Focus Groups to Assess Support for a ¼ Cent Sales Tax for Public Safety and Infrastructure

Presentation of Findings
By ETC Institute
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Agenda

- Purpose
- Methodology
- Conclusions
- Findings
  - How funding for major county services should change
  - Importance of funding specific types of projects that could be included in a future sales tax
  - Willingness to support a sales tax
  - Preferred allocation for the tax
  - Preferred type and length of tax
  - Impact of other issues on support
- Recommendations
- Questions

Purpose

- To determine whether the County should continue to pursue plans to present voters with a proposal for a ¼ cent sales tax for public safety and infrastructure
- To determine the types of projects and services that should be funded
- To determine the preferred type of tax

Methodology

- A total of 20 residents participated in two focus groups
  - 12 people attended a meeting at the Turner Recreation Center on January 18
  - 8 people attended a meeting at the Reardon Center on January 19
- Participants were selected by the Mayor and County commissioners
  - Not a random sample
  - Participants were generally more involved in and more familiar with local governmental issues than the "average" resident
- The overall composition of the meetings reflected the diverse demographics of the County
  - 11 men
  - 9 women
  - 12 Whites
  - 5 African-Americans
  - 3 Hispanics
  - Age range of participants: 30-80 years
  - All commission districts were represented

Bottom Line Up Front: Conclusions…

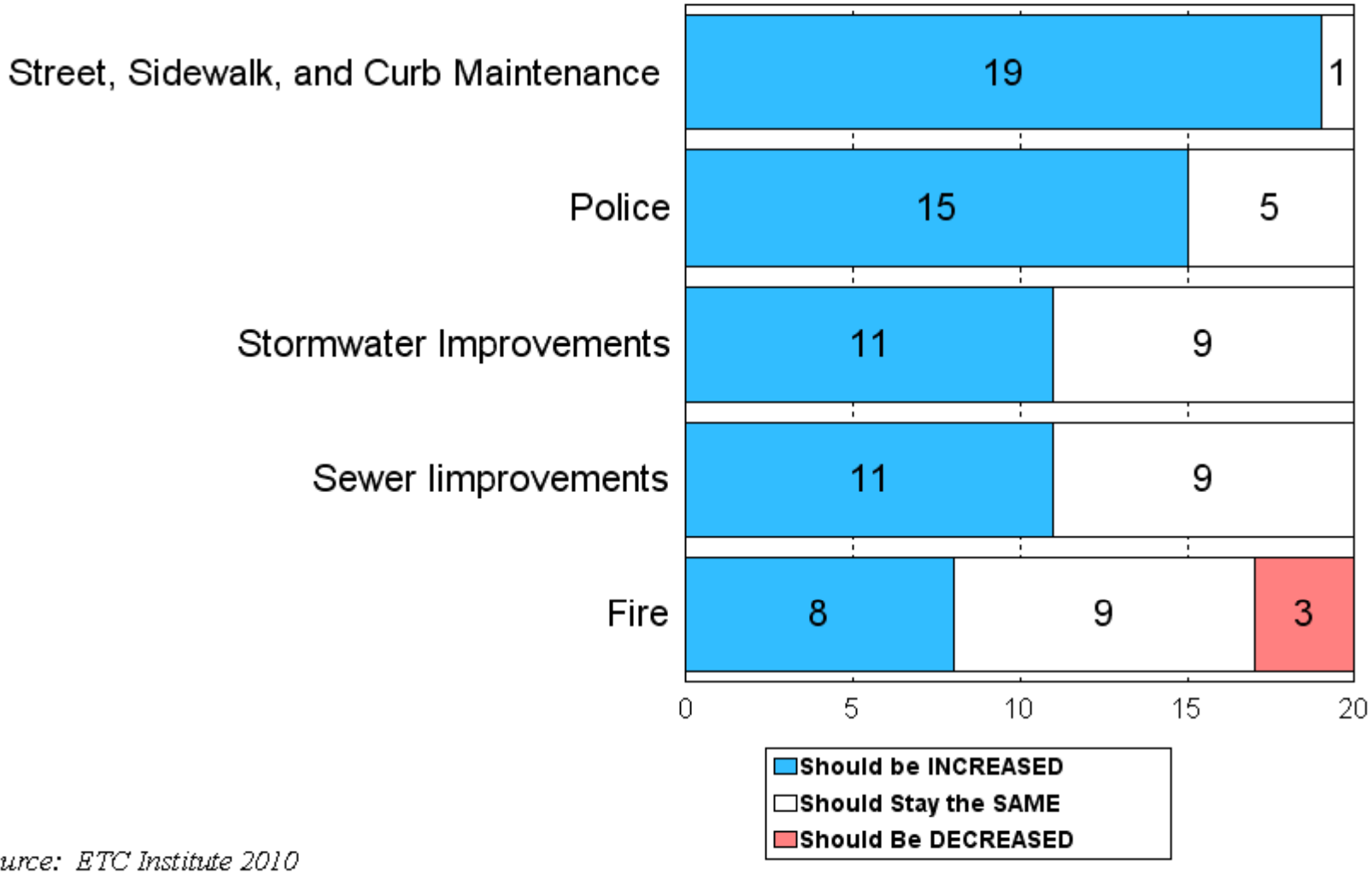
- The County should move forward with plans to present voters with a ¼ cent sales tax for public safety and infrastructure
- The tax should include funding for
  - More specialty police officers (narcotics, SROs, etc.)
  - Curbs and sidewalks
  - Repairs to sanitary and storm sewers
- To the extent possible, infrastructure improvements should be completed in a coordinated manner that will help enhance the overall appearance/aesthetics of neighborhoods
- County should pursue a "dedicated" sales tax for 10-20 years

