

## Using Surveys to Benefit Community Planning

Comments offered by the Team of Technical Assistance Providers at RCAP Solutions

*Special thanks are due to Bill Webb, Director, Field Management, for leading off with some of the core ideas*

### Needs identification and community support

Surveys of many types play important roles in the planning phase of any given community development project. For instance, a well crafted survey, such as a needs survey, or an opinion survey — one that asks residents what they feel about the needs within the community — might show to community leaders



or project sponsors how they can link whatever their proposed project is to other projects or to additional needs that have been defined through these surveys.

Community leaders might also find out through conducting a survey that there is perhaps considerable opposition to the proposed project. In the planning stage of a project, such knowledge is useful because the community

leaders can determine that more information is either needed or needs to be shared with the community. In the worse case scenario, they can go back to the drafting board and say “Yes, maybe we really didn’t think this project through enough.” So, surveys provide useful information to the community leaders and project sponsors during the phase when they are trying to plan out a project.

Conducting a survey also helps to promote interest in the project. Hopefully, participation in the survey will lead to greater participation by residents in later community meetings and things of that nature. It might even help volunteers to come forward and say, “Gee, this is something interesting and really needed by the community. — How can I help?”

From the standpoint of funding agencies, this sort of inquiry activity

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### Tales from the Doorstep

*Recounted by members of the RCAP Solutions technical assistance team*

*When staff and community volunteers go out to conduct door-to-door surveys, they have adventures. There are also challenges. Here are experiences our staff would like to share with you.*

#### The Man!

I approached a house for a door-to-door survey. As I got out of the car, another car pulled up in the driveway. The driver got out—with very familiar glasses and hair.

“Excuse me, are you Mr. Smith?”

“No, man! I’m Elvis.”

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# Minimizing Income Survey Pitfalls

By Donald Schwartz, Regional Manager, Pennsylvania

**R**CAP Solutions has been conducting income surveys in Pennsylvania for over a dozen years. Here are some of the problems we have encountered, both practical and more esoteric. Many of these can be avoided with appropriate planning.

First, the survey must get to the right household or family. Residents should be surveyed, and this includes renters. In communities with a high rental population, achieving the appropriate response rate can be difficult, especially since renters do not often view themselves as “residents.” Working with landlords to obtain accurate lists of renters is thus very important. Surveys should not be sent to absentee landlords with the hope they will give the form to the resident. A direct mailing is critical.

Other practical issues include being sure that confidential forms are coded before mailing, and enclosing a stamped envelope for returns. Receiving 100 completed forms with no identification is something that has happened here, and is a total disaster. And it is amazing how many people will not respond to a survey unless they receive a stamp. It is a great investment of 37 cents.

It is unfortunate that low rates of response most often occur in the populations that would benefit most from the additional funding resulting from a successful income survey. The best example is residents of a manufactured

housing community (mobile home park). Again, many of these households do not view themselves as “residents” of the community. Also, many do not appreciate the cost for water and sewer service, since it is typically included in their lot rent. Since they never see a water or sewer bill, per se, the issue has almost no meaning. It is crucial to work with the park owner early in the process, and ask for his assistance in encouraging a response.

Imagine receiving a form in the mail with a letter stating, “Please give your income to an unknown agency. Oh, and by the way, we are going to use this information to build a sewer system that you don’t really want, and will have to pay for every month in a sewer bill.” Would you respond? Education is the key. We encourage municipalities to advertise the survey, both publicly and privately. Public education would include advertisement in local newspapers and interviews with reporters; postings at stores, libraries, and other areas where people gather; discussion at all public meetings, etc. On the private level, we also encourage the mailing of a notice about a week ahead of the actual survey. The notice, written on municipal letterhead, states that an income survey will be mailed in the near future, and that this is

“legit.” This really helps to achieve a higher rate of response.

A final note on income survey practice and theory. This is a problem that can only be solved by the various funding agencies. Most surveys in Pennsylvania require a response rate of at least 80 percent. We have tracked income statistics as surveys are being conducted, and found that the final estimates vary minimally from those achieved by the initial responses. There is simply no reason to go to the time and expense of obtaining such a high rate of response (much higher than the U.S. census, by the way).

For example, we are currently conducting a survey, which has had the following results to date (see below). All response rates are cumulative.

