Problems in Paradise:
The People of Palm Beach and Martin Counties Speak Up

Executive Summary

March 2006

Prepared for
Community Foundation
FOR PALM BEACH AND MARTIN COUNTIES

Prepared by
Princeton Survey Research Associates International

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Dear Friends:

We define “community” as more than a geographic locale – it is an idea that exists in the minds of people sharing common hopes and fears.

Building a sense of community is one of the guiding principles behind the work of the Community Foundation for Palm Beach and Martin Counties. To accomplish our mission, the Foundation must understand how residents and community leaders view important issues affecting the quality of life in Palm Beach and Martin counties. We use that knowledge not only to shape the Foundation’s grantmaking and community leadership activities, but also as a resource for others engaged in community planning and to help people see the vital role they play in the future of our community.

In 1995, the Community Foundation commissioned its first public opinion survey. Now, a decade later, it is the right time to again assess people’s views on life in our community. The Foundation engaged Princeton Survey Research Associates International, a recognized, independent research company specializing in social and policy work, to undertake this comprehensive endeavor. The results are documented in the Executive Summary and full report – Problems in Paradise: The People of Palm Beach and Martin Counties Speak Up.

We invite you to use this information to build on our community’s strengths and address our challenges – and, most importantly, to nurture connections between the people who live here so that together we can develop a shared vision for the future.

To learn more about the Community Foundation for Palm Beach and Martin Counties and how you can play a role in building a sense of community here, please contact the Foundation at info@cfpbmc.org, or visit us online at www.yourcommunityfoundation.org.

Most sincerely,

Eliot I. Snider
Chairman

Shannon Sadler Hull
President & CEO
Executive Summary

The people of Palm Beach and Martin counties are quick to tell you that the beauty of the land, the sea and the weather provides an outstanding canvas for their lives each day. And they also will tell you that the impact of so many people drawn to this area means the list of community issues that need priority attention is long.

The incredible growth and development throughout the counties has generated major concerns about overcrowding, public schools, affordable housing, the environment and services for those in need. The diversity of the residents and the diversity of their circumstances mean a diversity of opinion on what problems need to be addressed most urgently.

These are among of the key findings from surveys of representative samples of adults in Palm Beach and Martin counties, conducted for the Community Foundation for Palm Beach and Martin Counties by Princeton Survey Research Associates International (PSRAI). The Palm Beach County survey is based on 1,204 interviews with adults and the Martin County survey is based on interviews with 602 adults, all conducted January 11-30, 2006. These findings are augmented by the results of a complementary survey among 201 community leaders in the counties completed in November of 2005. The research builds on a benchmark survey of Palm Beach County residents by the Foundation in 1995.

The Quality of Life

In the broadest of terms, life is good in Palm Beach County and in Martin County. For Palm Beach County, residents rate the overall quality of life highly, with 74 percent giving life in the county excellent or good marks. Only 25 percent say the quality of life is fair or poor.

And Martin County residents are exceptionally positive about the quality of life in their county. More than four in five residents (84%) give the county excellent or good marks for quality of life.
life, including 36 percent who say it is excellent. Only 16 percent rate it fair or poor.

And according to the survey of leaders, the community leaders in both counties agree: 89 percent give the quality of life positive marks, while only 10 percent give it negative ratings.

The top reasons for this overall positive view of life are clear: the natural beauty of both counties. Altogether, 57 percent of Palm Beach County residents mention its beauty when asked what they like most about the county. That includes references to the weather and the climate (44%) and the beaches and the ocean (10%). Just to the north, the beauty of Martin County is cited by more than a third of its residents (36%) as what they like most about it. And one in five Martin residents (19%) say that their favorite aspect of the county is that it isn’t crowded and still has a small town feel.

**Picking Priorities**

While residents are quite positive about the quality of life in the area, they see many problems that need attention. To gauge the people’s perceptions of the breadth and depth of the challenges in the counties, the Community Foundation identified 13 specific issues to ask residents to assign a priority level - top, some, very low - for taking action on in the next year. And a remarkable number of issues need immediate attention, according to residents.

