



March 25, 2019

Board of Directors
Williamson-Travis Counties MUD 1
Cedar Park, Texas 78613

Re: The Community Forum for WTC MUD 1 Community-Wide Survey Results

Board of Directors:

As you are aware, The Community Forum for WTC MUD 1 (hereinafter referred to as Community Forum), which is led by two WTC MUD 1 residents, Linda Fabre and Sarah Dillard Teale, recently prepared and distributed a community-wide comprehensive survey intended to gauge the opinions of residents on a range of issues. The survey addressed many issues that impact AMWNA and its role and function in the community.

On January 17th, after the survey was first published, AMWNA issued a statement on our Facebook page about the survey, explaining to residents that neither AMWNA nor the MUD had any involvement in preparing, reviewing, administering, managing, or interpreting the results of this survey. We further explained that the survey design was extremely flawed and written with significant bias. We made it clear at the time that due to the egregious flaws in the survey design and methodology, we would be wary of any data that came out of the survey.

Now that the survey process is complete and the Community Forum has compiled the results and issued a series of policy recommendations, AMWNA remains committed to our initial position on this matter. Despite the many problems with the survey, the Community Forum insists on the validity of their results, has made it clear they expect the MUD to make decisions based on their policy recommendations, and has indicated it will continue to monitor the MUD (and by extension AMWNA) to evaluate compliance with their recommendations.

Therefore, given that we expect this to come up repeatedly in the coming months, and given AMWNA's positive working relationship with the MUD, we felt it was appropriate to make it



clear to the Board of Directors how the AMWNA intends to respond to those Community Forum policy recommendations that impact us and how we operate.

We also know there are many people in Anderson Mill West who took the time to take this lengthy survey, so we felt we owed it to those residents to read the results and the list of accompanying policy recommendations and to be transparent in our response.

The writing of surveys is challenging and specialized work and is best done by a neutral third-party. To be clear, AMWNA attempted to collaborate with the individuals behind the Community Forum to ensure that any surveys issued to residents are done so responsibly, but they rejected all opportunities to do so, deciding instead to prepare and administer this survey themselves without any input, oversight, or review by anyone other than themselves. And as you will see from our analyses below, the result is a survey that is deeply flawed in its design and outcomes.

Given that I have prepared the following analysis myself, I feel I should preface it with some statement of my qualifications to do so. Although I would never go so far as to classify myself an expert in survey design or research methodology, my education and professional experience gives me the ability to identify and explain the many obvious flaws in the survey. My educational background includes a B.S. in psychology and an M.S. in urban and regional planning, and both my undergraduate and graduate level coursework included several years of research methodology and statistics classes.

Following graduate school I worked as an AICP-certified (American Institute of Certified Planners)* associate planning consultant, assisting communities with long-range planning efforts, which include public outreach and participation, the outcomes of which were incorporated into the communities' planning documents and the policy recommendations therein. I have also served as the consulting on-staff planner for several communities and have both an appreciation and respect for the value of an engaged public.

All of this is to say, I am in no way rejecting the results of the Community Forum's survey out of an inherent desire to dismiss public input. An AICP-certified planner pledges to uphold high standards of practice, ethics, and professional conduct, and I hope it is obvious to anyone who has worked with me that I care deeply about the opinions and wellbeing of our

** disclosure: since becoming a stay-at-home mom, I have allowed my certification to lapse due to the expense of maintaining it while not being employed.*



residents. Rather, it is *because of* my respect for public engagement that I cannot abide a process that has been so irresponsibly and unprofessionally handled from start to finish. Please allow me to elaborate.

Survey Design and Methodology:

I will start out with a few basic survey design issues. Some of these things may seem trivial, but they can make a huge difference in the validity of the results and how those results are interpreted. Again, this list is not exhaustive. It is merely intended to hit on a few examples of how the survey is flawed and how that impacts the usefulness of the data.

1. **The Community Forum did not collect adequate demographic data on respondents (i.e. characteristics of the people responding),**

Why does it matter? A lack of demographic data makes it hard to determine how well the composition of respondents represents the composition of the total population of the MUD. Lack of adequate demographic data also makes it impossible to conduct any sort of nuanced analyses of the results based on variances in demographics. (for example, do older adults feel differently than younger adults?)