What has been gained since the first mailing of the forms? There is a difference of less than \$1000 from a sample of 34% and a sample of 77%. Similar results are found in survey after survey. So far, no attention has been paid to this problem. So...at least deal with ones you can fix. ■

Survey Response Rate to Median Household Income		
	Cumulative Response Rate %	M.H.I.
First mailing of survey forms:	34.5%	\$38,684
Second mailing: (non-respondents)	50.2%	\$39,000
Door to door surveying:	77.0%	\$37,500

## More Tales from the Doorstep

*Recounted by members of the RCAP Solutions technical assistance team*

### History Becomes Real

On a recent door-to-door, in a Central Massachusetts town, we were invited in by a great man who insisted (on our honor, he insisted!) on showing off his World War II medals and pictures of his wonderful wife when they met in England. He was more than pleased we took the time to listen and to look, and we were rewarded with a bit of democratic history that may have been lost...

### Courtship Courier

While knocking on doors at a senior residential facility on a particularly hot and humid day, I came upon a gentleman who wanted to show me his son's military medals. After a few moments of chatter he asked if I would mind spending a moment and checking on a particular lady several buildings away because she didn't have air conditioning. When it was time to knock on the door of the special lady, she also was very friendly. When I advised her of the man's request, she indicated that he's a very sweet gentleman, who would be taking her out to dinner and bingo that night.

It's safe to summarize that both of the parties were happy to respond to the survey.

# When Census Data Don't Suffice...

*By Scott Mueller, Regional Manager, New York*

The Town of Tupper Lake, formerly the Town of Altamont, recently conducted an income survey. The information gathered served to support a funding application to the NYS Environmental Facilities Corporation (NY EFC). The proposed project is critical to the community's future, as well as to the re-opening of the nearby Big Tupper Ski Area. This local ski mountain has been closed for several years, which has hurt the local economy. The ski area could also be served by the construction of a sewer line, thus allowing it to re-open. Water quality would also be enhanced in the area. The situation was somewhat complicated because the ski mountain is located within the NYS Adirondack Park, over which the Adirondack Park Agency has jurisdictional review.

Typically, it is desirable to use the 2000 Census Data in support of funding applications.

However, in some cases this information does not allow the community to be eligible for funding. Such a situation calls for an income survey. Seasonal residents are

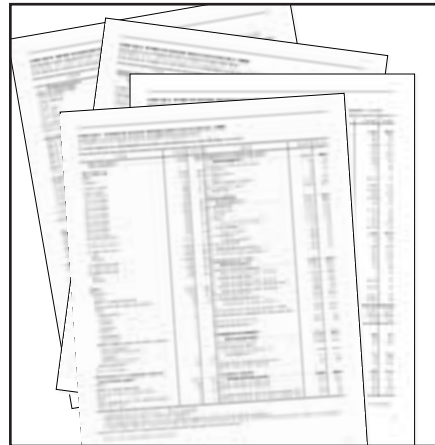


*Adirondack Region in New York*

not included in some key aspects of U.S. Census information because the party's principal address or location is elsewhere. By contrast, a trend seems to be emerging from funding agencies to include the seasonal component

of a community when reviewing capacity needs incorporating water or sewer infrastructure serving a particular area. In the past, the trend had been to survey only those who lived or resided in the area year round. In this survey, this was not the case. Instead, the

fundors were looking at the area from the viewpoint of having an impact on maximum number of Equivalent Dwelling Units (EDU). Moreover, NY EFC had requested



*CENSUS 2000: information for the entire Town of Altamont, now Town of Tupper Lake*

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## When Census Data Don't Suffice...

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documentation of resident income status, because the agency felt that the area involved in the project was comprised largely by seasonal residents and those with high income levels.

The income survey showed the MHI to be \$50,000. This figure qualified the project for a 20-year loan at 0% interest. Without such information, the community would have had to look for other means to finance their project, which would have incurred greater expense to the users. The User Charge would have most likely increased, to a point where the necessary levy would have exceeded the maximum charge stated in the district formation process. If this were to occur, the community would have to go about reforming the district and gaining public approval all over again.

