

# Be wary of skewed opinion polls

*By Senator John Cowdery*

Politicians love public opinion surveys to show how much the people support their policies. The news media love to report them because their viewers, readers and listeners want to see what their neighbors are thinking.

Survey questions are also remarkably easy to write so the result supports a politician's agenda. All too often, the news media doesn't carefully read the survey questions to see if they're designed to elicit a certain response.

Craciun Research conducted a survey last September on Anchorage transportation issues. The Begich administration used the results to write its version of the city's Long Range Transportation Plan that favored trails and mass transit over roads.

One question asked residents about four transportation issues. The Coastal Trail extension, widening the Glenn Highway near Merrill Field, expanding bus service and of course, Mayor Begich's Lake Otis & Tudor turn lane plan.

Here's exactly how Craciun Research asked the question.

*"Here are some specific improvements proposed for the next 20 years. Assuming the details could be worked out to your satisfaction; do you favor or oppose each?"*

The phrase "assuming the details could be worked out to your satisfaction," is so open ended it renders the question meaningless.

Mayor Begich wants the turn lanes built immediately, but I agree with the assembly to wait until the Dowling and Bragaw extensions are done and see if they're needed at all. But thanks to the way Craciun wrote the question, both of us would respond favorably because all the details would be worked out to his personal satisfaction and mine.

You don't need a PhD in statistics to see that Craciun's pseudo survey is more about promoting Begich's smoke-and-mirrors turn lane plan. The city also blew \$18,390 of your tax dollars to pay for it.

The Anchorage Assembly showed political courage by tossing the Craciun survey in the circular file, balancing out the LRTP in favor of roads and to delay construction of new turn lanes at Lake Otis & Tudor.

The news media's coverage was oversimplified and predictable. The assembly was vilified for ignoring the public's wishes on transportation priorities just so they could embarrass the mayor.

I'm still waiting to see a single news report questioning Craciun Research and Mayor Begich about their bogus survey.

How far has the news media gone to promote the mayor's discredited turn lane project? Here's a perfect example:

Anchorage Assembly chair Anna Fairclough appeared on a local TV newscast last month for a live interview with a prominent news anchor. The topic was the assembly's decision to delay construction of the turn lanes. The news anchor displayed results from his station's *unscientific* web poll showing 70% of their viewers consider the Lake Otis & Tudor turn lanes a high priority. The anchor spoke about the web poll results as if it was indisputable proof the assembly was ignoring the public's wishes.

Excuse me, but don't they call Web polls unscientific because they're an inherently flawed method of measuring public opinion? Yes, they do.

That's why the station in question reminds its viewers the Web poll is unscientific every time they ask them to log onto its web site and vote.

That little caveat didn't come up during the Fairclough interview. The anchor never told her, or his viewers that the web poll was a scientifically meaningless measure of what residents really want.

I can somewhat understand why the media treats Mayor Begich the way it does. He has masterfully used his considerable personal charm to build a unique relationship with journalists that other politicians can only dream of. However, that doesn't excuse their reluctance to challenge him.

Dittman Research conducted a reliable survey on the turn lanes a few months ago. It was not paid for by anyone. It found 65% of Anchorage residents prefer building and connecting other roads should be the priority to solving the gridlock at Lake Otis & Tudor. Only 16% named the turn lanes as the highest priority.

The results tell me drivers know building alternate routes – not turn lanes, relieves congestion.

Next time you see a politician waving around an opinion survey in the news, ask yourself the tough questions about how it was put together because the news media may not have done it for you.

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