Findings:

How should funding for major county services change?

How Focus Group Participants Thought Funding for Major County Services Should Change

by number of respondents



Source: ETC Institute 2010

Reasons Residents Thought Funding For Various Services Should Be Increased

- Police:
  - "We have had a high crime rate that has existed for a long time."
  - "The community is growing and police coverage needs to grow proportionately."
  - "We need more specialized officers, especially for narcotics."
  - "We need more SROs at the schools."
- Fire:
  - "The equipment and facilities are wearing out and it is a risk to the firemen."
  - "Some areas of the County are not covered well."
  - "We must keep up with additional growth in the County."

Reasons Residents Thought Funding For Various Services Should Be Increased

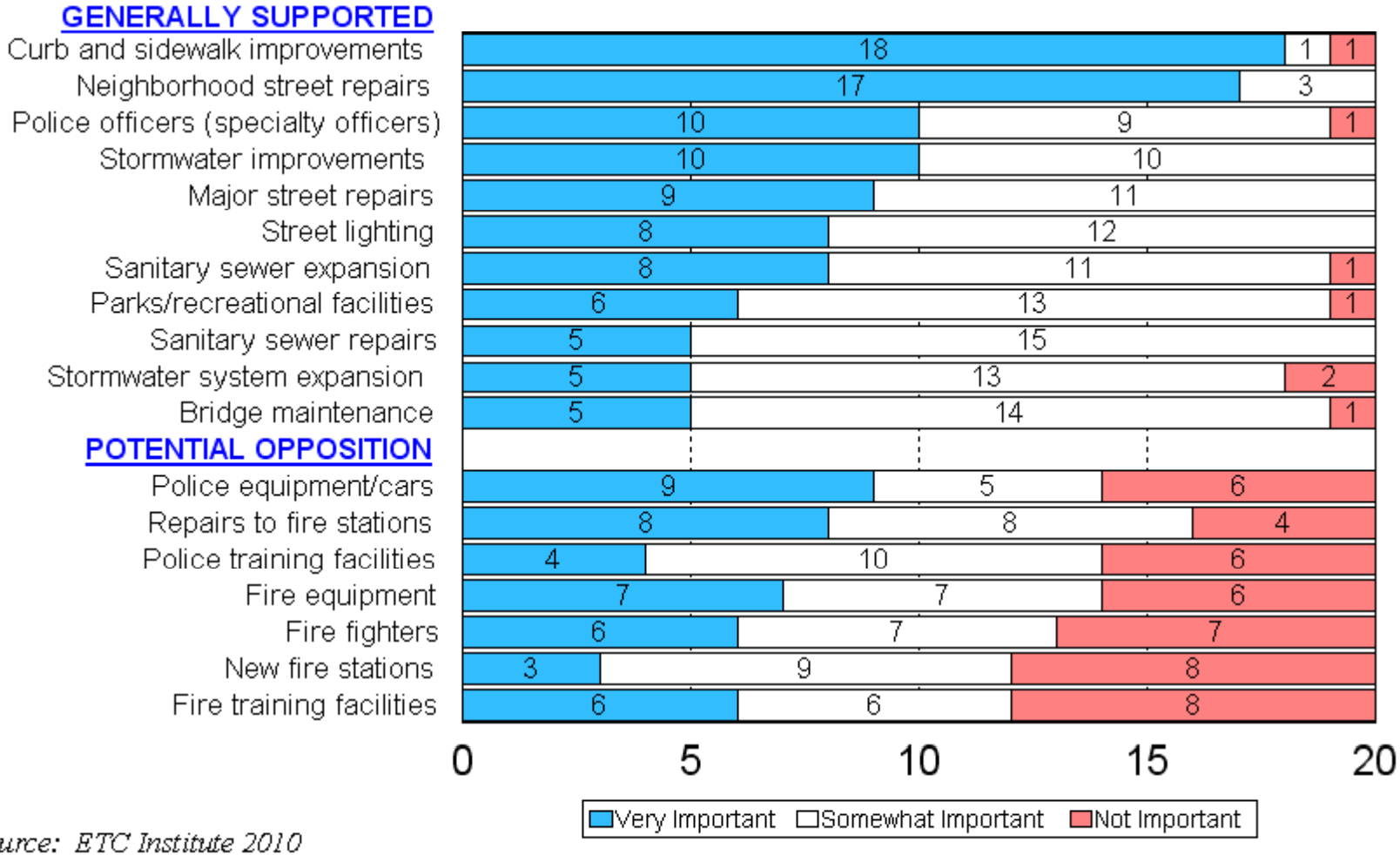
- **Street and Road Maintenance**
  - "Bad sidewalks and curbs make it appear that no one cares about this part of town (State Avenue)."
  - "Sidewalks and streets are not maintained, grass is not mowed and there is too much trash."
- **Stormwater Management/Flood Prevention:**
  - "The Argentine area has always had stormwater management problems."
  - "The Federal government is asking cities to step up to the plate to update infrastructure, so we need to step up."
  - "In some areas the infrastructure is 80 years old."
- **Sewer improvements:**
  - "With just an average rain, sewers back up."
  - "We have an aging infrastructure that needs to be repaired."