In this case, an income survey was a crucial step in project development for the community. Not only was RCAP Solutions able to develop information that furthered Tupper Lake's water quality protection and economic development needs, but RCAP now also has begun the process of assisting the community to move forward with the sewer project as well as future projects near and on the Big Tupper Ski Area. ■



Map of Tupper Lake region showing geographical features

## More Tales from the Doorstep

Recounted by members of the RCAP Solutions technical assistance team

### Fowl Play

As I approached one of the residences slated to be surveyed, I observed an assortment of large birds that were free-ranging all over the yard... chickens of various sizes and colors, guinea hens, geese, and a few large birds that looked like turkeys. It was a real menagerie.

Some of the fowl appeared unfriendly and made threatening noises as I approached the house. Of particular concern to me was a large turkey, who looked mean enough to carry out these threats. I was about to abandon my quest when the owner appeared and called off his birds. I complimented him on his fine looking brood and explained my purpose. Somewhat reluctantly he agreed to supply the survey data.

In closing his survey envelope, the householder remarked that the birds were effective at keep-

ing away salesmen, bill collectors, ticks and other "undesirables". Not entirely sure of where I fit in, I decided to exit promptly. But in leaving, I kept a close eye on the large gobbler with the attitude, until I was back safely in the car.

### No, Martha Stewart Doesn't Live Here

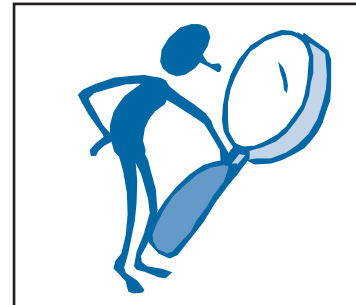
Across the street was a mobile home that looked literally like a trash dump inside. You could not walk through it without stepping on garbage. The inhabitants were sitting on their couch with their little Pomeranian dog (the dog of choice in this neighborhood). Above them, on the wall, I noticed a small plaque that said: "No, Martha Stewart doesn't live here."

I burst out laughing. The folks took this well, completed the survey and I moved on.

# A Glossary of Income Survey Terms

By Bob Morency, Water Resources Specialist

*PLEASE NOTE: Because loans and grants are administered in each state, you should check with those programs in your state to determine the policy of the program with regard to income surveys. RCAP Solutions Specialists are well-versed in this subject and are ready to offer assistance.*



## DATA DEFINITIONS

**Household:** Household means all the persons who occupy a housing unit. The occupants may be a single family, one person living alone, two or more families living together, or any other group of related, or unrelated, persons who share living arrangements.

**Household Income:** Income considered in an income survey is that which includes: wages and salaries, business/farm income, interest, dividends, Social Security, welfare, disability, VA payments, unemployment, and alimony. Total Household Income is the sum of the earnings of all persons living in the household.

**Household Income M.H.I. Median:** In a list of a group of household incomes, the Median Household Income (M.H.I.) is the income which falls halfway down the list. In practice, to determine the MHI, simply list the sampled incomes, count the number of samples, divide that number by two, and determine the median as being the income that is halfway down the list. For an odd number of responses, the MHI is the middle value (i.e. 5 responses, the MHI is the third highest). For an even number of responses, take the average of the samples around the mid-point (e.g. 6 responses, the MHI is #3 plus #4, divided in half).

### Household Income Very Low:

Those households whose Total Household Income falls at or below 30 percent of the Median Household Income, as determined by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), for households of the same size, in the geographic location (metro area or county) in which the household lies.

### Household Income Low:

Those households whose Total Household Income falls at or below 50 percent of the Median Household Income, as determined by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), for households of the same size in the geographic location in which the household lies.

### Household Income Low and Moderate:

Those households whose Total Household Income falls at or below 80 percent of the Median Household Income, as determined by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), for households of the same size, in the geographic location in which the household lies. Fifty-one percent LMI is the threshold for eligibility to apply to the CDBG Program.

**Response Rate:** The response rate is the number of responses, divided by the total number of

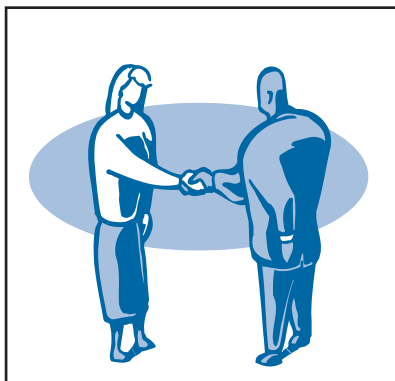
households in the survey area, times 100 (to give a percentage). For example, if the number of households has been determined to be 50 at the beginning of the survey, and 33 have responded, the resulting response rate is  $33/50 \times 100 = 66\%$ .

