



## 2023 CITY COUNCIL MEETING STAFF REPORT

To: Honorable Mayor and City Council Members  
From: Michelle Leise, Community Engagement Facilitator  
Meeting Date: June 26, 2023  
Agenda Item Number: 11.A.

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**Title** – Consider Motion to Approve a Survey Provider to Conduct a 2023 Red Wing Community Survey and Provide a Report of Findings

**Purpose** – The purpose of this item is for Council to review information on two well-regarded companies and choose one to enact Red Wing’s scientific community survey. Red Wing conducts these surveys periodically, and the last one was done in 2017. The Council has stated it is interested in the City conducting a scientific, community-wide survey to assist in strategic planning and to potentially help guide the Council’s decision-making process for the 2024 budget.

**Recommended Action:** Choose one of the two companies discussed in this report to conduct a Red Wing Community Survey in 2023.

### **Attachments**

- 1) Template of the standardized National Community Survey by Polco and the National Research Center
- 2) 2017 Red Wing Community Survey: Questions & Results by the Morris Leatherman Company
- 3) 2017 Presentation Slides from the Community Survey Results by Morris Leatherman Company

### **Alignment with 2019 Strategic Plan**

- Strategy #62: Continue to find ways for the public to give input into the decisions that affect them.

### **Background**

The City Council has expressed interest in conducting a scientific community survey this year to assist in upcoming strategic planning, and if timely, the 2024 budget. Red Wing last conducted scientific community surveys in 2005, 2013, and 2017. These past three surveys have all been conducted by the Morris Leatherman Company from Minneapolis. For the 2023 survey, the City has been researching two potential companies: the Morris Leatherman Company and Polco/National Research Center.

The City has been very pleased with the work of the Morris Leatherman Company in the past.

However, it's beneficial to review options periodically. Recently, the City has been working with the company Polco on one of its software tools called Balancing Act, which will let the public weigh in on their top priorities and also learn more about the City's budget through a simulation tool; that engagement will be launched in July. Because of this work, the City learned about Polco's partnership with the National Research Center and their use of the National Community Survey (NCS).

Below is a summary of the similarities between the two options:

### Summary of Similarities

--Both companies offer quality survey services and are trusted sources. Both are also highly regarded and have provided excellent customer service to Red Wing with accessible staff and quick responses to questions.

--Both companies would use an aggressive timeline to conduct the survey in August and get results to City Council by early October.

--Both companies use random, scientific samples and will provide a statistically significant result with a margin of error of plus or minus 5% of the entire population 95% of the time, which means getting responses from roughly 400 people.

Whichever company the Council chooses, the City will publicize the survey in multiple ways, including an insert with the utility bill, on social media, the newspaper and radio, our online newsletter (City Beat), and at events like River City Days and Night to Unite. Not everyone will be chosen for the survey, but it will be helpful to publicize it so residents know this is a trusted project (not a scam) and that by completing it, they will be helping their community.

The main differences between the two companies are cost and methodology. Below is some information to consider.

A. Morris Leatherman Company. The Morris Leatherman Company uses the phone method, calling a random sample of landlines and cell phone numbers and ensuring all demographic groups are represented. While fewer surveys utilize this method today, Peter Leatherman, who has worked for three decades and conducted the last three surveys for Red Wing, uses this method because he believes it is the most representative and accurate. When the City publicizes the survey throughout the community, we would share this phone number so residents will hopefully be looking for it on their phones. No mailers are sent in this method.

Interviewers call the representative sample of phone numbers many times (sometimes as many as 20 times) and leave messages so respondents can call back and either answer the survey right away or schedule a future time. Using the call method, the interviewers make sure that each demographic group is accurately represented by its percentage in the Red Wing population (age, gender, race/ethnicity, geographic area, rent/own, etc.).

Working with Morris Leatherman means the survey can be tailored to Red Wing. The survey would likely be similar to the survey Red Wing used in 2017. However, staff will take Council feedback and ideas, and questions can be added or deleted. For example, a few questions that were timely in 2017 (like police body cameras and graffiti on the bluff) would be deleted.

A copy of the 2017 survey is attached to this report for reference. There were 121 questions. With the Morris Leatherman survey, it would be possible to compare almost all of the answers to those of Red Wing's past results. Some of Red Wing's answers (but not all) would also be compared to a few similar cities in Minnesota to see how Red Wing's results are similar or different. In 2017, the survey cost \$22,600. More information is at [morris-leatherman.com/](http://morris-leatherman.com/).

COST TODAY: Not to exceed \$28,000.

B. Polco - Polco has paired with the National Research Center and is a highly regarded organization that conducts surveys for the National League of Cities (NLC), the International City and County Managers Association (ICMA), and other groups, along with hundreds of cities of various sizes around the country.

Polco offers a standardized written/online survey called the National Community Survey (NCS) that is used in communities big and small. The survey has 161 questions. The questions in the Polco survey cover similar topics to previous Red Wing surveys, though they are worded differently. You can see the survey template attached to this report. Similar to Red Wing's survey in 2017, the Polco questions gather input on things the City has more control over (like streets, parks, public safety, and utilities) and topics that the whole community works on (like arts and culture, affordable housing, downtown economy, how welcoming a city is, etc.).

