

COUNTY OF YORK

MEMORANDUM

DATE: August 15, 2025

TO: York County Board of Supervisors

FROM: Mark L. Bellamy, Jr., County Administrator 

SUBJECT: Understanding Statistically Valid Surveys and Their Role in Decision-Making

Before sharing the results of *The National Community Survey*, it's worth noting that the opinions of just 400 people can accurately reflect the views of a community of 70,000, a fact that may be surprising. After all, 400 is a small fraction of the total population. But in statistics, once a population reaches a certain size, the number of people you need to survey to get accurate results levels off. It's more about how confident you want to be in the results and the margin of error you're willing to accept.

For a community our size, surveying about 400 randomly selected residents gives us results we can be about 95% confident in. In other words, the *plus or minus 5%* margin of error means that if a survey shows 60% support for an idea, the real number in the community is likely between 55% and 65%. Once we have around 400 responses, adding more people improves accuracy very little; it mostly increases cost, and if survey participants are chosen at random and represent the broader community, their responses can reflect the community's views with a high degree of accuracy. Importantly, this only works when the survey sample is scientifically selected to be representative; random sampling is key.

Tools such as FlashVote and Polco are designed to ensure that surveys are conducted in a statistically valid way, with random selection and balanced representation. This process avoids the common bias that can result when we only hear from the most vocal individuals or those with strong opinions.

Statistically valid surveys give us something invaluable: a reliable picture of the "will of the people" across the entire community. They capture the perspectives of the silent majority, the residents who may not attend meetings, send emails, or speak at public hearings, but whose views are equally important.

However, survey results are only one part of a balanced decision-making process. Good governance requires weighing three critical inputs:

1. **Community-wide sentiment** – Obtained through statistically valid surveys.
2. **Highly impacted voices** – The perspectives of residents most directly affected by a decision, often those who speak at meetings or contact Board members directly.
3. **Expert staff input** – The technical knowledge, operational realities, and regulatory requirements provided by County staff.

When these three perspectives are considered together, you as Board members are better equipped to make informed, balanced decisions that reflect both the broad will of the community and the specific needs of those most affected.

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