In Palm Beach County, five issues are deemed top priorities by about three-quarters of the public:

- Fighting crime (84%)
- Improving the quality of public school education (77%)
- Providing services to the elderly (74%)
- Improving the availability and quality of health care and mental health services (74%)
- Protecting natural resources such as rivers, beaches and Lake Okeechobee (73%)

Another four issues are judged top priorities by about two-thirds of Palm Beach residents:

- Reducing traffic congestion (69%)
- Providing quality, affordable housing (67%)
- Helping poor families (66%)
- Creating jobs and economic opportunity (66%)

In Martin County, the priorities for the next year are slightly different. Specifically, at least seven in 10 residents say top priority needs to be given to:

- Protecting natural resources (80%)
- Reducing traffic congestion (73%)
- Fighting crime (71%)

Additionally, seven other issues are deemed top priorities by roughly six in 10 Martin residents:

- Limiting growth and development (64%)
- Improving public school education (63%)
- Providing services to the elderly (62%)
- Improving the availability and quality of health care and mental health services (62%)
Helping poor families (61%)
Providing quality, affordable housing (60%)
Creating jobs and economic opportunity (57%)

It is clear that residents in both counties see a lot of issues that need attention. Thus it is no surprise that their responses splinter when asked to pick a single number one priority for the next 12 months from the list. Education comes out on top in Palm Beach County, chosen by one in five residents (21%); about one in 10 residents designate affordable housing (13%) or fighting crime (11%) as the issue that should be number one.

In Martin County, the pattern for the number one priority differs. Five issues are essentially tied for first place, given the sampling error margin for the survey. Limiting growth and development tops the list, with 16 percent. The subsequent issues, all within a percentage point or so of the first are: protecting natural resources (15%); reducing traffic congestion (13%); affordable housing (12%); and improving public education (11%).

**Priority: Growth and Development**

Growth has been a dominant fact of life in the area. From 1990 to 2000, Palm Beach County grew 31% in population. By mid 2005, the U.S. Census Bureau estimates the county grew another 12.1% to about 1,268,000.\(^1\) Martin County grew 25.6% between 1990 and 2000 and then added another 10.3% to just under 140,000 residents by mid 2005.

Residents see too much growth and development as the area’s biggest problem.

In Palm Beach County, one-quarter of the adults (25%) flatly say too much growth and development is the biggest problem. One in five (21%) call the related issue of the high cost of living the biggest issue and 19 percent say the biggest problem is traffic.

For Martin County, the verdict is even clearer: nearly half of residents (46%) mentioned some aspect of growth and development as the most important problem facing the county. In second place is traffic, with 21 percent, which is arguably just another aspect of growth and development. A distant third in the ranking is the high cost of living, with 11 percent. Fourth is the environment (9%), with water quality and pollution named as key concerns.

And residents want to put the brakes on all this growth.

In Palm Beach County, nearly four in five adults (79%) call for reining in development. That includes one in four (26%) who say *development is out of control* and should be frozen. And it also includes the more than half (53%) who say that development needs to be slowed down so it can be planned more effectively. Only 17 percent say development is very important and should not be slowed down.

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For Martin County, the numbers are quite similar: 82 percent call for reining in growth, either by freezing it (26%) or by slowing it down (56%). Only 13 percent say development is too important to slow down.

Community leaders in both counties tend to agree it is time to slow down development. Three in four (73%) agree that development should be slowed down, although only eight percent say that development should be frozen altogether. One in six community leaders, 16 percent, say development is too important to slow down.

A high-visibility growth and development battle has raged recently over where to locate the Scripps Research Institute. The complex fight has left residents convinced Scripps will bring jobs and high-technology business to the area (78% in Palm Beach County and 77% in Martin County). But they are seriously divided over whether the project will damage the environment and bring more uncontrolled growth and development. For example, in Palm Beach County, 36 percent of residents say it will damage the environment and 45 percent disagree.

The community leaders from both counties, in contrast, expressed decidedly supportive views of Scripps and little concern about the possibility of it adversely affecting the environment. More than nine in 10 community leaders (94%) agree that Scripps will bring jobs and attract high-tech businesses to the local area, while only one in four agree that Scripps will damage the environment and bring more uncontrolled growth.

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2 The surveys were completed before the final decision was made on where to locate the research facility.
Part of the debate over growth and development is linked to what residents see as the burdens of a high cost of living, especially with regard to housing. Two-thirds of Palm Beach County adults, 67 percent, say that providing quality, affordable housing should be a top priority. For Martin County adults, 60 percent say affordable housing should have top priority. This issue has also grabbed the attention of community leaders: 82 percent name it a top priority.

**Priority: Education**

Education ranks as a top priority for the immediate future in both Palm Beach County and Martin County. But there are big differences between the two counties when it comes to the perception of how well the public schools are currently doing their job.