**Valid Survey:** A valid survey is one which has satisfied the criteria for achieving the required minimum number of responses. Validity does not necessarily mean that eligibility has been demonstrated for a given program (51% LMI for the CDBG program, for example). The required minimum number of responses should be pre-determined in consultation with the funding agencies, either as a percentage of total households in an area of interest, or as a number. In percentage terms, many states allow surveys to be considered valid if there has been a 67% response, collected in a random manner (i.e., where every household in the area has had an equal chance of being surveyed). Statistical sampling techniques are understood to come to accurate conclusions when samples are chosen at random. The actual

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## Glossary of Income Survey Terms

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percentage of responses can thus be reduced, if randomness is maintained. This is useful where the size of the “universe” (all possible households in the area being surveyed) is large. Tests for randomness can and should be conducted in cases where such techniques are used.

### Anonymous vs. Confidential:

Anonymous is where the name and/or address of the respondent is not known. Confidential is the case where identifying information is collected, but not divulged. Keeping track of at least the location of a response is necessary if smaller areas within the area being surveyed are to be targeted for projects.

## FUNDING SOURCES

**CDBG:** (Community Development Block Grant) Title 1 of the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974 authorized the CDBG Program. It is sponsored by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, and is administered through state agencies. The program is designed to benefit low and moderate income individuals. Its activities include funding

projects to promote housing rehabilitation and affordable housing opportunities, improvements to public water/sewer systems, community centers, and expansion of job opportunities. Income surveys are sometimes conducted to show whether or not a project area is eligible under the rules adopted by each state.

**USDA RD:** US Department of Agriculture Rural Development. The Rural Utilities Service (RUS), the Rural Business-Cooperative Service, and the Rural Housing Service comprise USDA’s Rural Development mission area. As the name suggests, the three agencies’ programs are designed to meet the needs of people who live in rural areas—including infrastructure, housing, health and medical, education, and employment. Income surveys are accepted by Rural Development in some states as a means of showing that the MHI in a given project area differs from the Federal Non-Metropolitan Census data for the municipality in which the project is located. Lowering the MHI may qualify the project for a more favorable interest rate and loan/grant ratio.

**SRF:** State Revolving Loan Fund. States have been given the charge, under the Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA) and the Clean Water Act, to set up low-interest loan and grant programs in order to help water and waste water systems achieve compliance with the laws. Rules and eligibility vary from State to State. Programs are usually administered by the state

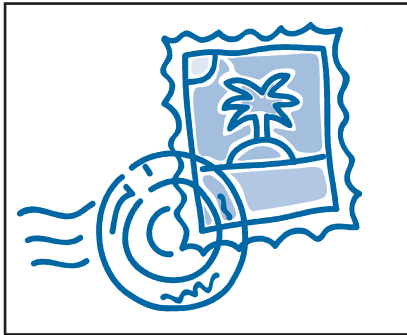
agencies charged with oversight of the program area (drinking water or wastewater).

**Co-funding:** This involves working closely with two (or more) external funding agencies to secure a “total funding package” which none of the funders could provide individually, (e.g. small Cities or CDBG grant + USDA/RD or small cities/CDBG + DWSRF loan).



## TYPES OF SURVEYS

**Door-to-Door Survey:** A survey conducted by visiting each household in the area of interest, and interviewing someone in the household who is knowledgeable about the income there. Trained volunteers go to each household and ask the questions of interest to the particular finding program that is requiring the survey. While door-to-door surveying is arguably the most effective means of collecting information, communities may be sensitive to their members giving information freely in a face-to-face situation. To alleviate these concerns, training can be given to surveyors in ways to avoid the problem, in



most cases. Using “flash cards”, sealed envelopes, and self-addressed mail-in envelopes are common ways to encourage participation to those who are at first reluctant to give personal information to a stranger. Door-to-door surveys typically result in a 70-90% response rate.

**Mail-in Survey:** Mail-in surveys are conducted by compiling a list of names and addresses of households in the area of interest, and sending out survey forms with self-addressed envelopes included as part of the mailing. An advantage of this method is that, if the survey has been pre-publicized (including the assurance of confidentiality), then people being surveyed may feel more comfortable mailing in a response than in giving the information to a volunteer stopping in at their door. In communities where there is sensitivity to knowing about one another’s personal information, especially income, the mail-in survey is an attractive alternative. The disadvantage of mail-in surveys is that the response rate (20-50%) is lower than in the door-to-door method (70-90%). Therefore, to complete

a survey, either successive mailings must be done, or else follow-up by door-to-door will be required.

