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Almanac News

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Bohannon's survey shows support for his big project

Sixty-five percent of 'likely' voters support it, poller says

by Sean Howell
Almanac Staff

If the final say on David Bohannon's proposed office/hotel complex came down to the ballot, voters would likely approve the project, according to the results of a recent poll paid for by Mr. Bohannon.

Of the 400 "likely" Menlo Park voters surveyed on Mr. Bohannon's project by Godbe Research, 65 percent said they supported the project, and 61 percent said they would vote in favor of the project if it appeared on a ballot, according to Bryan Godbe, president of the polling company.

Mr. Bohannon commissioned the survey, he said, primarily to gauge public sentiment for the project, which would comprise three eight-story office buildings totaling 700,000 square feet, a 206-room Marriott Hotel, and athletic facilities. The complex would be built on Bohannon-owned land near the intersection of Marsh Road and U.S. 101 in east Menlo Park.

Mr. Bohannon also wanted to gauge whether the project would pass the test of Menlo Park voters in the event of a referendum, he said.

"Recent history suggests that having an approved project doesn't mean you're through with the process," he said, referring to the Derry Project, a high-density condo/commercial project proposed for El Camino Real. That project cleared the council, but the development company ended up revising its proposal after residents gathered enough signatures to put a referendum on the ballot.

"In the event that we had to defend the approval, we think it's important to get a sense of where the voters would be," Mr. Bohannon said.

He said he only wanted to see how the project would do in a referendum. He doesn't plan to launch a ballot initiative himself to push the project through the city's process, or bypass it altogether, he said.

While he acknowledged that he is frustrated with the city's "slow" review process, he maintained that the poll had nothing to do with those frustrations.

Support

Mr. Godbe presented the results of the survey to The Almanac and defended its methods, saying the results give a strong indication that voters would approve Mr. Bohannon's project if it were put to a vote. The survey was conducted by phone between Feb. 25 and March 5.

Questioners asked residents at the beginning of the phone call whether they would support the project, then asked the same question at the end, after running through a number of pro and con arguments. Before respondents heard many of the project's details, 70 percent said they supported it. By the end of the call, 65 percent said they supported the project.

The number of residents who said they would "strongly oppose" the project rose from 7 percent to 13 percent by the end of the calls.

Twenty-six percent of respondents said they would vote against the project.

The survey claimed a 4.5 percent margin of error. Even if the survey over-estimated support by 4.5 percent, it still indicates that voters would approve the project, according to Mr. Godbe.

Mr. Godbe's firm works primarily for cities trying to decide whether to sponsor a ballot measure. In 92 percent of the surveys his firm conducted in 2008, its findings were borne out at the ballot box, he said.

Survey details

Over the course of the survey, residents were told that the project would generate \$6 million for the city's affordable housing fund, \$1.1 million for traffic mitigation, \$1.1 million for the construction of new schools, and \$500,000 for the fire district. Mr. Bohannon said his company's finance team calculated those numbers, based on payments mandated by the city for development projects.

Residents were also told that the project would generate an additional \$2 million per year in tax revenue for Menlo Park, and that it would create 1,900 construction jobs, and 2,300 jobs through new businesses.

Of the negative arguments presented, residents said they would be swayed most by the specter of increased traffic, by the argument that it would be out of character for Menlo Park, and by an increased demand for housing, in that order.

Asked to rank the importance of various community issues, residents put improving the local economy and securing new revenue for the city ahead of decreasing traffic, according to Mr. Godbe.

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
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