

# **Are the Chargers a Winner?**

**By John Nienstedt**

## **What a Difference Winning Makes**

The latest installment of the KPBS/Competitive Edge Research Poll shows a Chargers proposal to build a new football stadium could go either way. Compared to the virulent general opposition measured in previous surveys, it appears that winning on the field, in addition to a well-crafted stadium proposal and removal of the hated “ticket guarantee,” has turned a stadium deal from a non-starter into a real possibility. On the other hand, 44% say that the Chargers leaving for presumably greener pastures in Los Angeles would make no difference to them. In fact, only 29% say moving the team north would make them very unhappy. However, among residents who consider themselves to be “big Charger fans,” the heartbreak would be serious. The survey also shows that many County residents do not know anything about the Chargers’ ownership and opinions among those who do are split fairly evenly.

## **The Fan Base**

While the survey shows that, when it comes to pro football, San Diego County is not in the same league as Green Bay, Wisconsin with its Packermania, the fan base is not what one would call “small.” Self professed “big fans” of the Chargers amount to 27% of the County’s population or roughly 560,000 residents, not including those under 18 years old. Another 40% admit to being casual fans or the “fair weather” variety for which San Diego seems to be famous.

One very interesting finding is that big fans come in all shapes and sizes. True, men are more likely than women to be rabid about the Chargers. Even so, 22% of women consider themselves big Charger fans compared to 32% among males, so the

difference between the sexes is not that great and not even statistically significant. Certainly, residents who like the ownership and believe the Chargers contribute to the local community are much more likely to be fans, showing that public relations work may increase the fan base. But, other than that, the survey turns up no significant demographic pockets of fandom.

### **Frustrations With Ownership Not Evident**

Despite tension between the Spanos family and San Diego's elected officials and longtime ownership of the team, there is no consensus among residents as to what to make of Chargers' ownership: 27% rate ownership favorably and 24% have an unfavorable impression. But 39%, a startlingly large figure for the fairly high profile Spanos family, say they do not know anything about the owners. Clearly, ownership could have a higher and better profile.

Where the sexes differ is in their assessment of ownership. Not that either gender overwhelmingly likes or dislikes the owners, but women tend to be far less knowledgeable about the Chargers' ownership. About half say they know nothing about the Spanos regime while only 29% of men make the same claim. This reflects the more intense scrutiny men give sports in general and sports franchises in particular.

### **Giving Back to the Community**

Residents generally perceive that the Chargers are contributing something to the local community. But only 20% say the contributions amount to "a lot," 24% are unsure how much the Chargers are contributing and another 16% believe the team either contributes nothing at all or not much. If Charger charitable and civic contributions are in fact sizeable, most residents are not getting the message.

Again, the survey shows that very few demographic differences revolve around this topic. Generally, every group believes the team is doing something – but not a lot – for the community. The exception in this case is very liberal residents. They tend to perceive the Chargers as contributing less than conservatives do. Could the charitable or civic “bar” for those on the far left of the ideological spectrum be significantly higher than it is for those on the right? This would suggest that conservatives, in this case at least, are a little less judgmental when it comes to civic giving. It is also possible that residents are responding to the Spanos’ political contributions, which tend fund Republican causes.

### **The Chargers’ Stadium Proposal**

The survey’s most provocative finding is that more County residents approve (47%) of the Chargers’ plan for building a new stadium than disapprove of it (41%). Such a result was probably unthinkable before the start of the season. Importantly, within the City (where a vote on a stadium measure would take place) the margin is a little larger. The Chargers’ proposal is doing best where it needs to win.

It is not surprising to find that Charger fans are rallying around the plan. Just over two-thirds of “big” fans support it, with 40% strongly approving of it. On the other side, a majority of those who are not fans disapprove of the plan with 43% doing so strongly. It is therefore likely to be the casual fan who will ultimately decide the fate of any plan. Among these folks, 44% approve of the plan while an equal number do not, with 11% unsure at this point.

Another significant factor determining support and opposition to the stadium plan is length of residency. It is fascinating to find that the longer one has resided in their neighborhood the *less likely* they are to support the Chargers’ plan. For example, just 35% of those who have lived in their neighborhood for more than two decades (64% of

whom are seniors and therefore more likely to vote) approve of the plan. On the other hand, 60% of recent arrivals approve of it. This is probably related to ticket guarantee memories or the lack of them and suggests the Chargers may find themselves in the difficult position of having to rely on support from newer residents who are less likely to show up at the polls.

Females are also going to be tough for the team to bring on board. Despite finding that women are rivaling men in their love for the team, their affections are qualified. While plan approval among men is a robust 56%, among women it is a paltry 39% and a scant 18% strongly approve of it.

Finally, the survey shows that civic and charitable contributions to the community will make a difference in the fight for approval. Not surprisingly, those who see the Chargers doing a lot for the community overwhelmingly support their plan. But it is that large chunk of those who say the team has done only “some” good works that is split almost down the middle (46% approve vs. 46% disapprove). And what might be more worrisome for the Chargers is that nearly one-quarter of those who are unsure about the Chargers’ contributions are against approving the plan by a margin of 41% to 37% with only 10% saying they strongly approve of it. Clearly, the Chargers’ role in the community is an important piece of the puzzle for them.

## **Moving to LA?**

Since the departure of the Raiders, the lack of an NFL franchise in the huge and financially lucrative Los Angeles market has consistently fueled speculation that the Chargers might pull up the moving vans and head north. Ownership then moved their pre-season training facilities to Carson and speculation became rampant that this was merely a precursor to full-fledged relocation. The survey shows that, while some fans would be distraught, a large number of residents would shrug and a fairly small

percentage would actually be happy to be rid of the Chargers. The implication: a threat to move is a limited stick which, in and of itself, would not get the team where it wants to be – over 50% approval on a stadium measure.

Sentiment on the Chargers' departure falls along predictable lines. Big fans of the team would generally be mortified; non-fans would generally say "so what." But beyond that the survey taps into some interesting geographic fault lines. For instance, San Diego city residents would be more chagrined than those outside the city, indicating a more intense affection for the Chargers as the team that shares their City's name. But the survey also shows a disconnect among those in the south suburbs and, especially, the north coastal area. The former suggests that south county residents may have other sports on their mind (futbol, for instance). But the fact that north coastal residents are blasé about a possible Chargers' move (and 25% would actually welcome it!) insinuates that residents there tend to see the Chargers as less of "their team" (and perhaps more "their team" if they were to move up the I-5 freeway).

## **Conclusion**

A year ago a new stadium was perceived by civic observers to be pie in the Spanos' sky. Public relations mis-steps, governmental wrangling, a mediocre team and the fear of taxpayer subsidies combined to paint a bleak picture. However, the public mood has turned for the better and the Chargers are now on an even footing with their proposal. Passage at the ballot box is not assured, but at least residents are listening.

Still, residents are not in the mood to be bullied. The threat of moving the team, even to arch-rival Los Angeles, is often met with shrugs. Another surprising finding is that the ill will created by City officials' friction-filled relationship with ownership is largely passé in the minds of residents. Perhaps this is a cue for City officials to, in turn, let bygones be bygones. But the questions remain: is this merely a brief respite which ends after the season? If winning is so crucial to support for a new stadium, will the team be able to

repeat their success when the stakes are really raised during the 2006 campaign? Can the Chargers wage an effective campaign which gets through to a fickle and skeptical electorate?