Findings:

How important is it to fund specific programs and services that could be included in a future sales tax?

How Important Focus Group Participants Thought It Was for the County to Increase Funding for Specific Projects/Services

by number of respondents



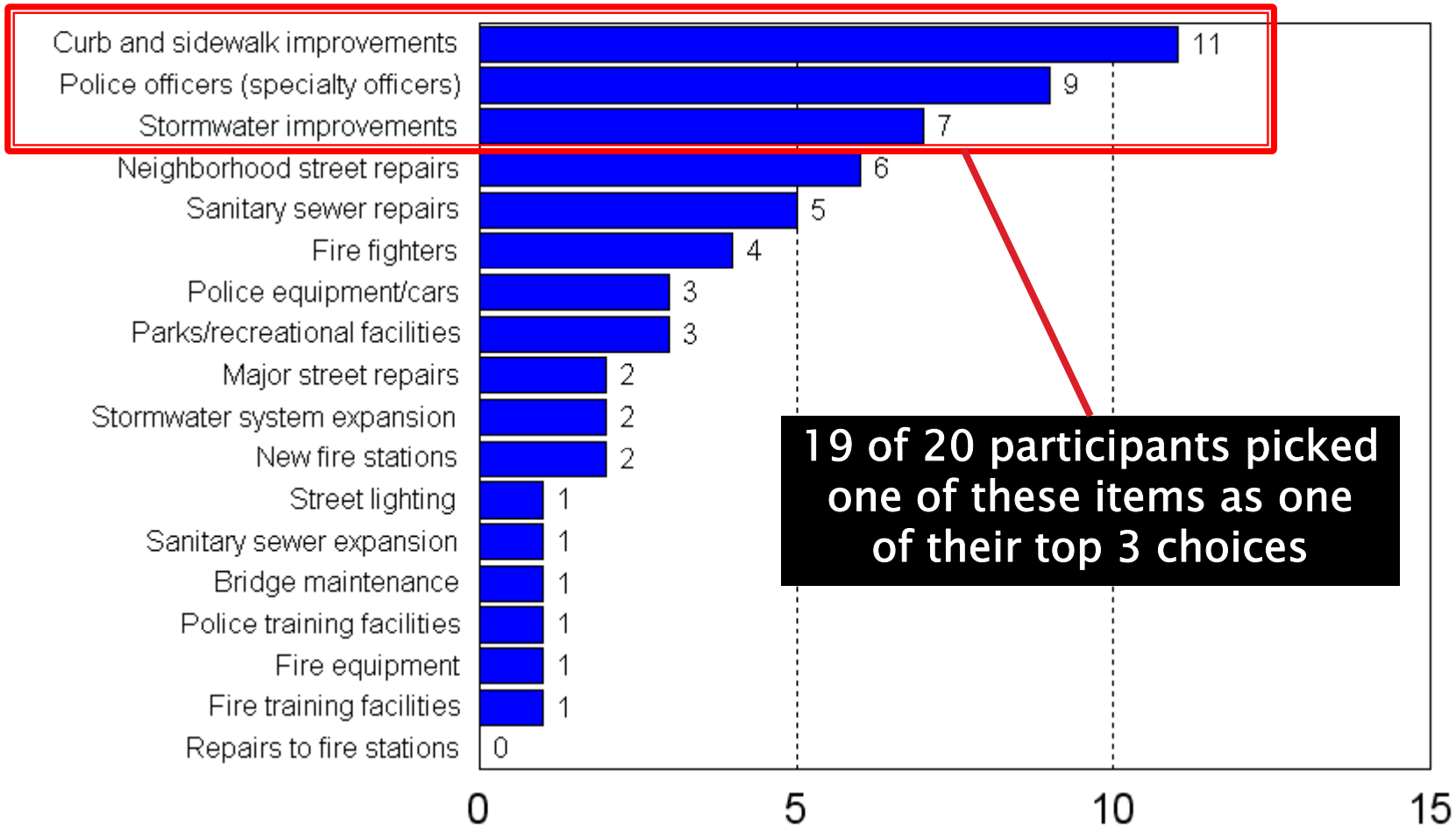
Source: ETC Institute 2010

Findings:

Which projects and services would residents be most willing to have funded by a future sales tax?

Projects and Services that Focus Group Participants Would Support Most on a Future Sales Tax

