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Poll Finds North Carolinians Wary of Political Leadership, Paying More Taxes to Improve the State's Infrastructure

RALEIGH, N.C., May 28, 2008 - North Carolinians are divided about how growth is affecting the state's infrastructure, according to results of a recent poll conducted by the Institute for Emerging Issues (IEI) at North Carolina State University. The poll also reveals that North Carolinians oppose paying more for improvements, and they do not trust local or state political leadership to handle these problems.

The poll asked hard questions about the state's infrastructure and was designed to discover public understanding of the challenges ahead, and to measure support for solutions and their price tag. Specifically, the questions addressed growth related problems in the area of transportation, water and sewer, and school construction.

Respondents were evenly divided about whether North Carolina is heading in the right or wrong direction (50%-50%) and doing a good or a bad job at managing growth (50%-50%). But a majority do not trust the state's political leadership to handle traffic congestion, water shortages and overcrowded schools.

- 68% do not trust the political leadership to solve the most important problems facing the state
- 55% do not trust local leadership to make wise decisions about transportation planning
- 54% said local government does not manage water use wisely
- 51% said they had "no" or "only a little" trust that local school boards planned effectively for growth in enrollment.

Infrastructure

Respondents consistently opposed the idea of paying more to improve the state's infrastructure. A majority of respondents opposed creating toll roads, increasing the gas tax to pay for improving state roads, and increasing any type of local tax that would allow counties to build new roads or cities to fund mass transit projects. Likewise, only 35% of respondents support new state issued bonds to pay for improving water and sewer infrastructure once they were informed the bonds would require new taxes.

Education

A plurality of respondents say K-12 education is the most important problem facing the state. The majority of respondents agree the state lottery does not provide enough money for schools and that school overcrowding is the major problem impeding student performance. Despite resistance to new taxes in general, 81% of respondents want the state to pay a greater share of the cost of building more schools to deal with the growth in enrollment, even if counties are unwilling to pay to reduce overcrowding.

(more)

(Institute for Emerging Issues Poll Results, pg. 2)

Transportation

There was evidence of greater support for improving mass transit. Respondents rate the quality of their local mass transit as poor—affordability, convenience, reliability and availability—but a majority say they would increase their use of mass transit if they had access to mass transit that was affordable (57%), or convenient (66%).

Similarly, support for increasing the percentage of the Department of Transportation's (DOT) budget spent on mass transit climbed from 32% to 44% once respondents were informed that DOT spent 3% of its budget on mass transit.

When asked if they favored privatization of DOT, resulting in for-profit companies building and maintaining state roads in exchange for charging tolls and receiving payments from the state highway trust fund, 74% respondents oppose privatization of DOT. If they thought transportation was the most important problem, respondents were more likely than other respondents to support toll roads (46% vs. 33%) and the privatization of DOT (38% vs. 23%). Also, a majority of these respondents support some kind of tax increase (58% vs. 48%) to allow counties to build new roads.

Lastly, 53% support increasing their local sales tax by one-half cent if it is used to improve mass transit to relieve traffic congestion, which is the only time in the poll that a majority supported any kind of tax increase.

About the Poll

IEI will use the poll data to inform its programs of work on tax modernization, energy and environment, and growth. The poll is one of three planned for this year, which will yield a broad, detailed map of citizen attitudes about the important challenges facing North Carolina in the years ahead.

The poll included 492 respondents from North Carolina, was in the field from May 7-18, 2008, and had a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 4 percent. Knowledge Networks, Inc conducted the poll for IEI.

About IEI

IEI is a think-and-do tank focused on tackling big issues that affect North Carolina's future growth and prosperity. From energy, to fiscal modernization, to improving our systems of higher education, IEI takes the lead in convening state leaders in business, higher education and government to prepare for future challenges and opportunities. To learn more about IEI's work on Financing the Future, please visit www.emerqingissues.org.

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