

Perceptions of City & County Commissions¹

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Commission Leaders. In an internet survey jointly sponsored by Kerr & Downs Research and the *Tallahassee Democrat*, citizens selected Leon County Commissioner Tony Grippa as the most effective County Commissioner, while Commissioners Debbie Lightsey and Mark Mustian were more likely to be identified as leaders of the City Commission. One in three residents out of the 501 interviewed during March, named Grippa when asked to select a County Commissioner who should be commended for efforts in leading the community.

Lightsey and Mustian were selected by 28% and 24% of residents, respectively, as leaders on the City Commission. Interestingly, the survey was conducted prior to Grippa's and Mustians' leadership role in resolving the battle between the two commissions over community redevelopment areas.

Cliff Thael and Dan Winchester were named as leaders of the County Commission by one in five residents. John Marks and Andrew Gillum, relative new comers to local politics (as is Mustian), were named by nearly one in five residents as leaders on the City Commission.

Consolidation. The survey examined citizens' views on consolidation; two out of three citizens in Leon County claimed they support consolidation. This percentage has remained rather stable over the past 20 years. Yet consolidation has repeatedly been voted down. The devil is in the details as previous surveys have shown that support for consolidation diminishes as details over sensitive issues such as law enforcement are discussed.

The current survey asked citizens directly what they perceived as the biggest problems or obstacles to consolidation. Having to choose between the Tallahassee Police Department and the Leon County Sheriff's Office was the number one problem followed closely by perceived turmoil that would follow consolidation and the loss of checks and balances provided by two local governments. County residents having to pay higher taxes, an argument against annexing property into the City, was mentioned by only 10% of citizens (16% of citizens outside the City limits) as a problem with consolidation. In this government town, only 4% of citizens named loss of jobs for friends or family as an obstacle to consolidation. Clearly many citizens have grown weary of disagreements between the two local governments, yet concerns about the details of consolidation continue to pose problems for the pro-consolidation camp.

¹ The survey was part of *Voices*, an Internet survey panel sponsored by Kerr & Downs Research and *The Tallahassee Democrat*. The *Voices* panel is older, less racially diverse and has a higher income than Leon County as a whole, yet City and County (outside City limits) residents are represented in proportion to their numbers in the 2004 US Census Bureau estimates. 501 residents responded to the survey conducted 3.1-3.04. To become part of *Voices*, go to www.voices2004.com.

Local residents were more likely to name the City Commission rather than the County Commission as:

- Doing a better job of providing a vision for the future of our community
- Spending local tax dollars more efficiently
- Doing a better job of providing government services to residents in our community

However, when asked to choose only one commission to lead the entire county, slightly more residents selected the County Commission (37%) over the City Commission (32%) with a significant minority (31%) uncertain as to which commission they wanted to govern all of Leon County.

Pay for Surveys. Viewed in the context of the City Commission's recent action to discontinue conducting the Resident Opinion Survey each year, two out of three City residents supported suspending tax dollars on scientific surveys that enable commissioners to learn about citizens' views on issues such as traffic, race relations, growth and development, crime, and education. Nearly as many Leon County residents (62%) also supported spending County tax dollars on scientific opinion surveys.