2. **The demographics that were collected were not done so in ways that make meaningful sense.**

Why does it matter? Let's take an example from the survey. Survey question 3 reads: *How many of each of these age groups are represented in your home?* But instead of allowing respondents to indicate the actual ages of the people in their home, respondents selected from age ranges. The options available were: "*Baby/Toddler (0-4),*" "*Child (5-12),*" "*Teen (13-19),*" "*Adult (20-64),*" and "*Senior (65+).*"

When designing survey answer choices, you should only group responses into categories if those categories actually mean something to the data. But in this case, the ranges seem to be selected without any thought as to how the responses could be used to understand the data. For example, do we expect there to be any meaningful difference between the opinion of a 64 year old and a 65 year old (all else being equal)? Not likely. But I could easily hypothesize a difference between the opinions of a 20 year old and a 64 year old. And yet, the 20 year olds and 64 year olds are grouped together in the same category, while the 65 year olds are in a separate category. During the analysis



of survey results, this kind of meaningless data grouping makes it hard to fully understand and interpret the results.

3. **The survey sample does not appear to be representative of the population of the MUD.**

Why does it matter: What is clear from the demographic data that was collected is that the data suffers from something called “selection bias,” which is when the survey sample (the people who took the survey) does not accurately represent the population at large. In this case, the people who responded to the Community Forum’s survey are skewed towards adults without children, meaning that families with children were underrepresented in the results. And while we can’t be completely sure based on the data (because 20 year olds and 64 year olds were grouped together), it suggests the sample is also likely skewed toward older adults, while under-representing young adults (adults with young children tend to be younger themselves).

Oddly, the Community Forum chose to interpret the data as follows: *“data reveals that in our neighborhood there are as many seniors (65+) as there are kids (5-12).”* However, this is not at all how this should be interpreted. In the absence of comprehensive and current census data to back up this claim, the only thing the data suggests is that residents without young children were more likely to respond to the survey. (not surprising and very typical, especially when the survey is so long).

This underrepresentation of certain categories of MUD residents is problematic. In research terminology, it is called “nonresponse bias” when the people who take a survey differ in meaningful ways from those who don’t. Both selection bias and nonresponse bias often occur due to the way a sample is selected (more on this below). But what it means is the data cannot be generalized to the entire population of the MUD because only certain segments of the population have been adequately represented in the survey results.

4. **The survey results suffer from “selection bias” in part because of the way the residents were sampled (how residents were selected to take the survey). In this case, the sample was self-selected. That is, the Community Forum distributed the survey to everyone in the MUD and participation was voluntary.**

Why does it matter: This type of sampling typically leads to problems in the data because it provides no way of ensuring the final sample is representative of the population. As



described above, when a sample is not representative of a population, it puts significant limitations on how the data can be used and interpreted. A random sampling methodology would have helped to address this problem. Although, I understand why the Community Forum chose to make the survey available to everyone. Nevertheless, the sample is what it is and at no point that I'm aware of has the Community Forum acknowledged this limitation in their data. Although the response rate was pretty good (the size of the final sample of respondents), a larger sample size can only do so much to offset selection bias and nonresponse bias.

5. **The survey is riddled with leading questions (and response options) and double-barreled questions.**

Why does it matter? In some respects this is the most egregious problem with the survey design because regardless of who took the survey, it is impossible to interpret the validity of the responses (that is, how well the question accurately measures what it is intended to measure) because of the way the questions and response options were worded. Leading questions are those that are written in a way that induces one response over another or influences the way a respondent is likely to answer a question. This can happen in many different ways, and it is one reason why surveys should be prepared, or, at bare minimum, vetted by neutral third parties. If the party preparing a survey has opinions about the matter being asked about, it is very difficult to ask a truly neutral question.

Let's take an example directly from the survey—one that impacts AMWNA. Question 88 :*"Do you feel that the Board should continue relying on input from HOA's and the Neighborhood Association to drive their agenda or engage directly with residents?"*

To begin with, this is a what's called a double-barreled question (this is a pervasive problem throughout the survey), which means it is actually asking more than one thing, but respondents can only answer one way. And, in this case, they are actually asking three different things. Ignoring for a moment the inaccurate wording, the three separate questions would be, "Do you feel the Board should continue relying on input from HOAs to drive their agenda?"; "Do you feel the Board should continue relying on input from AMWNA to drive their agenda?"; (the HOAs and AMWNA are different animals, so they need to be decoupled) and "Do you feel the Board should engage directly with residents to drive their agenda?"



