

Attitudes Toward Petco Park

By John Nienstedt

Clouds of Controversy Lift as Ballpark Celebrates First Anniversary

Back in 1998 voters in the City of San Diego passed Proposition C, the measure which greenlighted the region's most ambitious redevelopment project and eventually led to the construction of Petco Park. Then Padres President Larry Lucchino promised San Diegans "the world's best ballpark in America's finest city." Though Lucchino moved on to Boston, he is vindicated by the results of the latest KPBS/Competitive Edge Research Poll. It shows that the ballpark is very popular with county residents. Despite the kudos however, Petco Park's success has not translated into a seismic shift in voter opinion. Support for Proposition C still runs at about 60% among city voters, which is identical to what it received in 1998. Another finding demonstrates that the redevelopment project is generally seen as a good deal for residents, the City and the Padres. But, just as clearly, the sentiment is that the team got the better end of the deal. The survey also shows that most county residents have not actually been to Petco Park and this is related to the finding that only 19% label themselves as "big fans" of the Padres.

Where are All The Fans?

It could all relate to this being baseball's off-season, but the Chargers have – at least temporarily – captured the hearts of more San Diegans. While fewer than one-in-five county residents say they are now big Padres fans, the December installment of this poll showed that 27% are big Charger fans. Despite drawing over six times as many fans to their games last year, the team's fan base is smaller than the Chargers'. This suggests that televised games play a much bigger part of the Chargers' success.

Interestingly, the survey shows that there are few distinct pockets of strong fan support or weakness for the Padres. That may reflect a marketing effort which has tried to sell baseball to all demographic groups. For instance, there is no significant difference between the sexes when it comes to fandom.

There are, however, some fairly small demographic patterns. Those earning middle incomes (\$40,000 to \$80,000 annually) are more likely to be Padres fans and more likely to be hard-core fans at that. In what might be a worrisome development for baseball as well as Padre marketers, the survey shows that the fan base drops off significantly among younger adults. Just 12% of those in the 18 to 24 year group say they are big fans of the team, while 44% are not fans at all. Among those over 44, 21% are big fans and just 32% are not fans. And, wading into the age-old debate of whether baseball is a sport for conservatives or liberals, the results show that more conservatives are attracted to the Padres. Well over half who describe themselves as very liberal are not Padres fans.

Petco Attendance: Take Me Out To The Ballpark

2004 was a banner year at the turnstiles for the team as it drew slightly over 3 million fans during Petco Park's inaugural season. Despite that record-obliterating pace, 56% of county residents have not yet set foot in the ballpark. The 44% who have attended a game at Petco equates to about 880,000 unique adult visitors. Most who have visited only took in a game or two. Just 3.5% visited Petco Park more than 10 times last season.

Visitation to Petco is obviously strongly related to whether or not someone is a fan. About three-quarters of stalwart Padres fans made it to the ballpark last year and most of those went on three or more occasions. Among casual fans, about half visited Petco and the large majority were only there once or twice. Non-fans were basically the

opposite of the big fans, as over three-quarters have not visited the Park at all.

Aside from whether a resident is a Padres fan or not, attendance comes down to income, location, age and, curiously, voter registration. As for income, the results here show a significant amount of price sensitivity on the part of residents. Few of those earning less than \$20,000 per year have been to the ballpark and virtually none went to more than a couple games. While attendance among those in the \$20,000 to \$40,000 range is higher, it is not until the \$80,000 and above categories are reached that we find more than half attending a ballgame. A night out at Petco Park is clearly priced out of the comfort range of many lower income folks.

The survey also shows that those nearest the ballpark visit it much more often than those outside the urban core. Over half the residents in the south city – where the ballpark is located – have visited Petco Park.

The finding relating a resident's age to visitation is mainly a product of elderly folks not attending games. Just 24% of those over the age of 75 have frequented Petco at all.

Finally, the differing results for registered voters and non-registrants may result from the highly politicized nature of the ballpark building process. Not only was it ratified by a public vote, but those who are more civically engaged, as voters are, were exposed to the protracted legal battles surrounding it via the media. It is possible that voters in particular have a sense of "ownership" of the ballpark and – as "landlords" – are more inclined to check on their investment. As it is, 20% made it to Petco five or more times, while just 5% of non-registrants have been there as often.

Rating Petco Park Itself

Nearly 60% give Petco Park a grade of A (for excellent) or B (for good) and most of those are A grades. The balance generally do not grade Petco harshly, they simply do not have enough information to evaluate it at all, as 30% are unsure what grade it deserves. Just 3% give Petco an F and, it should be noted, 90% of those folks have never been to the ballpark, indicating they are judging less on aesthetics and more on political factors. Overall Petco Park's grade point average (GPA) stands at 3.16; a very good score for a public venue.