**Telephone Survey:** Surveys may also be conducted over the telephone. Unfortunately, the proliferation of telemarketers using the telephone to make unsolicited sales calls, as well as reports of telephone-based scams, has made this method difficult, if not impossible in most situations. We have had success, however, in a very small village, where the caller (surveyor) was known to most, if not all, of those being surveyed.

**OTHER TERMS**

**Census:** The US Census is required by the Constitution to take place every 10 years. Data from the Census becomes available to be used with 1-3 years after the data has been collected. Census data may be used to determine eligibility for CDBG funding where there is good correspondence between the project area and a unit of census analysis (Census Tract, Block Group, and Block; in descending order of size). In the 2000 census, it is most common to have income data only to the Block Group level. As stated above, The USDA RD program uses Non-Metropolitan Census data.

**Publicity:** Publicity is a necessary early step in any income survey. Sometimes the success or failure of a survey depends on publicity. Methods sometimes include using: newspaper articles,

local access cable TV announcements, community newsletters, mail-out letters, postings in public places (post office, town hall, bulletin boards), and telephone calls. It is generally up to the community to determine which method is most suited to their situation.



**COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT— A FINAL WORD**

Conducting an income survey in your community can be either a very gratifying experience, or a chore that can seem to have no end. Outlook and attitude is important to achieving a survey that accurately reflects the income profile in the area that is being considered for a grant program. By setting goals necessary to conducting an income survey, such as inventorying the households, preparing publicity notices, soliciting volunteers, and stuffing envelopes or canvassing door-to-door, communities develop the capacities to respond to future needs and challenges. ■

## Profile of a Rural Community Leader:

### Dolores Pino, President, Wagon Wheel Tenant Cooperative, Londonderry, New Hampshire

By Bob Morency, Water Resources Specialist

I'm proud to present Dolores "Chicky" Pino as the first subject in an ongoing series that will focus a spotlight on Rural Community Leaders. In succeeding issues, an RCAP Solutions Specialist will present an individual in one of the communities in which we work. We're not trying to put the spotlight on people who have accomplished great things, necessarily, but we do want to present examples of those who saw a need in their community, and "stepped up to the plate," in many cases, when no one else could or would do so.

I first met Dolores when I was called upon to meet with the Board of Directors of Wagon Wheel Tenant Cooperative, a small community that had been formed as a result of their purchase of their homes from the owner of the mobile home park where they live. The Co-op is a small, low-income community within a rapidly-developing part of Southern New Hampshire. There are higher-than-average proportions of elders and disabled persons in the Co-op. Dolores, herself disabled, has taken it upon herself to lead the community in their efforts to improve their water and sewer systems.

As is often the case, the drinking water and wastewater systems had been neglected by the previous owner. When the property had been transferred to the



tenants, so were the problems. They were faced with replacement of the water and sewer pipes, which were undersized, resulting in poor water pressure. Septic systems were failing and were threatening the wells, one of which was located too close to homes to be in compliance with sanitary radius rules. Their water source, which was found to contain high levels of radionuclide and radon, needed replacement.

Long before RCAP was called to assist the Co-op in their consideration of the options, including treatment and connecting with a nearby municipal system, Dolores was leading the charge toward bettering the Co-op's infrastructure. She had been instrumental in raising the issues to officials in New Hampshire state government, who referred her to resources that could get the process started to

apply for grants, and to hire professional services. The project development process was well on its way, and our role was to educate the community on the pros and cons of consolidation with the nearby municipal system. Prejudices about that system were hard to break down, but realities of treatment costs are changing minds.

Dolores has proven to be a tireless advocate for her community. She has a knack for reminding public officials that it is the public that they are serving, and that disadvantaged people are not there to be taken advantage of. She has educated herself in many of the details of the fields where the project has led. As problems have arisen, she has done what she feels is necessary to get a fair shake for the community. This





*Dolores at home with "Shady"*

has included going on the local cable TV channel to ask for local business contributions to the project. Even when results are less than earth-shattering, she moves on to the next task at hand. The experiences she has had over the years of her activism have taught her how to prioritize and the importance of attending to small measures to achieve compliance.

