

Municipal Bonds Survey Analysis
Town of Swanzey

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1) The failure of the proposed municipal bonds projects for the Town of Swanzey, New Hampshire in 2015 and 2016 reflects voters and taxpayers deeply seeded concerns for protecting their self-interest, and viewing government as “other”. Opposition to the proposals is concerned with a variety of issues, primarily the total cost, location of the fire station, and the belief that a fire station suitable to a full time staff is not needed. If the goal is to identify and resolve any variable impeding the implementation of the proposals, then the Town of Swanzey (based on the numbers) has several potential approaches to achieve its goals.
- 2) In 2015, voters blocked the Town of Swanzey’s proposal of a \$4.5 million, 17,000 square foot fire station located on Safford Dr. The following year, the town packaged further renovations and expansions to municipal service buildings together (700 s.f. addition and renovations to the police station, 1,000 s.f. addition and renovations to the town hall, and improvements to the public works facility) and reduced the size of the fire station to 10,000 square feet, costing a total of \$5.5 million. Voters also voted against this proposal, the survey results are consistent with the vote.
- 3) Alternative adjustments to a future proposal include changing the location of the fire station, proposing and completing one project at a time, reducing the cost, and proposing a multiuse facility.
- 4) Changing the location of the fire station will provide the Town of Swanzey more favorable public opinion of the proposal, in addition to holding more deliberative sessions over a longer period of time. Opposition feels ignored and/or cheated by the town, however these negative feelings can be resolved through simple measures.

Improvements to municipal services facilities in the Town of Swanzey appear to be a necessary step for the town to make. The sample of respondents expressed this sentiment fairly regularly, one respondent said, “We know these repairs are all needed, the way you bundled them together wasn’t the right way to present them...” The respondent expanded on how he or she did not have the required information to make a fully informed decision, so “consequently [he or she] voted no until [he or she] understood things better.” This statement expresses the sentiment that voters understand the necessity for improvements to municipal service buildings, however conservatively voted no due to the manner in which the proposals were presented, or some other main concern. Another voter expressed, “Would have voted for everything but fire station, location and cost ridiculous.” This indicates that improvements to facilities remains within the scope of the Town of Swanzey, and voters do not stand in hard-lined opposition to all improvements.

60.2% of respondents voted against the proposal in 2015, with 26.7% reporting they voted in favor. 53.4% of respondents voted against the 2016 proposals and 34.8% voted in favor. Potentially reflecting the success of downsizing the fire station from 17,000 s.f. to 10,000 s.f. There is a strong positive relationship (Pearson’s R of .717) between a respondents 2015 vote and his or her 2016 vote at the .01 level of significance, showing us that people’s perception of the proposals remained consistent and suggesting that other measures will be necessary to passing future proposals. There is no significant relationship between any demographic information provided in the survey and the likelihood of support for the proposals, telling us support and opposition exists evenly among all

demographic groups (age, whether or not the respondent has children under the age of 18, and length of residency).

Additionally, attendance of the deliberation sessions in both 2015 and 2016 has a statistically significant relationship of moderate strength with how the respondent voted for either proposal. In 2015, 54.8% of respondents who voted in favor of the proposal attended the deliberation session. If there were no relationship between the variables, 41.6% of respondents who voted in favor would have also attended the deliberation session. The relationship between attendance of the 2015 deliberative session and how the respondent voted is significant at the .05 level, with a Pearson's R of .229 (the best we can hope for given the nature of the data). Meaning, voters are more likely to vote in favor of the proposal if they attend the deliberative session. The same is true for the 2016 proposal. While 53.8% of people that voted in favor attended the deliberative session, it is up from an expected 36.2%. 72.2% of people who voted against the proposals did not attend the deliberative session, compared to an expected percentage of 63.8. This relationship is significant at the .01 level with a Pearson's R of .302.