If Petco Park is garnering rave reviews overall, it is hitting a grand slam with ardent Padres fans. Sixty-four percent of them give it an A, only 6% say it warrants less than a B grade and it achieves a GPA of 3.60 among big fans. Non-fans are not really negative about the Park, though the GPA drops to 2.74 among them. Half are unsure what grade to give it.

The survey finds that, even controlling for fandom, those who visit the Park frequently like Petco much more than those who went one to five times. They, in turn, give it much better evaluations than residents who have never visited it. In fact, the results show that it is very rare for anyone who has been to Petco Park to give it less than a C grade!

We do find, however, that folks between the ages of 55 and 74 tend not to think quite so highly of Petco as others do. While that age group gives Petco a B-plus on average, the other age categories give the ballpark an A-minus. This small but significant difference may relate to a fondness built up over time for the smaller ballparks of yesteryear or it may tap into a resistance to change among this age group.

Another observation is that residents in the city's southern portion, despite visiting Petco more often than those in other regions of the county, are not quite as exuberant in their

praise for the ballpark. The GPA there is just 2.92. This could relate to traffic issues stemming from the ballpark.

If We Had It To Do All Over Again, Would We?

The campaign to pass Proposition C was a huge civic debate conducted in the heat of a pennant race and the euphoria of the hometown team's appearance in the World Series for just the second time in their history. It has often been suggested that those festivities contributed to the measure's passage and that the ensuing litigation, financial issues and, simply, the long wait for the ballpark dampened enthusiasm for the redevelopment deal which produced Petco Park. These results show that is not the case. Support has remained constant, and, if anything, opponents are the ones who have given ground. Among all county residents 56% would vote for Proposition C now, 31% would vote against it and 11% are unsure how they would vote. Isolating voters in the city we find that 59.5% would vote for the measure, 33% would vote against it and 7% are unsure. The "yes" vote total is uncannily similar to the result in 1998, indicating that public opinion can be stable over long stretches of time.

Nearly every Padres fan or frequent Petco patron would likely vote to approve Proposition C again. Casual fans too would widely support the measure again. But what is startling is that even among non-fans and non-visitors – where a serious backlash would be expected -- Proposition C would have a fighting chance. A little over 40% in these two categories would vote "no," but nearly equal numbers would cast "yes" votes, indicating a draw even here.

One very interesting finding here is that conservatives are the measure's staunchest supporters. While liberals may view the deal as amounting to "corporate welfare," it appears that conservatives' greater affection for the team as well as their desire for an economic revitalization downtown trumps their fiscal reservations.

The survey also shows significantly less support for Proposition C among those 54 to 74 year-olds as well as among south city residents. While, on balance, still supportive, the erosion of “yes” votes confirms that south city residents in particular are less satisfied with Petco Park.

Finally, the survey finds that men would be much more inclined to approve Proposition C again than women.

A Good Deal For All

The popular perception, clearly demonstrated by the survey results, is that residents, the city and the Padres all came out winners in the ballpark and redevelopment deal. Though it was a “good trade” for all sides, it is evident that residents perceive the team got the better end of it. Sixty-three percent feel it was a very good deal for the Padres. In contrast, half say it was a very good deal for the City while 22% say it was a bad deal (7% “very bad”). This no doubt reflects the current fiscal problems the city is facing.

Non-fans tend to feel quite differently on this point than do big or even casual fans. In fact, it looks like fans and non-fans are on different planets. Over 80% of big fans feel the city got a very good deal while just a quarter of non-fans believe that and 41% say it was a *bad* deal for the city. Are fans ignoring what may be the deal’s negative fiscal impact on the city because they finally got a jewel of a ballpark built? Or is a feeling among non-fans that they received nothing in the deal begetting a sense of bitterness that has caused them to unfairly view Petco as a part of the fiscal problem.

Conclusion

Petco Park, despite the civic trauma during its creation, has lived up to its billing. It is certainly a popular venue. Residents and voters alike would “do it all again.” In hindsight, one is forced to consider the litigation which led to construction delays as a horrible waste. It produced needless rancor, added costs and postponed what ultimately is seen as an asset to the community. What’s more, no minds were changed over the last six-and-a-half years and San Diego finds itself right back where it started, in terms of public opinion, about the redevelopment project.

The results also show that the Padres, perhaps for the first time in many years, have some catching up to do with the town’s football team. With their public relations victories, winning season and trip to the play-offs, the Chargers won some hearts in San Diego. If the 2005 version of the Padres can do the same and generate excitement – especially among younger adults – they may very well get back on top.