

Community attitudes in Johns Creek, Georgia

In June 2008, the city of Johns Creek, GA, contracted with Doug Thompson to conduct a community awareness and attitudes study of issues and problems facing the new city as well as citizen awareness of the job performance of city government and various city agencies.

Doug Thompson visited Johns Creek in June to interview selected city officials. He also conducted random interviews of city residents and researched news coverage of issues affecting the community.

Based on the interviews, a questionnaire was generated for a computer-selected sample of 300 Johns Creek voters for a survey to be conducted by The Tarrance Group of Arlington, Virginia. A controversy involving the 911 call center operated by Fulton County resulted in a delay in implementing the survey until September 30, 2008.

Once the survey was completed, Doug Thompson analyzed the data, compiled initial observations and findings and generated recommendations based on what was learned through interviews and the survey.

General Conclusions

The Government of the City of Johns Creek has hit the ground running since its inception on Dec. 1, 2006. The high approval rating that city government receives places it ninth among towns, cities and counties where similar community attitude studies have been conducted. With 74 percent of the city's voters believing the municipality is going in the right direction, the government of Johns Creek enjoys the rare advantage of being among the few governments that serve a satisfied population.

The Johns Creek Police Department ranks second among cities and municipalities with a 73 percent approval rating. Only the Arlington County, Virginia, police department -- a force considered the model for the nation -- ranks higher among communities where such community attitudes have been studied.

It is obvious that the vast majority of voters in Johns Creek believe the creation of Johns Creek as a city was a good thing. Most are happy with city services that they feel have improved significantly over the performance of Fulton County.

Interestingly, the positive attitudes of voters towards the services of Johns Creek government have rubbed off on perceptions of services that the city does not provide. For example, our interviews found residents who felt the "taste of the water" has improved since Johns Creek became a city even though water service continues to be a county service.

Privatization is not an issue with at least two-thirds of the voters of Johns Creek. The highly-negative coverage of the issue by the Atlanta Journal-Constitution has not affected public opinion because less than one-fifth gets their news from the AJC.

Traffic congestion emerges as the number one issue for the region with taxes also measuring a significant level of concern. The concern over traffic indicates a public that might be willing to accept the cost of improvements to correct the problems but taxes also emerging as an issue increases the likelihood of resistance to proposals that impact taxes. The results of a question dealing specifically with a referendum on road improvements show it is a polarizing issue.

Specific Findings

Information Sources

Almost half of local voters, forty-seven percent (47%), indicate they rely on the Johns Creek Herald as their primary source for local news. Eighteen percent (18%) rely on Atlanta TV stations, while 17% rely on the Atlanta Journal Constitution. Only 5% of local voters rely on the Johns Creek Post.

Reliance on the Johns Creek Herald is particularly high among voters in the 30005 zip code region, where 60% indicate they rely on the Herald as their primary source of local news. There is also a slightly higher level of reliance on the paper among Johns Creek natives (50%) and those who approve of the job that the Mayor and City Council are doing (53%.)

Reliance on Atlanta TV stations stands at 20% among women overall, and rises to 22% among working women. There is also a greater reliance on Atlanta TV among voters with higher income levels and voters who have lived in the area less than two years.

Senior citizens are significantly more inclined to rely on the Atlanta Journal Constitution as their main source of local news, with fully thirty-two percent (32%) of seniors indicating that this paper is their main source for local news and information. There is also a slightly higher level of reliance on this paper among those who disapprove of the job that the Mayor and City Council are doing.

Direction of Community

Local voters have a very positive view of the direction of Johns Creek, with seventy-four percent (74%) indicating they believe things are going in the right direction, and only 16% indicating they believe things in the community are off on the wrong track.

These positive views exist throughout the community, with over 70% of voters in the 30005 and 30022 zip code regions indicating they believe things are going in the right direction. Voters in the 30097 region are even more positive, as 83% of voters in this region indicate they believe things are going in the right direction.

There is no gender gap on this measure, and the view that things in Johns Creek are going in the right direction is the prevalent view among every key demographic group. Over 80% of voters who have lived in the community for less than five years believe things are going in the right direction, as do sixty-nine percent (69%) of Johns Creek natives.

Even among those voters who are unsure whether the Mayor and City Council are doing a good job or not, sixty-one percent (61%) believe that things in Johns Creek are going in the right direction, and only 18% believe they are off on the wrong track.

The small segment of the electorate who believe things in Johns Creek are off on the wrong track includes voters in the 30005 region, Johns Creek natives, and voters with lower income levels. However, even among these groups, only 20% believe things are off on the wrong track.

Voters who believe that things in Johns Creek are going in the right direction do not coalesce around any one specific reason for their views. One in ten voters who believe things are going in the right direction specifically mentions the low crime rate, and there are also small amounts of focus on the quality of the schools and the limits on growth and development.

Issue Concerns

Traffic and traffic congestion is the dominant issue in the minds of Johns Creek voters. When asked to volunteer the most important issue or problem facing the community, 32% volunteered traffic as the number one problem.

