

San Diegans Take a Look in the Mirror, Like What They See

By John Nienstedt

Ranking Cities has become a cottage industry in recent years. San Diego has been ranked as the fittest city, the third most kid-friendly city, the 13th best city for singles, and the tenth worst city for bike theft to name a few. While everyone else in America has their opinions about San Diego, what do County residents think about the metropolis they call home? The latest installment of the KPBS/Competitive Edge Research Poll finds most are very impressed with San Diego. They tend to point to nature – climate, coastline, etc. -- as the reasons for its appeal. In fact, a majority believes San Diego deserves its self-proclaimed title of “America’s Finest City.” Opinions vary on whether San Diego is a “world-class” city, but it is clear that the emphasis is on attaining that status. The larger negative aspects include traffic, growth and the costs of housing and living here.

General Impressions of San Diego

Ask San Diegans about their impression of the City in which they live and an incredible 88% respond with a favorable impression (68% *very favorable*) and only 7% respond unfavorably. Another 5% are either neutral or unsure on the question.

You must do some dedicated hunting to find a group of residents who do not have overwhelmingly positive views of San Diego. San Diegans across almost the entire demographic spectrum -- age, household income, and length of residency, to name a few -- hold strongly positive feelings about the city. Further, folks who identify traffic, growth, crime, and government ineptitude as being San Diego’s worst attributes all still hold very favorable impressions. This is another testament to the broadly positive feelings San Diego engenders and that, despite its faults, San Diego is a great place to live.

Still, there are a few groups at odds with the wholly positive impression. First, those who do not identify themselves as conservative or liberal are less likely to hold very favorable impressions. Only half of these ideology-free individuals hold a very favorable impression compared to almost three-quarters of those on either side of the ideological

spectrum. It is possible that folks in the political middle may feel a sense of detachment from the City to the point of being less satisfied with it. While conservatives and liberals may be able to weather civic turmoil because they can identify with politicians and parties, middle-of-the-road residents lack the same stabilizing influences. Perhaps they feel like no one in the power structure is “on their side” and that creates tension. There is other evidence in the poll that suggests these folks simply do not value what San Diego has to offer. They seem to focus on the non-natural attributes of the City.

Another thing the survey shows is that those who live in the eastern suburbs such as La Mesa, El Cajon, and Santee are not quite as giddy as everyone else about San Diego. The less temperate weather in East County may be a partial explanation. The cool ocean breezes are not as easily felt in these inland areas and, as we shall see, “the climate” is the main thing residents like about San Diego. It should be noted that 80% of east suburban residents do view San Diego favorably, so the City is far from reviled there. But 12% do hold a very negative impression of San Diego; four times as much as any other area!

A third factor that may negatively influence a resident’s impression of San Diego is how residents react to the people of San Diego. Those who list “the people” as San Diego’s worst attribute are much more likely to have a negative impression of the City. It appears that mom had a good point when she said “you attract more flies with honey.” How we treat people not only affects their immediate attitudes toward us individually, but appears to significantly color how they view the City as a whole. Note that we did not see this effect with any other negative attributes (e.g. traffic, growth, cost of living).

America’s Finest?

Under former Mayor Pete Wilson San Diego adopted the slogan “America’s Finest City” and it seems that most of us still feel that way--57% believe it fits while 36% think it does not. Only 15% of us feel that we fall far short of the mark.

Those in the south suburban areas of San Diego County much more readily identify with this statement than any other geographic area of the County. In fact, these folks are more likely to believe San Diego lives up to its slogan than even “real” San Diegans who

live within the city limits. With its new housing stock, parks, and shopping centers the south suburbs can indeed be a very nice place to live. We found that in the Quality of Life survey (March '04). While similar things can be said about north county, the northern communities may be more likely to affiliate themselves with their more established individual cities and communities—Del Mar, Encinitas, etc.— than do south county residents.

The survey also shows that residents are much more likely to engage in civic boosterism when they can afford it. Two-thirds of those making over \$80,000 annually say San Diego lives up to the America's Finest City label. On the other extreme, only 35% of those making less than \$20,000 and 49% of those earning between \$20,000 and \$40,000 per year agree.

Finally, the results show that those who peg traffic as the City's worst attribute are much more likely to agree that San Diego is America's Finest City. Though that seems oxymoronic, this finding converges with earlier research that shows the traffic-centric to be more content generally. Consider that traffic is a "mitigatable" concern; that is, congestion can, theoretically be relieved via more roads, better transportation technology and planning. On the other hand, growth and development cannot "get better." Therefore, folks who focus on traffic tend to be optimists and those who focus on development (as a negative attribute) are less optimistic.

World-Class or Cul de Sac; What Type of City is San Diego?