by number of respondents who selected the item as one of their top three choices



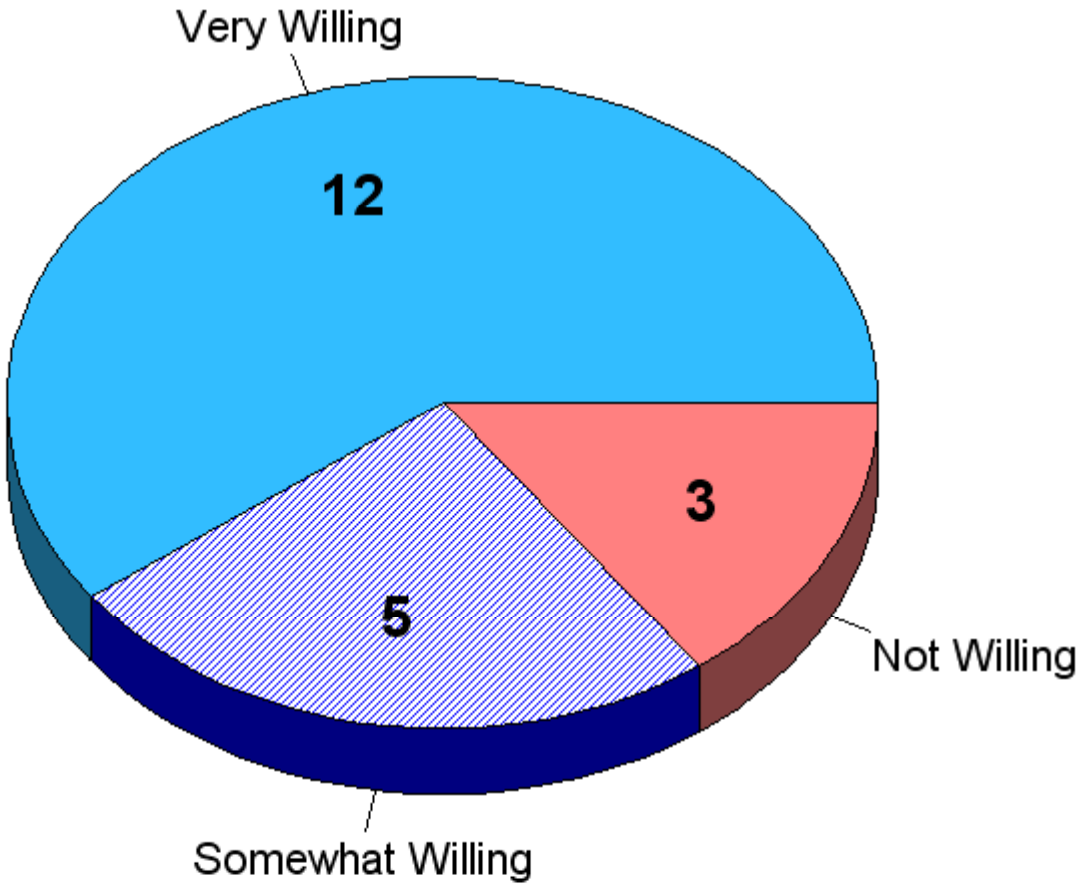
Source: ETC Institute 2010

Findings:

How willing are residents to support a future sales tax ?

Willingness of Focus Group Participants to Support a 1/4 Cent Sales Tax if it Included Funding for More Police Officers, Curbs/Sidewalks, and Storm/Sewer System Improvements

by percentage of respondents



Source: ETC Institute 2010

Reasons Residents Were Not "Very Willing" to Support a Sales Tax

<u>Those who were "somewhat willing" said:</u>

- "I need to know how the sales tax would make us compare to other areas in the Metro so that shoppers will not be dissuaded from shopping here because of a higher sales tax."
