

## **Survey shows area residents concerned about environment**

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### **By Robert Rogers**

Despite an increasingly dismal view of the economy, Inland Empire residents are growing more conscious about protecting the environment through personal habits and smart growth.

The final version of the 2007 Inland Empire Annual Survey released Monday sketched a picture of residents generally less fearful of crime, more concerned with the environment and more confident in their elected leaders.

Some of the economic indicators showed the sharpest year-over-year changes, as Inland residents have been hard hit by a plummeting housing market and inflationary pressures driven by high energy costs.

The study's authors noted that the survey questions were completed in November, suggesting responses concerning the economy would be even more dour today.

"The housing crisis, the rises in gas prices and commodities, it's hitting pocketbooks very hard," said study co-author Barbara Sirotnik of the Institute of Applied Research and Policy Analysis at Cal State San Bernardino, which has conducted the annual survey since 1997. "Only 25 percent (of respondents) said they are better off than they were one year ago, which is an all-time low."

But while respondents were predictably cynical about the economy, they were overwhelmingly concerned with the healthy of the environment, with increasing percentages reporting changes in personal behavior to conserve and recycle.

More than eight in 10 survey respondents said they recycle, and 34 percent said they actively conserved water in their homes and yards. Perhaps more telling, 10 percent of San Bernardino County residents reported that they avoided driving their cars alone by biking, carpooling or taking mass transit, and 7 percent said they had made upgrades to their homes to make them more energy-efficient.

The commitment to greening lifestyles, even amidst economic uncertainty, speaks to a strong and building social movement toward environmental stewardship, the authors said.

A key survey result, said co-author Shel Bockman, showed 69 percent of San Bernardino and 71 percent of Riverside respondents saying environmental health was at least as important as economic growth. More than 50 percent in both cities said the environment took precedence over the economy.

"Both are important, but people are very concerned about the state of the environment and see it a more pressing issue in some sense than the economy," Bockman said.

He cautioned that the strong commitment to the environment could be waning slightly eight months after the survey was conducted, and that respondents tend to answer questions in ways they feel are socially acceptable.

Certain responses that were particularly encouraging to the environment may face the most pressure if the economy continues to slide, Sirotnik said.

For instance, 86 percent of those surveyed said they would be inclined to buy from green businesses, even if the products cost more.

“That may have shifted a bit” with deepening economic torpor, Sirotnik said.

An overriding message from the 132-page report is that environmental issues have a newfound salience with the public, rivaling economic concerns, Bockman said, which poses fresh challenges to elected leaders and policymakers.

“The results suggest that voters are concerned with green issues as well as economic development issues,” Bockman said. “Political leaders are going to have to find ways to effectively balance those issues.”

Survey responses showed improved perceptions of other issues as well. Just 24 percent of respondents said crime was the most negative aspect of living in San Bernardino County, down from 33 percent in 2006, the sharpest one-year drop in the survey’s history. Nearly two-thirds of respondents said they had at least “some” confidence in elected leaders, up from 56 percent the year before.

Riverside County was polled for the first time in years because of sponsorships by Riverside-based agencies and the Green Valley Initiative, a program launched last year to drive environmentally-friendly and energy-efficient growth in the Inland Empire.

The institute surveyed 2,388 people in the two counties in October and November 2007.

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