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The strange but true tale of dueling polls in the Rays stadium saga

John Romano | A survey by a non-partisan political group says voters hate the deal. A team poll says residents are behind the deal. One is more accurate than the other.

ST. PETERSBURG — Soon, the great stadium debate will be in the hands of elected officials.

The details of the plan to reimagine the Tropicana Field parcel has taken more than a year to negotiate with the Rays, developers, Pinellas County and St. Petersburg all playing a role in what eventually will be a multibillion-dollar project that could define downtown's future.

And now that financing and other questions have been mostly answered, city council members and county commissioners will soon be responsible for approving the plan and the government's share of expenditures.

From what I can gather, most people seem amenable to the idea of affordable housing, hotels, corporate campuses, medical buildings, green spaces and restaurants/bars on the bulk of the 86-acre parcel. It's the 17 or so acres and the \$1.3 billion price tag for a new stadium that's contentious.

So, let's talk about that.

A few weeks ago, I wrote a column pondering the benefits/costs of this project and included two sentences about a poll commissioned by the team that suggested most registered voters considered it important for the Rays to remain in the region.

Within hours of the column's publication, my mailbox began to fill up with emails from opponents of the plan. They disputed the poll's veracity because it was at odds with a League of Women Voters survey that had been released in February. Several emails demanded I print a retraction.

Since there was nothing factually incorrect about what I had written, a retraction was never considered.

However, I did decide to invite an expert to review the methodology of the Rays poll.

And, also, the one released by the League of Women Voters.

The verdict?

One poll was far more reliable than the other.

“When I looked at the League of Women Voters survey, my first thought was, ‘Oh, this is really problematic,’” said Stephen Neely, an associate professor in the School of Public Affairs at the University of South Florida.

When it comes to assessing polls, Neely says he looks for evidence that responses come from a sample size that accurately reflects the population being questioned. That means the proper ratio of gender, age, race, partisan affiliation and income level.

Another critical component is the phrasing of questions. They should be asked in a non-leading, neutral manner.

The League of Women Voters survey falls short in both categories.

The first question, for instance, goes like this:

Neither the city nor the county has approved the Rays-Hines deal yet. The city and county should negotiate a better deal than the current term sheet that costs taxpayers \$1.9 billion.

“The questions are very much like, ‘Here’s our opinion, don’t you agree?’” Neely said. “It’s worded in ways that are very problematic. Should the city and county get a better deal? That’s like asking, ‘Would you like to negotiate a better deal on your rent?’ Well, of course I would. But when it comes due, I’m still going to pay my rent.

“The questions are asked in a way that are almost primed to elicit a certain response.”

Not to mention, there’s not a lot of nuance in the questions. The term sheets for the stadium financing call for the county and city to each contribute \$300 million, with the Rays paying \$700 million and any cost overruns. The \$1.9 billion in the survey question is an estimate of a host of other factors, including interest payments. That’s like buying a \$400,000 house but claiming you spent \$2 million because that’s what it will cost over the life of the mortgage.

The other concern with the poll, which the League of Women Voters acknowledged in a press release was not scientific, is that it used an opt-in method. The League sent emails to 36,461 registered voters in Pinellas and got 779 responses. It didn’t account for any appropriate demographic representation. The concern is that only people with unusually strong feelings — one way or the other — might respond.

As for the Rays poll, which was conducted over the phone and included 412 responses in St. Pete and 500 in Pinellas County and generally put support for the stadium deal in the 75% range, Neely said it was done by a reputable company (Pathfinder Opinion Research) and seemed to follow accepted industry standards.

Neely had some questions about the demographics, which the pollster later provided, showing an accurate representation of the population.

I did not write much about the Rays poll when I first got a copy a few weeks ago, and I'm not going to recreate it here. Why? Because as faithful as the polling company was in trying to elicit accurate responses, I think the issue is far too complex to be whittled down to a handful of broad questions.

As a general barometer, I think the Rays poll is accurate that most residents see the value of a Major League Baseball team even if they are not fans.

But the ultimate decision has to take more into account than polls and surveys. It needs to include the reality of the current use agreement at Tropicana Field that puts the team in control of the land, and development revenues, until 2027. It needs to include the reality of the proposals the city received from developers in separate RFP processes in 2021 and 2022. It needs to include the advantages of partnering with a global firm such as Hines. It needs to include the hopes/concerns of residents of the Historic Gas Plant District.

It needs to have the type of conversations that the City Council is planning for workshops in May.

It does not need hype or hysteria.

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