- "I need some assurances of accountability; how can we be sure they will actually do these projects."
- "I need more information about the actual cost and specific projects that will be funded. I want to know that they are really needed and that we have tried other options."

<u>Those who were "not willing" said;</u>

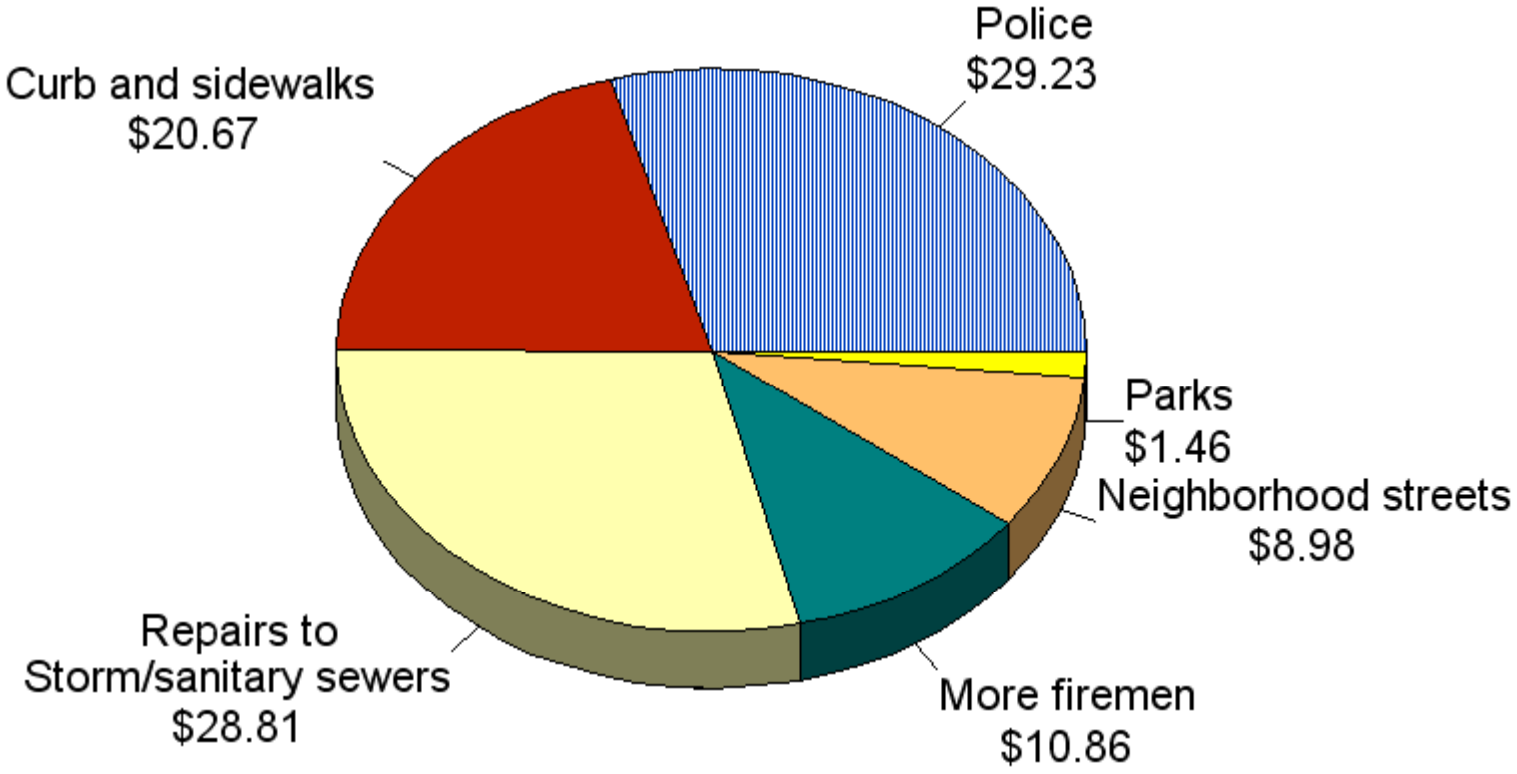
- "My community (northeast) has gotten nothing for all these years, I doubt it is going to change."
- "Senior citizens on social security can't afford more taxes; taxes are already too high."
- "I have trust issues with the UG."

