorial input on the outcome of the 2022 referendum (which he describes as having failed by "a pretty substantial margin" - surprisingly imprecise language for a data scientist.)

I was eager to attend the April 2 meeting of the SBAC Finance Committee. I had begun to get the sense from various committee conversations that lifespan/additional costs would feature in the survey insert and public forum - and that Joe Cuetera would be providing or validating a methodology for providing numbers that satisfied the SBAC's preferences. When I logged in to the meeting, it became quickly apparent that my hopes were too high. The meeting began late (in fact, was never called to order,) meeting materials were available only in hard copy, side conversations prevailed, there were multiple references to offline correspondence, conversations were barely audible, and the recording didn't begin until half an hour after the scheduled beginning time and remains missing from CETV video on demand.

The only substantive takeaway I observed was the dissemination of a memo (again, hard copies) written by Kevin Justh - highlighting the negative real borrow cost afforded to municipalities and the resultant appeal of borrowing for large projects. In other words, in the eyes of a member of the public, the most informative aspect of this meeting came from neither committee or consultant, but from a member of the public being cited by our paid consultant.

I have been following closely because, like you, I care deeply about the outcome of this process. I am very troubled by the direction things have taken. The chair of your finance committee attempted to set a hard budget cap of \$70M, even before the last round non-survey-feedback was solicited. The communication committee, in collaboration with Bruce Lockwood, has moved ahead with a straw poll survey, despite consensus and professional guidance opposing such a format. There has been more discussion about birth rates than about providing essential voter education on the long term costs of each remaining design concept. I have not observed any meaningful conversations about alternative sources of financing or a commitment to planning ahead for future expenses. Finally, the credibility of your body is strained by the myriad concerns laid out here, and the behavior exhibited in meetings like that on April 2nd.

Despite what the last (Portland Research Group) survey told you, almost 40% of voters supported a two school bond in 2022. This level of support must be contextualized by the lack of public education about that project, the well funded opposition, and the (inaccurate) threat of a 25% tax increase. You cannot assume that you will carry all of these same voters regardless of which option advances. For many of these voters, concept E already represents a compromise. The public deserves to be educated on the value of these investments and the expected future outlays - some of which would come very soon.

Is Bruce's objective consistent with the SBAC objective? Has Bruce taken steps to eliminate researcher bias? Are you planning on using this survey in the same way that some of your members used the last one, to incorrectly insist that the public will only support a 10% tax increase, and to accordingly advance only a lowest-cost concept?

Thank you for your time. I welcome our responses. Otherwise, I look forward to addressing these questions at this week's public forum.

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