In Palm Beach County, opinion is marginally positive but divided: 43 percent give the public schools excellent or good marks, while 36 percent rate them fair or poor. Fully one in five residents (20%) cannot give a rating.

In Martin County, the picture is much more positive. Sixty-three percent of residents say the local public schools are doing an excellent or a good job, including 26 percent who say excellent. Only 17 percent give the schools negative marks. Again one in five Martin residents say they cannot rate the schools.

Even though public school ratings are lower in Palm Beach County, it appears they have improved over the past decade. A slightly different question in the 1995 Community Foundation survey found 32 percent of the residents are positive about the schools and 48 percent negative. The identical question in a 1999 Knight Foundation survey found a 36 percent positive
to 40 percent negative split.

Attitudes toward the nature and sources of problems with public school education are varied. For example, 51 percent of those in Palm Beach County agree that high school drop-out rates are a major problem in this county. Eighteen percent say their views are not close to that position and almost a third, 31 percent, say they do not know. In Martin County, as one might expect, the concern is somewhat lower: 39 percent agree that this is a problem, 29 percent disagree and again 31 percent do not give an answer.

But the community leaders are more concerned than the public is on this facet of the problem: nearly two-thirds, 65 percent, agree that the drop-out rate is a problem, and only 22 percent do not. Only 12 percent of leaders cannot give an answer.

**Priority: Health and Human Services**

The delivery of health care and other human services in communities as diverse and geographically dispersed as Palm Beach and Martin Counties poses a wide range of challenges and a substantial range of perceptions.

For example, the people of Palm Beach County are sharply divided on the quality of the work by the local human services agencies that serve children, the elderly and the poor. Thirty-five percent give them excellent or good marks; 40 percent give them fair or poor marks and 24 percent cannot rate them.

But in Martin County, the view is much different: 47 percent give positive ratings to these agencies, 24 percent negative and 28 percent cannot say.

Demonstrating the wide variation in public perceptions, the local hospitals in each county receive positive ratings. In Palm Beach County, 65 percent give the hospitals positive marks and 77 percent in Martin County. Despite the high ratings for the hospitals overall, there is serious concern about the quality of care provided in the area emergency rooms. In Palm Beach, 55 percent agree the quality of care provided by hospital emergency rooms is not adequate. Only 34 percent disagree. In Martin, 40 percent agree and 48 percent disagree.

**Other Issues**

Several other issues affecting life in Palm Beach and Martin counties were explored in the surveys. While these issues were explored in less detail than those deemed priority areas by the Foundation, results for each enrich our understanding of how residents in the counties feel about their lives today and their concerns about the future. Some of the highlights include:

- **Crime and Safety**: While majorities of residents in both counties say fighting crime should be a top priority, most residents feel safe in their communities: 85 percent in Palm Beach County and 93 percent in Martin say they feel either very safe or somewhat safe.
• **Hurricanes**: Despite the incredible impact of hurricanes on the area in recent years, a majority of Palm Beach County residents (69%) say the county is at least somewhat ready to handle the effects of future hurricanes. One in five Palm Beach residents (19%) say the county is very prepared for future hurricanes, and half (50%) say the county is somewhat prepared. In Martin County, a slightly larger majority of residents say their county is very prepared (27%) or somewhat prepared (53%).

• **Race Relations**: In diverse communities, the benefits of cultural exchange are often overshadowed by the fact that relations between racial and ethnic groups can be fraught with tension, emotion and some lack of understanding about other groups’ points of view. In Palm Beach County, a majority of residents have a rather negative view of race relations, but that view may still be an improvement over a decade ago. While 40 percent of residents describe race relations in Palm Beach County as excellent or good, 53 percent say they are fair or poor. That is some improvement from the results of the 1995 Community Foundation survey, when 31 percent described race relations in a positive light and 62 percent characterized them negatively. In Martin County today, the view is much more positive compared with its neighboring county. Six in 10 Martin residents (59%) rate race relations in the county as excellent or good. Only 34 percent say they are fair or poor.

• **Immigration**: In Palm Beach County, where one in five residents say they were born in another country and 20 percent say they are first-generation Americans, issues surrounding the impact of immigration are especially meaningful ones. Fewer than half of Palm Beach residents (45%) say immigrants from other countries have helped the county, a decline from the 62 percent of residents who expressed this positive impression in the 1995 Community Foundation survey. In Martin County, fewer identify themselves as immigrants (8%) or first-generation Americans (16%). Despite this demographic difference, the results are similar: just half (49%) say they think immigrants have helped Martin County.