When respondents were read a list of key issues and asked to identify the issue that concerned them the most, the same 32% of respondents indicated that traffic is the most important issue. The only other issue of major importance was taxes, and other key issues like education, the environment and open space, and the quality of local services attracted the attention of less than one in ten voters.

While the issue of traffic is dominant throughout the community, it is highest among voters in the 30097 region, where fully forty-five percent (45%) indicate it is the most important issue. There are also 38% of voters in the 30005 region who believe it is the most important issue.

Concern about the issue of traffic increases with the length of residency of the voter, and fully thirty-six percent (36%) of those who have lived in Johns Creek more than ten years believe it is the most important issue. It is also the most important issue among both those who approve and those who disapprove of the job that the Mayor and City Council are doing.

At the same time, there is also a higher level of concern about the issue of taxes among voters in the 30022 region. Among voters in this region, 25% indicate that taxes is the most important issue, and focus on taxes is as high as their concern about traffic.

Men (24%) are significantly more focused on the issue of taxes than are women voters (15%), and there is also a higher level of concern about the issue of taxes among minority voters, Georgia transplants, and those who are unsure whether the Mayor and City Council are doing a good job or not.

Mayor and City Council

Two thirds of Johns Creek voters, sixty-five percent (65%) approve of the job that the Mayor and City Council are doing, and only 11% disapprove. There are 24% of local voters who are unsure. Twenty-eight percent (28%) strongly approve of the job they are doing.

Approval is strongest among voters in the 30022 and 30097 regions, where approximately 68% indicate they approve of the job that the Mayor and City Council are doing. Among voters in the 30005 region, the approval rating drops to 60% and 17% of voters in this region disapprove.

There is a seven point gender gap in approval ratings for the Mayor and City Council, with 62% of women and 69% of men indicating they approve of the job they are doing. However, age has the greatest impact, and approval ratings for the Mayor and City Council increase with the age of the voter.

Fifty-eight percent (58%) of 18-44 year old voters indicate they approve of the job that the Mayor and City Council are doing, but approval rises to 67% among 45-64 year old voters, and to 70% among seniors.

Approximately 66% of both Johns Creek natives and voters who moved to Johns Creek from out of state indicate they approve of the job that the Mayor and City Council are doing. However, approval drops to

50% among those who moved to Johns Creek from inside the state, and 34% are unsure whether they are doing a good job or not.

It is also interesting to note that the Mayor and City Council get their highest job approval ratings from those voters who believe that traffic is the most important issue. Among this segment of the electorate, 72% approve of the job that the Mayor and City Council are doing.

Six in ten voters, sixty-one percent (61%), believe that the Mayor and City Council are doing a better job than the county did of providing services. Twenty-one percent (21%) believe that their performance is equal to what the county did, and only 5% believe that the current administration is not doing as good of a job of providing services as the county did. Approximately 60% of voters in every region of Johns Creek believe this to be the case.

Police Department

Fully seventy-three percent (73%) of Johns Creek voters approve of the job that the Police Department is doing of fighting crime and improving public safety. Only 9% indicate that they disapprove, and 18% are unsure.

Approval of the job that the Police Department is doing stands at 81% among voters in the 30097 region, but drops to 73% among voters in the 30022 region, and to only 66% among voters in the 30005 region. There are 17% of voters in the 30005 region who disapprove of the job they are doing.

Geography is the only significant driver of differences in views about the job that the police department is doing, and there are no other differences based on age, gender, or length of residency.

Fully eighty-five percent (85%) of those who approve of the job that the Mayor and City Council are doing also approve of the job that the Police Department is doing. Even among those who disapprove of the job that the Mayor and City Council are doing, 45% approve of the job that the Police Department is doing and only 39% disapprove.

The gap between perceptions of the job that Police Department is doing compared to Fulton County is also significant but not quite as large as the Mayor and City Council. Fifty-six percent (56%) believe that the Police Department is doing a better job than Fulton County did, while 29% believe they are doing the same job. There are only 6% who believe they are not doing as good a job.

911 Center

Johns Creek voters do not have fully formed opinions about the way in which Fulton County is operating the 911 center. A plurality of voters, thirty-seven percent (37%) indicate they are unsure of the job that the County is doing of operating the call center. Twenty-six percent (26%) approve of the job that the County is doing, while 37% disapprove. Disapproval stands at 40% or better among voters in the 30005 and 30097 regions, as well as among seniors and voters with higher income levels.

At the same time, however, Johns Creek voters do have a fully formed attitude about who should be operating the 911 call center. Sixty-nine percent (69%) of respondents believe that Johns Creek should operate the 911 call center, and only 13% believe that Fulton County should operate the center.

Over two-thirds of voters in every region believe that Johns Creek should operate the 911 call center. Sixty-four percent (64%) of men believe that Johns Creek should operate the call center, and this view climbs to 77% among women.

Approximately 70% of voters of all ages indicate they believe that Johns Creek should operate the 911 center, and there is no difference in views on this issue based on the length of residence.

Even among those who disapprove of the job that the Mayor and City Council are doing, fifty-two percent (52%) believe that Johns Creek should operate the call center, and only 30% believe it should continue to be operated by Fulton County.