A summary of Polco's outreach method is outlined here; the details are slightly different from that in the previous report.

- (a) Polco creates a random, scientific sample of 3,000 households within Red Wing's city limits.
- (b) All of the selected households receive two mailings. First, households will receive an initial postcard with instructions and a survey link (not to be shared with others) so people can answer the survey online.
- (c) The second and final mailing – a larger packet – follows one week later. That includes a cover letter, a hard copy of the paper survey, a web link again if people prefer to answer online, and a self-addressed stamped envelope so it's easy and free to return the paper survey. (The mailings will get the City's approval on the wording, and the mailings will incorporate the City's logo and signature of an official.)

Polco oversamples multi-family units to help address non-response bias and ensure a broad representation of residents who statistically don't answer surveys as often.

Nationally, an average of 10% to 20% of survey recipients across an entire community respond to the survey. Polco says that Minnesota communities have some of the highest response rates. The goal is about 400 residents. All of the answers are weighted. Polco also provides the actual numbers of respondents in each category so it's clear if one or more demographic groups were not equally accounted for in the raw data. In looking at results from other Minnesota cities that used the Polco survey, such as Prior Lake and Bloomington, there are demographics that were under-represented based on their overall population percentage. As noted, the results are weighted to correct this, and the report includes the raw data to transparently show those discrepancies (link below).

The survey questions are qualitative, and the answers are available on a scale, such as excellent, good, fair, or poor—or essential, very important, somewhat important, not at all important. “Don't know” is also an option for many questions. There are no follow-up questions for details or to dig into the reasons for the answer. (To learn about the reasons why people answered a certain way, the City would plan to follow up with additional, non-scientific surveys through our internal community engagement division).

The National Community Survey through Polco is unique because it has the largest database of its kind and has an average rating for each question, based on the hundreds of times the survey has been conducted. For this reason, Red Wing's answers will be able to be compared to national benchmarks.

The report will provide a written methodology, including details about the sampling process, response rate, margin of error and confidence level, the weighting process, and more. This link shows the Polco survey report from Bloomington, Minnesota:

<https://www.bloomingtonmn.gov/sites/default/files/2022-10/NCS-Report-Bloomington-2022.pdf>.

Bloomington added four of their own questions: numbers 13 through 16 on page 4 of their survey.

COST TODAY: \$15,000.

Additional features - If desired, Red Wing can add 3 to 4 specific questions at the end of the survey for \$2,800 extra, or request more questions for an additional price. Red Wing can also request comparisons to Minnesota cities with similar populations and demographics to us for \$2,000 extra. The total survey cost with both features would be \$19,800. Without these features, the price is \$15,000. (More information is at [info.polco.us/the-national-community-survey](http://info.polco.us/the-national-community-survey).)

The next page shows a summary of the differences between the two options.

## Summary of Differences

### Morris Leatherman Survey

- Telephone survey (landlines & cell numbers)
- More tailored to Red Wing
- Includes open-ended follow-up questions
- Compares answers to those in past RW surveys and a few similar MN cities
- Ensures broad demographic representation. All answers are weighted.
- Roughly 121 questions
- Cost to not exceed \$28,000

### Polco/National Research Center

- Online and hard paper surveys
- Standardized survey with 3-4 tailored questions
- No follow-up questions for nuanced answers
- Compares answers to national benchmarks with option to compare to specific MN cities
- Some demographics may be under-represented. All answers are weighted.
- Roughly 161 questions
- Costs between \$15,000 and \$19,800

## Discussion – Next Steps

In general, with either company we work with, it will take 4 to 5 weeks to finalize the actual survey with Council's approval, 5 to 6 weeks to conduct the survey, and 4 to 5 weeks to tally the results. If things go smoothly, a report of findings could come to Council by early October. It's recommended that the Council choose one of the options at the June 26<sup>th</sup> meeting in order to get results back in a timely fashion.

If the Council chooses the Polco survey, it has the option to pay for 3 or 4 additional questions (at an additional cost of \$2,800 to the base of \$15,000). If Council chooses the Morris Leatherman Company, it also has the option for a few more specific questions (no additional cost to the \$28,000).

If there is time at the June 26 meeting, the Council may want to discuss the overall types of questions it would want to add to the survey. Then staff can draft a few new questions based on the Council's direction and bring that draft to the July 10 meeting. A final draft could be approved by Council at either the July 10 or July 24 Council meeting.

The survey would go out to the community in August and early September. Results would be available to the Council in late September (small possibility) or early October (more likely).

**Financial Plan and Impact** – As stated above, the cost for the Morris Leatherman survey would not exceed \$28,000. The cost of the Polco/NRC survey would be between \$15,000 and \$19,800. This project was not budgeted in 2023. The suggested plan is to take dollars from the labor funds that have been saved this year due to staffing shortages across the city organization – roughly \$200,000 – and use a small portion of that to pay for the survey.

**Recommended Action** - Choose one of the two companies discussed in this report to conduct a Red Wing Community Survey in 2023.

**Alternatives** –

- Choose one of the two companies discussed in this report for the survey.
- Table the discussion and request more information.
- Deny the option of a community survey entirely and table it until next year.
- Another option of the Council's choosing.