Dolores' genuine concern for the other residents in the Co-op has always impressed me as being what sustains her in the role as community leader. This concern leads her to explore every aspect of an issue, and is especially valuable in tireless advocacy for the residents. I'm glad to receive calls from her to discuss the merits of the Co-op's positions on issues, and to lend support to their efforts toward reaching self-sufficiency in a difficult climate for funding improvements and finding affordable solutions to water and wastewater issues. ■

## More Tales from the Doorstep

*Recounted by members of the RCAP Solutions technical assistance team*

### Opportunity for Project Education

While conducting a door-to-door this summer, I met a homeowner who has a large, extended family living with him. (I believe there were 7 people living in this home.) Although his home is not connected to the Town's wastewater system, the Town system does run by his home, which means that he would be charged a betterment fee because of a community project to improve that system.

Because his property is so large (approximately 2 lots), the homeowner has two possible connection points should he ever want (or need) to connect to Town Sewer. The owner was angry that because of this he will incur two betterment charges. He was not anxious to help the Town in any way with a sewer project.

While the homeowner described the problems he has had with the Town, he asked me to summarize what the project would do for the Town and how it could potentially affect the fees that he is already paying. I explained that if the Town receives assistance for the sewer upgrade, it would lessen the burden on the taxpayers.

After a very good discussion about the Town, its problems with community members, the new system, and how it will affect the town's residents, this gentleman was very happy to

provide any information needed for the survey. It was great to see such a change in demeanor. He had not been happy to have me come to his door, but after a very good discussion, he recognized that anger was not going to solve any problems and he eventually wanted to help out.

### Individualism vs. Community

Once, in the middle of a door-to-door survey on a deep and dark December early evening, I knocked on a door. A poor soul behind the door replied, asking me who I was. The second thing the voice said was "Please go away." I continued to ask for some cooperation with the survey, being committed to finishing the survey on behalf of a community sewer project. This time, the voice was more pained, and began to shout "GO AWAY! GO AWAY!" The pitch became very panicked and shrill, and I began to fear for my life, thinking that there might be a gun aimed at me behind that door. I said "OK, I'm leaving."

I was moved to wonder where we as a society have failed and caused some people to live in fear and dread—TV? capitalism? materialism? individualism? I wonder if now is truly the best of times and the worst of times.

## Using Surveys to Benefit Community Planning

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is also very important because it shows that the community was asked questions about their thinking regarding community needs and this project. Also, if the results are positive, it shows that community residents are in favor of the project. Funders who will be providing loans, i.e. they will be acting as bankers, want to know that the people are going to be ok with repaying this loan! The funders themselves are also interested in knowing that public participation was an important element in crafting the final form of any project. So, there are several ways in which needs assessment surveys can be important.

### Income surveys

Another survey that is really essential during the planning phase is an income survey. This will again generate information for potential sources of whatever funding might be necessary. While census data can be used as a mirror of income eligibility, in many instances we're dealing with very, very small portions of a community and the census block group or census tract data may not be unique to that particular area. So, in order to get information on only the area involved in the project, an income survey is a good option. Another drawback to depending upon census data is that important segments of the community may not be included. Scott Mueller talks about this in his article in this newsletter about an income survey conducted in Tupper Lake. The seasonal residents' information is not picked up in census studies and some

funding sources now want to view issues related to peak population periods rather than just year-round residents only.

The income survey itself is also important to the funders because it helps them determine what they consider the "affordability level" of this particular community. In turn this will help them determine what if any amount of low interest loans or grants they can provide to the project.

### Separate and equal

The subject matter in income surveys is considerably different from what you want to learn in a needs assessment survey. Our general preference is to have two separate documents and to have them NOT go out at the same time. We prefer to have the needs survey go out first and then when, or IF, it becomes necessary, there can be a follow-up income survey. Jumping immediately into a subject of a sensitive nature such as income without having the residents understand more fully WHY they are being asked to provide this information and what potential benefit may flow from this is a poor approach. It works better if the whole project and process is explained to the respondents first.

### RCAP Solutions becomes involved because...

Income surveys can be carried out by those who are consultants in the grant writing or financial application aspect. Under certain conditions RCAP Solutions is able to perform this activity as a free service. Beyond that, our experi-

### The Man... continued from pg.1

"Well, Elvis, I would like to talk to you about the income survey being conducted in the Town of X....."