Two-thirds of Johns Creek voters, sixty-five percent (65%) believe that Johns Creek would do a better job of operating the call center than Fulton County does. Sixteen percent (16%) believe they would do the same job, and only 4% believe they would not do as good a job.

Public Works Department

Sixty-one percent (61%) of Johns Creek voters indicate they approve of the job that the Public Works Department is doing. Only 5% disapprove, but there are 34% of voters who are unsure.

Fifty-seven percent (57%) of voters in the 30005 region approve of the job that the Public Works Department is doing, and approval climbs to approximately 63% among voters in the 30022 and 30097 regions.

There is no difference in approval between men and women, and 59% of all voters over the age of forty-five indicate they approve of the job that the Public Works Department is doing.

Over sixty percent (60%) of voters who have lived in Johns Creek for three years or more indicate that they approve of the job that the Public Works Department is doing. Among those voters who have lived

in Johns Creek for less than two years, approval drops to 55%, and 40% indicate they are unsure whether the Public Works Department is doing a good job or not.

Privatization

Only thirty-one percent (31%) of Johns Creek voters indicate they have seen, read, or heard anything in recent months about being a privatized city. This awareness is universally low across the geography of the community, and there is no difference in awareness between men and women voters.

Approximately 33% of voters under the age of sixty-five indicate they have seen, read, or heard something about Johns Creek being a privatized city, but awareness drops to only twenty-one percent (21%) among seniors.

Sixty percent (60%) of Johns Creek voters approve of Johns Creek having a system where most city employees work for a private company that has a contract to provide services to Johns Creek. Twenty-nine percent (29%) disapprove of this system, and 11% are unsure.

Approval of this system is fairly uniform across the geography of Johns Creek, with 62% of voters in the 30005 region and 59% of voters in the 30022 and 30097 regions indicating they approve of the system.

Approval of this privatized system stands at sixty-three percent (63%) among men and fifty-seven percent (57%) among women voters. There is no significant resistance among senior citizens, and 60% of seniors indicate they approve of this system.

At the same time, it should be noted that minority voters, new residents, and Georgia transplants are all less comfortable with this system. This is particularly true among those voters who have lived in Johns Creek less than two years. Among this segment of the electorate, only 50% approve of this system and 45% disapprove of it.

Road Improvement Referendum

The Johns Creek electorate is polarized in their views on a referendum to increase local taxes to pay for road improvements and resurfacing. Only forty-eight percent (48%) of respondents would support this referendum, while an almost equal 45% would oppose it.

There is bare majority support (51%) among voters in the 30022 region, but a plurality of voters in both the 30005 and 30097 regions indicate they would be opposed to such a referendum.

Fifty-two percent (52%) of men would support such a referendum, but forty-nine percent (49%) of women would be opposed to it. It should also be noted that a plurality of both 18-44 year old voters and seniors would be opposed to such a referendum.

New residents are also opposed to this referendum, with fifty percent (50%) of those who have lived in Johns Creek for less than two years indicating they would be opposed to it.

Even among those voters who indicate that traffic is the number one problem and the most important issue, only fifty-two percent (52%) indicate that they would support this referendum, while 42% would be opposed to it.

Additional observations and recommendations

In interviews with city residents, we found significant misunderstandings of how city government functions among those who are aware of privatization. For example, some felt the city was governed out of Colorado rather than locally. Some were unaware Johns Creek even had a City Hall. We recommend consideration of a public information campaign that promotes both department heads and city employees to the residents of Johns Creek. This could include an advertising campaign and increased use of city employees at public appearances.

During our site visit in June, we noted that no sign exists to point visitors to City Hall from Medlock Bridge Road. We recommend increased signage not only on Medlock Bridge but also on other city thoroughfares pointing visitors to City Hall and other city departments.

Some residents felt the city lacked a defining "downtown" or business district. We recommend defining an area as "downtown" and working with private developers to create a "Main Street" business district.

Many merchants complained that Johns City residents didn't shop locally but drove elsewhere in the Atlanta region to make purchases. We recommend working with city merchants and business associations to create a "Shop Johns Creek/Buy Local" campaign to build a sense of community pride. The survey data shows that there is already a lot of pride about being a resident of Johns Creek. Such a campaign could build on that.

The data on traffic congestion and taxes shows that while residents consider easing congestion a high priority; questions remain on how to pay for such relief. We recommend a targeted public information campaign to educate the public on the need for a program to ease traffic congestion as quickly as possible and the reality that such relief does not come cheap.

Other Recommendations

Johns Creek has an informative and well-designed web site that most residents of the city should find useful. We recommend using the web site to increase dialog between residents and the city. Adding an interactive public forum for the discussion of issues is one way. So is adding a feature like "Ask the Mayor" or a "Report a problem" form that is more detailed than the current "Contact Us" page.

While many city documents are online as PDF (Portable Document Format) files, we recommend the city consider expanding the forms to include online applications, utilizing the standardized "Electronic Signature Format" for form submission.

We also recommend the city consider a "Community Bulletin Board" on the web site where organizations and citizens can post notices of events.