County residents are more evenly split as to whether San Diego is a world-class city. A little over 30% feel that San Diego is already up in that league, 42% feel that it has the potential to develop into a world-class metropolis, and 23% feel the City is not world-class. Clearly, the momentum is on the side of the progressives in this case.

Perhaps surprisingly, Republicans are more likely to view San Diego as a world-class city, with 43% classifying it as such versus 32% of Democrats, and only 17% of non-partisans and non-voters. For their part, the non-partisans and non-voters tend to think San Diego has the potential, but hasn't arrived yet.

Newcomers are also much more likely to rate San Diego as “world-class.” This suggests that new arrivals compare San Diego favorably to their recent locales. However, these results strongly suggest that the bloom comes off the rose as quickly as three years or as long as seven years. After that, residents may begin to focus on the negative and lose the perspective they came to San Diego with.

The finding that traffic-focused individuals are more positive again plays itself out here. Those who cite traffic congestion as the worst thing about San Diego are more likely to consider the City to be world class.

What’s the Best Thing About San Diego?

Watch any nationally televised San Diego sporting event (the Holiday Bowl, for example) and the commentators always talk about the region’s beautiful weather and gorgeous coastline. The survey reveals that these are the top two things San Diegans love about their own city, especially the weather. Almost 60% of residents highlight the weather as San Diego’s best attribute. The only other positive attribute making double-digits is the ocean and coastline of the County (10%). The marine features go hand-in-hand with the climate since many respondents who mention the weather also mention the ocean. As one elderly female told us “I like the boats the water and weather.” Also mentioned by a significant number of residents are people/culture (6%), tourism/attractions (6%), location (5%) and beauty (3%).

What’s the Worst Thing About San Diego?

San Diego’s two best attributes -- weather and the ocean -- are constantly attracting new residents into the city. But, paradoxically, these two qualities lead to San Diego’s two worst attributes -- traffic and growth/overcrowding. Almost a quarter of the populace (24%) feels traffic congestion is San Diego’s worst feature and 18% think that congestion/overcrowding is the worst feature. In fact, many respondents tie the two together. One older north coastal Republican said that San Diego’s worst attribute is, “traffic, and, just like anywhere else, too many people, too many people . . . “

The scourge of traffic congestion certainly has a geographic component. In this case the issue is especially for residents north of Interstate 8, which is home to the County's worst traffic corridors. One out of every three residents north of I-8 says traffic is the worst thing about living here. To the south and east, growth and affordable housing concerns tend to replace traffic as the number one negative.

Growth and development issues also strike a chord as being San Diego's least likable characteristic with a significant segment of the population. Growth – one elderly woman from the east suburbs labeled the situation a “population explosion” – wears a little more on residents at opposite ends of the age spectrum. Younger residents may be more environmentally sensitive and growth encroaches on open space. Those in this age group also are more active and the loss of open land curtails hiking, mountain biking, and other outdoor activities. Senior citizens dislike growth because they remember San Diego the way it was before extensive development. This same factor also explains why those who have resided in San Diego for more than two decades also tend to cite overcrowding as San Diego's top negative attribute.

While traffic and overcrowding are the top two negative attributes, some residents raised other issues. Lack of affordable housing (11%) and high cost of living (10%) are two issues that go together. As one middle-aged Latina put it, “it is too expensive to live here.” The proverbial “sunshine tax” may seem overly excessive to folks trying to buy their first homes and raise children.

On the other hand, the high costs of housing and goods in San Diego do not seem to bother those over the age of 55 as much as governmental incompetence and political problems do. Overall, 7% finger local government and politics as the worst thing about San Diego, but that figure more than doubles among seniors. Much of this may be explained by the pension problems (a particularly salient issue to older residents) that have been taking place in the City of San Diego, but this also relates to the fact that seniors are much more likely to pay close attention to and participate in local politics.

Crime (4%) and the “people” (3%), jobs (3%), and immigration (3%) also received a significant numbers of mentions as San Diego's worst afflictions.

Conclusion

San Diegans genuinely like the metropolitan area which they call home. The hometown pride is convincingly revealed by the fact that most even think the City really is the finest in America. Many believe it is on its way to being a world-class city, and may already be there. The future appears bright.

The key to San Diego's success is "location, location, location." In a spot that produces a temperate climate and beautiful coastline, San Diego is clearly situated in an enviable natural location. Unfortunately these positive attributes attract new people, and growth leads to traffic, overcrowding, and high housing costs; all things San Diegans recognize as negatives. So the survey not only highlights the civic pride, but also shows that the City's potential for decay rests in the good things which make San Diego special. The trick will be to deal with the problems while retaining the physical charms that make San Diego "America's Finest City."