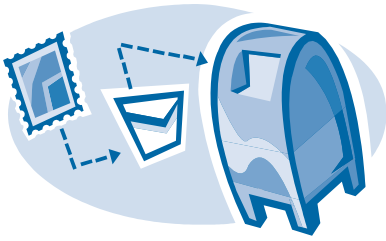
He completed the survey (admitting that Smith was his correct name) and then invited me into his house. It was a shrine to the King: walls covered with commemorative plates; gold records; paintings, etc. Also, Elvis lamps and other memorabilia. Mr. Smith, a.k.a. Elvis, gave me a detailed description of everything.

I went back the next day with a colleague who brought a camera. Elvis was quite accommodating and also gave us another guided tour.

ence in most states in the Northeast over the last fifteen years has shown that, without exception, all of the sources from which a community might seek funding — for water, wastewater or solid waste projects — have accepted income surveys undertaken and completed by RCAP Solutions. That indicates the quality with which we have been working.

### Community roles and challenges

Probably the most important role that a community has to play in all this is to make sure that the public, the community residents, and those who are going to be polled, have a thorough understanding of what an income survey is — and what we are actually



trying to accomplish. They also need to understand the procedural aspects of what goes on in an income survey.

RCAP Solutions staff are readily available to help explain these types of surveys through public meetings or by written information, perhaps newspaper articles, or something that might go out with a water or a sewer bill. Certainly, this preliminary information is a very important part in helping people to feel comfortable with providing information of a sensitive nature so that the community can use this information in their planning phase.

### The process

In general we gather information on residents in the intended service area. A Master List is constructed and a count of households is then estimated. The community is asked to suggest ways to publicize the survey, either through direct mailing, newspapers, postings at local gathering places, or cable access channels.

The survey itself usually consists of several phases. The first step involves a widespread mailing and communications outreach to members of the community explaining the project and the information collection process. The initial approach to data collection is often a mail survey to all of the residents of the area for

the proposed project. These may also be absentee owners...they have to be contacted as well as those who live full-time in the community. Completed surveys are sent back in a sealed envelope, usually mailed to our central office for processing. No name is affixed to the survey form.

The community leaders have no notion of the individuals' personal responses. Reporting is done in terms of "who has completed the survey" or "persons to re-contact" in order to meet obligations to obtain information from a very high percentage of members of that part of the community being surveyed. To achieve the necessary return rate (which varies by funder), a door-to-door approach is often an appropriate method. In some instances door-to-door surveys are conducted by volunteer groups within the community — a sort of neighbor-to-neighbor activity. Some of their experiences are shared in this newsletter. Information collected in this manner is also sent back to our central office (in sealed envelopes) for processing. Unfortunately, for all of the interest and effort we have put forward for a community, sometimes the necessary response rate is not achieved or achieved only gradually. This accounts for certain surveys taking a very long time to complete, which shows the determination and perseverance of the community to help those last few individuals understand the importance of providing the needed information. Sometimes the necessary response rate is never achieved. Then the community loses its opportunity to apply for funding that might otherwise be available for them.

Once survey data have been processed and findings submitted to the community leaders, RCAP Solutions staff work with the community leaders, the engineering firm and possibly other stakeholders to use the collected information in preparing funding applications to what appear to be appropriate types/sources of funding. "Appropriate" funders are those who, hopefully, will provide funding for the project since the survey results show the project populations meet their funding threshold criteria.

### Final observation

Doing surveys is a very important part of the community development planning process. Some of the most valuable surveys come well before you undertake income surveys, too. Quite often community leaders are a little bit reluctant to undertake opinion surveys because they don't understand how beneficial these can be. It is, therefore, important for RCAP Solutions to help community leaders or project sponsors understand that you need to be able to link perceptions that the residents within a confined geographic area have about this project and what else needs to be done. Money can stretch just so far, and different people have different understandings of what "needs to be done" and what priorities should be set. Understanding these concerns and values from the start of a project will sharpen the focus of your efforts — and help build in community acceptance. ■

*RCAP Solutions uses surveys in a number of ways to learn more about the needs and activities of the people we serve. For more information contact Carol Hess, Manager, Special Projects, 800/488-1969 x231.*

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