

# Quality of Life in San Diego County

By John Nienstedt

The latest installment of the KBPS/Competitive Edge Research Poll finds San Diego County residents are largely happy with the region's quality of life. Over 80% rate life here to be "good," "very good" or "terrific." However, it is the trend that worries many San Diegans. Just over half believe the County's overall quality of life has declined in recent years and only 22% say things have actually improved. Further, there is disagreement over what the future holds. Fewer than one-in-three residents predict the quality of life will improve over the next few years while 47% see it getting worse with 16% saying "a great deal worse."

What fuels this trepidation? Without a doubt, traffic/road congestion is perceived as the single biggest threat to the region's quality of life. Another fairly widespread concern is affordable housing/cost of living. However, in keeping with San Diego's image as paradise-like, a substantial number of folks say "nothing" threatens their quality of life.

## **A Really Nice Place to Live, Especially if You Can Afford It**

Ask San Diegans what life is like here and the response is usually positive and some residents are almost giddy about where they live. In contrast, just 10% percent say the County's quality of life is only fair and just 6% rate it as poor or terrible.

Despite the overall rosy views of life in the County, the picture can change depending on a resident's socioeconomic standing. The survey confirms what we've probably all suspected: the rich tend to be more satisfied with their surroundings while things are not quite as nice for lower income earners. Of the 20% in the County who report annual household incomes in excess of \$100,000, 34% say we enjoy a very good quality of life and 31% say it is terrific for a whopping 65% strongly positive. Just 2% in the upper income category rate quality of life as strongly negative. On the other end of the income spectrum, only 37% of those with incomes of less than \$20,000 per year give County's

quality of life a strongly positive rating (just 9% say it is terrific). The evaluations among those earning \$20,000 to \$40,000 are similarly tepid. Middle income earners generally rate quality of life somewhat higher than low income residents but not nearly as high as the affluent.

Interestingly, folks who focus on traffic congestion as the region's main threat to quality of life are significantly more likely to rate life in San Diego as *better*. In fact, about two-thirds of the folks who say traffic is the number one issue facing the County rate its quality of life as either very good or terrific. On the other hand, just half those who tend to ignore traffic as an important issue give quality of life a strongly positive rating. The phenomenon of happier traffic-focused residents is common. Folks who are concerned about roads and traffic see civic problems as "mitigateable." Unlike those who concentrate on growth/development, these residents are progress-oriented "civic positivists" and this is expressed along the lines of "if we could build more roads, things would be fine."

Geographically, we find that residents of the southern suburbs (National City, Chula Vista, Coronado, Imperial Beach, Otay, San Ysidro) as well as those in north San Diego city report the highest quality of life. Residents in south San Diego city rate the quality of life lower.

### **Ah, the Good Old Days**

Just over half feel the County's quality of life has become somewhat or a great deal worse over the last few years. This is countered somewhat by the 22% who say it has improved and another 18% who feel it has stayed the same (at a generally high level).

The elderly are the most pessimistic about recent developments. In general, the survey finds that as age increases, negative assessments increase. To be sure, the results among those under 55 are not, on balance, positive. Almost half of them say things have gotten worse, though most stop short of saying quality of life has become a great

deal worse. But among the elderly, 55% say things have gone downhill and 26% say quality of life has gotten a great deal worse!

Residents of the south suburbs break with the rest of the County as equal percentages there see quality of life improving and getting worse. Though not a ringing endorsement of the policies that have brought the County to this point, that most south county residents are not nostalgic for the past is a good sign for that region. Perhaps decision makers there are “getting it right.” The same cannot be said for the County’s other regions, especially the south city, north suburbs, east county and north coastal areas. The latter appears to have lost the most while gaining the least in terms of quality of life: 56% say things have gotten worse while just 11% believe things have improved (0% say quality of life has improved greatly).

### **Headed Toward Oblivion (or at least toward becoming Los Angeles)?**

Compared to what they see in their rear view mirror, things tend to look a little better to San Diegans as they evaluate the County’s future prospects. Still 47% think quality of life will decline during the next few years, while 30% feel it will improve, 11% foresee no change and 12% are unsure.

Unlike the assessments of current and past quality of life which revolved mainly around demographics like income and age, it is one’s outlook on the important County issues which tends to determine a resident’s view of how things will play out. What we find is that people who believe over-population, development, traffic and the cost of housing are the most dangerous threats to quality of life are more likely to foresee future degradation. Therefore, these four are the County’s true hot-button issues.

But the survey also found that females are more optimistic than males. Thirty-five percent of women say the quality of life will improve while 40% believe things will get worse. On the other hand just 24% of men see improvement on the horizon and 55% are pessimistic.

Income is also tends to determine outlook. Those who earn more tend to be less negative as they evidently feel they can deal more effectively with whatever problems come along. Since they currently enjoy a higher quality of life, there is good reason for their relative optimism. While the future cannot be described as bleak for low income residents, they clearly are less likely to believe things will improve.

### **If Only We Could Fix . . .**

. . . traffic problems. Twenty-nine percent say traffic congestion/roads are the main threat to maintaining San Diego's quality of life. Another 13% say it is the second biggest threat for a combined percentage of 42%. This is the one elected officials and planners must deal with.

Those who are most concerned with traffic issues are older, upper income residents and registered voters. The latter is clearly a constituency that elected officials do not want to upset. On the other hand, the survey shows that those in the south city tend to be much less concerned with traffic and Democrats are also less focused on the issue. This strongly suggests that these residents are beset by other issues which take precedence.

Affordable housing/high cost of living is another big issue for many people. Overall, one quarter put it in their top two and 14% say it is the number one threat. Younger residents are much more sensitive to cost issues as over 20% believe it is the top impediment to maintaining the County's quality of life.

The survey also turned up a telling issue-based dichotomy between north coastal and south city residents. Very few in the former are at all concerned about affordable housing. Conversely, the survey shows this is clearly a big deal for south city folks. Since north coastal residents are usually homeowners with at least moderate incomes and the southern part of San Diego city contains many lower income families and renters, this makes sense. But the differences on cost issues are striking nonetheless.

Aside from traffic, what gets the goat of residents in the north coastal region is growth/development. Twenty-eight percent see overbuilding as a threat to their way of life and this presents the other side of the affordable housing dilemma: those in high income areas (no matter what region they reside in) tend to ignore issues of housing costs and focus on housing construction. Similarly, those in the north suburbs (along the Interstate 15 corridor) are more concerned with building.

When it comes to population growth and overcrowding, that is clearly an issue which affects older residents rather than younger ones. Those over 55 years-old tend to see it as a threat while those under 45 do not.

## **Conclusion**

County residents are saying: "It's gotten worse but it's still pretty good." Despite challenges caused by traffic congestion and high housing prices, most residents now enjoy a high quality of life. Yes, the survey shows that money may buy contentment since, material comforts will sometimes determine perceived quality of life, but even lower income residents are generally satisfied.

Many San Diegans are wary of the future and more are not thrilled with how things have unfolded over the past few years, but officials know that they can do much to maintain the County's vaunted quality of life by addressing transportation and housing issues. The trick is to do that while not falling into other pitfalls such as overbuilding and overpopulation.