• **Arts and Culture**: Arts and cultural activities are a vital part of life in the area and residents seem to take advantage of what is available. Sixty-one percent of Palm Beach County residents and 54 percent of those in Martin County have attended at least one live performance in the previous 12 months, whether that was a play, or a music or dance concert. Museum attendance is also fairly widespread.

Additional topic areas discussed in the detailed survey report include county leadership, civic activism, ratings of local institutions and the impact of seasonal residents.

**Research Overview**
The surveys of the general public in Palm Beach and Martin counties are the centerpieces of a multifaceted research project commissioned by the Community Foundation to obtain a broad picture of how area residents perceive their lives now and their futures.
The project included five other major components that helped to shape the design and content of the general public surveys and to inform the survey analysis. Information from these elements of the project is included in the detailed report where relevant.

1) The Community Foundation’s 1995 study, *Palm Beach Community “Check-up”: Residents Respond to the Issues Facing Their County*, was reviewed. This study was based on a telephone survey of 1,000 Palm Beach County adults, conducted by Public Agenda.

2) A telephone survey of 201 community leaders in Palm Beach and Martin counties was conducted in November 2005. The leaders represented all facets of the communities including government, education, non-profits, businesses and religious groups.

3) Three focus groups, conducted in November of 2005, including two with a cross-section of Palm Beach County residents and one with a cross-section of Martin County residents.

4) Administrative data and statistics on such issues as crime, high school graduation rates and housing costs in the counties were collected in 2005 and 2006.

5) Major stories in local newspapers over a three-month period were reviewed and coded.

**Survey Methodology**

The Community Pulse Surveys obtained telephone interviews with representative samples of 1,204 adults living in Palm Beach County telephone households and 602 adults living in Martin County telephone households. The surveys were conducted by Princeton Survey Associates Research International. Interviews were done in English and Spanish by Princeton Data Source from January 11 to January 30, 2006. Statistical results are weighted to correct known demographic discrepancies. The margin of sampling error for Palm Beach County weighted data is ±3.3%. The margin of sampling error for Martin County weighted data is ±4.6%.  

**Reasons for the Research**

The Community Foundation initiated this research to provide updated information on the state of Palm Beach County, and to provide a baseline of information on Martin County, to help inform decisions by the Foundation and others about future efforts to serve the counties. The project provides a window into residents’ and local leaders’ views about important community issues, a decade after the Foundation’s first public opinion survey.

The Foundation will use the project findings to inform its own work. The Board of Directors of the Foundation will use the results to help assess the future course of the Foundation’s grant-making and of its community leadership activities. The Foundation will make the results freely and broadly available and will endeavor to function as a convener, collaborator, catalyst and advocate. When survey results address issues outside the Foundation’s purview, the Foundation

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3 A comprehensive description of the survey methodology for the surveys of the public and the leaders of Palm Beach and Martin counties is included in the Appendix of the detailed report on the public survey findings. Pertinent information on other aspects of the research project, including the focus groups, is also provided in the Appendix of the detailed report.
will especially seek to provide results to other groups under whose auspices the need might be addressed.

**The Community Foundation**
The mission of the Community Foundation for Palm Beach and Martin Counties is to enhance the quality of life for all residents now and for future generations; to build permanent endowments; to address needs through grant-making; and to provide community leadership. The Foundation is committed to assessing and responding skillfully to changing local needs, and for this reason its areas of focus are broad: arts and culture, community/economic development, education, environment, health and human services, and human and race relations.

Established in 1972, the Foundation’s assets have grown to more than $100 million through donations from private donors, foundations and corporations. The Community Foundation develops strong partnerships with its donors to help meet their philanthropic goals by having an impact on important issues. During fiscal year 2004-2005, the Foundation approved more than $5 million in grants to nonprofit organizations and scholarships to students pursuing postsecondary education. Community leadership projects include the Foundation’s recent documentary, *The Indian River Lagoon: Gateway to Saving the Everglades*.

**PSRAI**
Princeton Survey Research Associates International is an independent firm dedicated to high-quality research providing reliable, valid results for clients in the United States and around the world. PSRAI has designed and implemented complex research efforts for clients ranging from foundations, non-profits and news organizations, to major international corporations. These include the Pew Research Center, the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, the Commonwealth Fund, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, The Urban Institute, *Newsweek*, NBC News and the Knight-Ridder newspapers. With offices in Princeton, N.J., and Washington, D.C., PSRAI conducts surveys by telephone, mail, personal interview and online.