Findings:

How would residents like to see funding for a future sales tax allocated ?

How Focus Group Participants Would Allocate $100 from a ¼ Cent Sales Tax for Public Safety and Infrastructure

mean distribution for all respondents



Source: ETC Institute 2010

Findings:

What type of tax should the County present to voters?

Preferred Type of Tax

- <u>Preferred Type: Dedicated</u>
  - 12 (60%) participant preferred a dedicated sales tax
  - 8 (40%) preferred a general purpose tax
  - Some participants were concerned about accountability
  - 5 of the 12 participants who said they would support a dedicated sales tax would not support a general purpose sales tax
  - All of those who supported a general purpose tax were also willing to support a dedicated tax

Findings:

How many years should the sales tax last?

Preferred Length for the Tax

- <u>Preferred Length: at least 10 years</u>
  - 3 participants would probably not support the tax
  - Of the remaining 17 people, 16 indicated that they would support a tax that lasted at least 10 years, assuming:
    - There were assurances that the tax would be used for the projects promised
  - 7 participants indicated that they preferred the 10-year time frame because it would hold the County accountable
    - They felt the tax would be renewed if the County did a good job implementing the tax and they were not sure that they would support a tax that lasted more than 10 years
  - 5 participants were concerned that 10 years was not enough time
    - But all of these people would still support the 10-year tax

Findings:

What Impact Would the State Sales Tax and Cigarette Tax Proposals Have on Support for the County Tax?

Impact of State Initiatives

- <u>State Sales Tax:</u>
  - Only 3 participants indicated that a 1% state sales tax would make them less supportive of the proposed County sales tax
  - Most of the participants did not think the proposed state sales tax would affect their level of support
  - 4 people suggested that the County implement its sales tax before the State sales tax just to be safe
- <u>Cigarette Tax:</u>
  - None of the participants thought the proposed 55-cent per pack tax on cigarettes would make the less supportive of the County sales tax

Closing Comments

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- **“Have there been other considerations for funding? Have we done our homework? Is this really needed?”**
- **“Make sure that the sales tax goes to the issues as promised. Accountability is very very important.”**
- **“Police and Fire need to be the main focus. I know we have other needs, but we need to be sure the community is safe.”**
- ***“I appreciate this kind of a process and respect my fellow participants.”***
- ***“I hope and pray that the UG listens to what the citizens have said, and especially these focus groups.”***
- ***“My bills are going up so I just can’t support any more tax increases. Tax increases are really hard on seniors.”***
- ***“With all the new things that are coming to this area, we should support tax for the betterment of our community.”***
- **“We need to sell this to the people. Everything else has been tried.”**

Recommendations

Recommendations…

- The County should move forward with plans to present voters with a ¼ cent sales tax for public safety and infrastructure
- The tax should include funding for
  - More specialty police officers (narcotics, SROs, etc.)
  - Curbs and sidewalks
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- County should pursue a “dedicated” sales tax for 10-20 years

Other Issues to Address…

- County should not rely solely on the results of these focus groups to predict the likely outcome of the sales tax
  - Focus Groups are <u>not</u> a scientific sampling of the voting population
- County will need to do a good job educating the public about the need for the sales tax
  - The County will need to explain that other options have already been tried
- County will need to address issues about how the sales tax will affect the County's competitiveness with other communities
  - Will the higher sales tax hurt local business?

Questions??

THANK YOU