By combining all these into one question as they have, it creates a false dilemma in which the respondent is led to believe (or forced into responding as though) the only two options are to allow AMWNA (or their HOA) to speak on their behalf, or to have the freedom to speak for themselves. In reality, these two things are not mutually exclusive. The AMWNA does advocate for residents, yes. But that advocacy in no way prevents residents from speaking for themselves or interacting directly with the MUD board. In addition, the AMWNA board bases our own work on feedback we receive from residents, either directly or indirectly.

The available answer options continue to provoke the same bias. They are as follows: *"I already have too much on my plate, I am happy to leave decisions about the neighborhood to others;" "I am undecided, I would have to know what it looked like to be my own advocate before I could make that decision;"* and *"I want to know what is happening, and be able to put my own input in, not have others speak on my behalf."* What about the option, "I am happy to allow AMWNA to advocate on behalf of the community while also engaging directly with the MUD on issues that mean the most to me."? The fact that nearly half (48%) of respondents selected *"I am undecided ..."* indicates how challenging this question was to answer given the way it was worded.

Again, survey question 88 is just one example of the many leading and/or double-barreled questions in the survey. AMWNA attempted to point this out to the Community Forum when the survey was first released, and other residents have made similar comments, but they chose to dismiss this feedback as unimportant. I would argue it is critically important.

6. **The environment within which the survey was issued is wildly problematic, with a response period that lasted two months.**

Why does it matter? Two-months is an lengthy period of time to allow people to respond to a survey (has any sort of analysis been done to see how responses from the early days of the response period differ from those of the final days of the response period?), especially considering that during that period of time, the Community Forum did not make any efforts to remain quiet or neutral with respect to their opinions on numerous issues that were covered by the survey, further influencing people's responses and opinions. And, for our part, AMWNA was also vocal about the problems with the survey, at least at the outset. As such, there is no way to determine to what extent the Community Forum and other parties influenced the way people responded to and thought about



issues asked about in the survey, or, for that matter, people's decision to take the survey at all, further deepening the selection bias problem.

In summary, those are just a few examples of the numerous problems with the survey design and methodology, all of which make it challenging to interpret and use the results of this survey in any meaningful way. To be fair, many (though not all) of the issues described above are common in situations where communities are trying to solicit public input. It is very hard to get the public to participate in community outreach initiatives, and, by extension, difficult to gather a representative sample when conducted community-wide surveys. But what it comes down to then is responsible interpretation of the data, such as it is.

When evaluating, interpreting, and reporting on data that is so flawed, it is at bare minimum critical to acknowledge the limitations of the survey and the data and to be conservative in how the results are applied. And yet the Community Forum not only continues to insist their data is valid and generalizable, they have taken it upon themselves to extrapolate from the results specific policy recommendations that align with their own opinions and biases. Their recommendations clearly and repeatedly demonstrate the Community Forum's lack of expertise, professionalism, and objectivity.

Analysis of Select Policy Recommendations

To expand on this last point, I have selected a couple of the Community Forum's policy recommendations that impact AMWNA, or initiatives AMWNA is involved in, and have outlined in detail the problems associated with them. You will find that for each one the list of problems is so lengthy it could merit its own small report. And while I only evaluated in-depth the two recommendations included below, a similar litany of problems is applicable to all of the Community Forum's recommendations.

Community Forum Recommendation: *"Only 11% of residents are comfortable with the Board relying on input from HOAs and the neighborhood association to drive their agenda. It is recommended that the Board discontinue relying on input from the HOA and NA to guide decisions and instead reach out directly to constituents. This process could be facilitated by an increase in transparency, public education, investment in improved communication from the Board to the community, and a route for more reliable constituent input."*

First, as we discussed in #5 above, there are significant problems with the wording of the survey question upon which this recommendation is based (question 88), which in and of itself means the results of this question cannot be considered valid. But even if the results



were valid, the Community Forum has blatantly misrepresented them in the way they've phrased their associated policy recommendation.

