

2010 BES PUBLIC AWARENESS FOCUS GROUPS

Executive Summary

Conducted for:



ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES
CITY OF PORTLAND
working for clean rivers

Data Collected
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Executive Summary

The following summarizes key points from the research. To understand the full depth of the research, however, the reader is urged to review the entire report.

METHODS

A set of four focus groups were conducted with City of Portland residents who live in households that pay their sewer and stormwater management bill. Two groups were held with residents who live on the west side of the Willamette River and two with residents who live on the east side of the Willamette River.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Participant Characteristics

1. Quotas were established and locations selected to ensure ratepayers from throughout Portland attended the groups. As a result, a wide range of ages and occupations are represented.

Environmental Issues Facing Portland

2. Improving water quality frequently is mentioned on an unaided basis as an environmental issue the City of Portland should be addressing in the next five to ten years.
3. When asked to rate nine environmental issues on how important it is for the City of Portland to address, improving water quality generates the highest average rating among westside and eastside ratepayers. Cleaning up the Superfund site's rating is in the middle and protecting endangered species is least important.

Awareness & Reputation of BES

4. Almost all believe either the City of Portland or the Water Bureau provides sewer and stormwater management services because they pay their bill to the City of Portland Water Bureau.
5. BES receives some praise for the Big Pipe project, downspout disconnection program, and bioswales.
6. Ratepayers say overflows into the Willamette, big bills, and poor communications are the downsides to BES.
7. Ratepayers frequently say using ratepayers' funds efficiently is the most important of BES's responsibilities.
8. Ratings for how well BES is meeting its responsibilities are relatively low, primarily because ratepayers frequently aren't sure what BES does.
9. Ratepayers say they have learned little about BES in the past year, but would like to know the results of BES's efforts to improving water quality and how individuals can help.

Perceptions of the Willamette River

10. Participants know watersheds are important, but have only a vague idea of what they are. Ratepayers are most likely to cite Johnson Creek as a local watershed.
11. Most believe there is a substantial decline in water quality in the Willamette as it flows through Portland and that there has been little change in water quality in the last five years.
12. While most have a general knowledge of the Big Pipe project, there is little awareness of when it will be completed or when it will have a positive impact on the Willamette.
13. DEQ's Willamette Water Quality Index is met with skepticism. Ratepayers will not believe the Willamette has "excellent" water quality until they feel comfortable swimming in it and eating fish caught in it.

Next Steps for BES

14. Ratepayers believe the City should regulate industry, finish the Big Pipe, and offer more incentives to individuals to make changes.
15. There is agreement that more public information and outreach would be beneficial.
16. The question of whether the City should "help" or should "require" property owners to clean up and restore contaminated sites is often difficult for ratepayers. Many say "it depends."

Superfund Site

17. Understanding of the Superfund site is typically superficial and ratepayers have little idea of what BES's role in the process should be.

Individual Action & Willingness to Pay for Cleaner Rivers & Streams

18. Participants appear to have gotten the message that individuals contribute to water pollution.
19. Sewer and stormwater services are somewhat lower in perceived value than other utilities except for cable.
20. Almost all participants are willing to pay more to improve water quality — but they want evidence of improvement.

KEY CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Portland residents want improved water quality in area rivers and streams. They don't know if BES is making any progress in accomplishing this goal.**
2. **To attract residents' attention, keep communications simple and focused on what they want to know.**
3. **To change the skepticism that their dollars may not be well spent, focus communication on results, not tasks.**