Upon initial inspection of the survey results, opposition to the proposed municipal bonds appeared angry towards the potential of raised property taxes, 59.6% of respondents who voted against the proposals cited the impact on taxes as important, very important, or extremely important, with 44.9% of respondents saying taxes were extremely important in informing their vote.ⁱ 77.5% of opposition to the proposals cited the impact of taxes as important, very important, or extremely important, approximately comprising 42.8% of the total sample of respondents. A

negative sentiment towards the fire chief and several town employees permeated throughout open responses.

77.9% of opposition to the 2016 proposals cited the location of the fire station as an important to extremely important causal factor informing their decision. Respondents frequently cited the location as a central concern, saying, “I feel the location is not central,” “location should be in Swanzey Center,” “The location of the facility is my number 1 concern,” and “Free land does not mean the location is correct.” (As well as, “The LOCATION is STUPID.”) In addition to the location as a primary concern, 88.4% of respondents cited the total cost as important to extremely important.

Most opposition did not cite the renovations and improvements as unnecessary, the median response to “Expansion and renovation to town hall/police station/ public works facility” was “somewhat important.” Despite the town reducing the size and cost of the proposed fire station from \$4.5 million and 17,000 s.f. in 2015 to \$2.7 million and 10,000 s.f. in 2016, the median response to the size/cost was very important, with 87.5% of respondents citing it as important to extremely important. These numbers show there is consistent opposition to the fire station yet more support for other proposed projects. A fire station located on Safford Dr., will not pass, particularly with the negative perception of the fire chief expressed by a number of respondents.

Respondents who voted against the proposals and attended the deliberation sessions yield useful results. There is no statistical relationship between attendance of the deliberative sessions and impact on taxes as a causal factor for the

respondent's decision making. Revealing to us that voters concerned with the impact of taxes are informed ideologically and will not budge if provided conflicting information. It could also mean any attempts at softening the perception of the impact on taxes during deliberative sessions were unsuccessful. This poses an issue for passing the bill, as 42.8% of the sample of voters cite the impact of taxes as important to extremely important and 3/5 of the vote are needed to pass a bond proposal. It does, however, give opportunity to increase the amount of deliberation sessions and increase attempts to alter the perception of the impact of taxes on those who cited it as a less extreme reason.

Additionally, the total cost of projects as a motivating variable for opposition reflects similar frequencies. 88.4% of respondents who voted against the bill cite it as important to extremely important, comprising about 47.8% of the sample. The size/cost of the fire station greatly outweighs the size and cost of other improvements and renovations to facilities, however. Responses claiming it as important to extremely important comprise 87.5% of the opposition and about 47.8% of the total sample. There is no statistically significant relationship between attending the 2016 deliberative session and the size/cost of the fire station. Responses regarding other renovations are much less overwhelming. Importantly, only 54.7% of the opposition believes the fire station is not needed, accounting for 28.6% of the total sample.

Going forward, the process to inform voters should start earlier and more frequent deliberation sessions should be held. Separating the projects will help gain support for individual proposals, and will likely lead to a vote in favor. Deliberation

sessions have statistically proven to lead to more support and more moderate opposition, which then allow room for compromise. Voters do not stand in complete opposition to the proposals, however the current 10,000 s.f. fire station located on Safford Dr. will likely never pass, and if bundled will never allow other projects to gain approval even with frequent deliberative sessions. There is enough room, given the data provided, to take the correct steps and measures to pass these proposals individually. The ideologically driven opposition is not the norm, and many voters are willing and able to approve future proposals. A different location of the fire station will yield the greatest increase in support, and deliberative sessions will moderate any views of the total cost of the proposals. Separating the proposals will also separate the costs and more likely lead to a vote of approval. The voters of Swanzey will compromise and reach a decision with these simple steps.

ⁱ The large amount of consistent reports of factors being “extremely important” in determining the respondent’s decision to vote against likely do not accurately reflect the aggregate reasoning. Many responses claimed all factors provided were “extremely important”, suggesting respondents may have not carefully read or thought about the various factors individually, and instead reported “extremely important” out of an emotional response to the proposals, rather than a rational or analytical approach. This further suggests the importance of this issue to the respondents.