The actual responses to this question were as follows: 11% of respondents selected "*I already have too much on my plate, I am happy to leave decisions about the neighborhood to others;*" 48% selected "*I am undecided, I would have to know what it looked like to be my own advocate before I could make that decision.*" And that means only 41% of respondents selected "*I want to know what is happening, and be able to put my own input in, not have others speak on my behalf.*"

This is a beautiful example of how the way a statistic is presented can change the way data is interpreted by the public. It is also a very irresponsible way to present data and report statistics, and it is just one reason why you don't have residents write, manage, and interpret a public opinion survey about their own neighborhood without any oversight or external input or review. This is not the first time the Community Forum has misrepresented data to support their own opinions, and I will call them out on it every time because it is highly irresponsible.

By drawing attention exclusively to that 11% statistic and not reporting on the other two percentages, it makes it appear that only a tiny percentage of the population support AMWNA's role as community advocate. But watch how differently you would view the results of this question if the beginning of their recommendation had been worded as follows: "A 59% majority of respondents either support the AMWNA in its advocacy role or are undecided based on lack of information." Or, how about this: "Nearly half of all respondents indicated they were undecided on this matter, so we are unable to draw any conclusive policy recommendations from the result." Or this: "A minority (41%) of respondents indicated they would like to have opportunities to provide their own input to the MUD board." All of those statements are based on the same data and responses, and yet when compared to the way the Community Forum has chosen to represent the data, it paints a very different picture for the reader.

The Community Forum has chosen to interpret and present the data the way they have because it supports their own opinions of the AMWNA (I am not making an assumption about this; their opinions have been communicated to me directly outside the context of the survey).



Another point related to this is the Community Forum's use of the word "residents" in their first sentence, as in, "Only 11% of **residents**." The correct way to phrase this sentence would be "Only 11% of **respondents**." We have already established above that the sample of respondents is not representative of the population, and, therefore, you cannot generalize these opinions to the entire population. But even if you could, their phrasing would still be considered incorrect. This seems like a nit-picky thing, but it is significant because it betrays the Community Forum's stubborn insistence that the data be considered representative of everyone in the MUD and should, without question, drive policy decisions.

Next, if you look closely at the responses to questions 4, 5, and 9 of the survey, particularly the open commentary portion of the responses, it becomes clear that a fair number of survey respondents aren't actually familiar with AMWNA. They either don't know it exists, confuse it with the MUD or an HOA, don't understand the role and function of the AMWNA, or are referring to the AMWNA from years past and not the AMWNA of today. Therefore, when combined with the various response bias issues, it becomes near impossible to consider the responses to this question meaningful.

To conclude, AMWNA is supportive of public input and involvement and, therefore, contrary to the Community Forum's policy recommendation, intends to continue to assist the MUD in educating the public and engaging them in decision-making in appropriate and objective ways. We will also continue to advocate on behalf of both individual residents and the community as a whole.

Community Forum Recommendation: *"All parks and ponds, with the exception of Lakeline Oaks Park and Anderson Mill West Park, are reported to be used almost exclusively for walking on the trails and exercising dogs. The two other parks are used by a great deal of residents for the playground. Some amenities, even those placed most recently are used so infrequently (yoga deck - 0 people, disc golf - 3 people) that the cost to install and maintain them seem misguided. The recommendation in light of this data is to forgo a costly "Park Concept Plan" and maintain the playground equipment at Anderson Mill West Park and Lakeline Oaks park -- maintaining the walking trails and natural beauty of the other parks and ponds, instead of investing in costly hard amenities "see recommendation #11 for neighbor's opinion on spending"*

First, for each of the parks in the MUD, the survey asked the same basic question, which was "What is your primary use of INSERT NAME Park?" Respondents were then only allowed to select one answer. So, in situations where a person used a park in several different ways,



they were forced to choose only one use (at least one respondent called them out on this in the open commentary portion of a question). Therefore, the statement *"All parks and ponds, with the exception of Lakeline Oaks Park and Anderson Mill West Park, **are reported to be used almost exclusively** for walking on the trails and exercising dogs."* is not accurate. Based on how the questions were structured, there is no way to tell how many other ways those parks are used by the same respondents. Perhaps those parks are *primarily* used for walking and exercising dogs, but not *"exclusively,"* as suggested by the Community Forum.

Second, the survey question said absolutely nothing about whether or not the MUD should engage in a park planning process, nor is this addressed anywhere else in the survey. And yet, from the data that was collected, the Community Forum has extrapolated that no park planning process is needed. This is the Community Forum's own opinion and has nothing to do with anything that was explicitly asked in the survey.

Third, the Community Forum's recommendation is based on the statement *"All parks and ponds, with the exception of Lakeline Oaks Park and Anderson Mill West Park ..."* But Anderson Mill West Park and Lakeline Oaks Park are the MUD's two main community parks, and they differ significantly from the other smaller parks in the MUD. So it makes no sense to base a policy on how the MUD's smaller and less improved park spaces are used, while ignoring how its two most popular and diversely used parks are used.

Fourth, if you look at the number of people who responded to each of the questions about how they use a park space, the response rate drops significantly. The actual number of respondents for the questions about each park are as follows:

Hatch Pond: 50 responses
Madeleine Loop: 17 responses
AMW Pond: 45 responses
Aster Pass Pond: 15 responses
Cashell Wood Pond: 9 responses
Vestivia Pond: 4 responses
Little Elm Pond: 39 responses
London Lane Pond: 23 responses
Lakeline Oaks Park: 67 responses
AMW Park: 151 responses
Aster Park: 18 responses
Sunchase Park: 66 responses



Old Mill Pocket Park: 22 responses

Volente Hills Park: 20 responses

So, to summarize, the Community Forum is suggesting we forgo park system planning because a handful of residents who live close to the MUD's smaller neighborhood parks report using those particular spaces primarily for walking. We cannot understand the logic in that, and it betrays not only a strong bias against planning but also a lack of understanding about the proposed planning project, its goals, and its value to the community.

Contrary to the personal opinions of the Community Forum, the AMWNA will continue to advocate for a planning process that encompasses our parks system for the following reasons:

1. Contrary to the Community Forum's apparent concern that the purpose of the park planning process is to legitimize huge investments in our parks over the next few years, the much more complex purpose is to define, with meaningful (and third-party-led) resident input, what investments should be made in our parks, how best to spend MUD money as it relates to our park system, how to program the spaces we have, how to ensure our park amenities are serving all our residents, document data and formalize recommendations as it relates to having an aquatic amenity in the district (a topic that has been an ongoing issue for years), and to establish a detailed budget timeline for managing the park system.
2. Rather than investing piecemeal in our parks, the plan would allow the MUD to consider the park system as a whole, define goals for the future, and work towards these goals in a fiscally responsible manner, over time. It is an upfront investment that will help the MUD meet its long-term financial goals. And in the long term, the money spent on the park plan will be a drop in the bucket compared to its value to the MUD.
3. Planning processes, in general, are an important means of maintaining transparency in government decision making and are also useful tools for ensuring responsible spending.
4. In a residential community like ours, our park system is one of our most significant assets. There is a wealth of literature out there documenting the value of parks and public spaces as it relates to property values, human health and well being, and the natural environment. These are not trivial contributions. Our gathering spaces, our parks, our



schools, the public realm is what binds our individual properties together and connects. And these things are worth investing in.

5. One thing we *can* extrapolate from the Community Forum's survey results is that at least some of the MUD's residents don't use any of the park spaces. Although, we didn't need a survey to know that was the case. This is true in any community and for any population. However, the park planning process would help identify ways the parks could evolve to be accessible and useable spaces for an even greater diversity of the MUD's residents. As just one example, the playgrounds are currently not very friendly to children with special needs. It would be wonderful to see changes to the parks, over time, that help address this issue. As another example, how could our park spaces be adapted to be more appealing to and useful for senior residents?

I could go on, analyzing all the Community Forum's policy recommendations in similar fashion, but I think I've gone on long enough to make my point. If the MUD would like feedback from AMWNA on our position regarding any of the other policy recommendations, we are happy to provide it.

Thank you for taking the time to understand our position on this matter.

Megan Dudo
President, Anderson Mill West Neighborhood Association