Methodology

In January/February 2010, the Cary Biennial Citizen Survey was conducted examining numerous issues relating to the functioning and operation of Cary as well as current issues related to the Town. The results of this survey were followed up by BKL Research that examined specific issues from the survey in order to gather more detailed insight. They would be willing to participate in a focus group session (44% of the sample agreed to participate) was selected.

The composition of the groups was controlled in respect to two factors, age and gender. Participants were selected so that there was a balance of both age and gender in each session. All the participants owned homes. A total of 6 participants were in the first session and 7 in the second session. Appendix A has the roster of participants for both sessions including their age groups and Appendix B contains the seating charts. The participants were compensated for their involvement.

The sessions were held on May 15th at 1:00 p.m. and 3:00 p.m. at the Town Hall in Cary. The first session lasted 1 hour. A relatively structured set of questions was used for both groups (Appendix C), although discretion was allowed to explore other areas of importance during the sessions of both focus groups.

Growth in Cary

1a. Growth in Cary showed up again in this year’s survey as a concern, even though the population and tax base growth rates are way down compared to the recent past, probably due to the recession. How much do you think concerns about growth might be impacted if the Town did more to educate citizens on what the actual growth rate is as it changes over time?

Session 1

The respondents did not think educating the citizens on the actual growth rate would make a significant difference. One participant asked why growth is a concern and stated it is not necessarily a bad thing. Several of the participants agreed with this statement and they did not necessarily view growth as negative. Another member expressed concerns about growth. This individual indicated Cary generally did a good job with growth and enforced stringent development standards especially the requirement of buffers around developments. This person indicated concerns with the increased number of apartment-type units of recent developments instead of single family homes. This would cause the population to multiply more quickly. Another participant stressed the need for goals in growth not just growth for growth’s sake, but was satisfied with the level of growth in Cary. There was concern for the infrastructure especially water, community centers, greenways, and parks. The participants worried that fast growth could impact these quality of life aspects. Overall, this group generally agreed Cary is doing a very good job with growth.

Session 2

The participants were supportive of Cary publicizing the actual growth rate. One participant mentioned how Cary went from a sleepy little bedroom town to a big community. It was felt that publicizing the growth rate for different time periods would give a point of reference to residents. When asked if they knew the recent growth rate in Cary, none could name it. One member expressed a degree of concern for widespread growth such as moving into Chatham County and felt the infrastructure could not support it.
1b. What about growth do you think concerns folks? For example, is it the byproducts of growth such as traffic or waiting in line at stores?

Session 1
The participants were primarily concerned about resources and environmental aspects. The water supply at Jordan Lake was an issue with continued growth in the region. Several of the participants were concerned about the loss of greenspace and trees with developments and growth. One other participant was concerned about the increased number of traffic lights with development and the impact on traffic flow citing Cary Parkway. However, this participant perceived overall traffic to be better than other places.

Session 2
The key concern for the participants was infrastructure items such as police and fire. They noted the airport area where it was hard to tell if you are in Cary or Morrisville. A participant referred to this as spider web growth. Another member cited the Cary/Morrisville line. This individual wanted more defined lines of development where whole areas or sections are annexed.

1c. How much of the concern is growth in Cary, growth in Wake County, or growth in the Triangle?

Session 1
The conversation centered on the Wake County issue of schools. One participant questioned whether the School Board could make decisions for the whole county since the issues vary from region to region and one size does not fit all. Many of the participants have children in private schools. One member indicated the School Board does not seem to be consistent with their goals or plans citing year-round schools, busing, and reassignments. The participants noted that half the children in their neighborhood who are eligible for elementary school in Wake County are in private schools and these parents are not surveyed. The participants discussed and one participant stated that only 1 of 8 eligible children was actually assigned to attend the community-based elementary school in their neighborhood. Another participant commented that all residents are affected by schools through property values. There was a degree of support for Cary starting its own school system and increasing local taxes. Toward the end of the conversation, growth in the Town not the county or Triangle was more of a concern. Several participants felt the recession may have had a positive impact by slowing growth and giving a breathing period.

Session 2
The participants generally focused on growth issues in Cary; although, one member indicated more concern for Wake County growth. The primary conversation centered on demographic changes in Cary. One participant was concerned with the growth noted the growth in the 90’s was young people starting families. This forced schools to be built and they were soon maxed out. However, recent growth is from baby boomers and retirees. There was concern for the resources that are being provided to both these groups. Many retirees are moving here to be near their children and this is driving more adult day care. The Town was perceived to be offering good activities for retirees through parks & recreation. The participants saw a need for services for the in-between seniors who are less independent but not needing a nursing home. The participants also expressed some concern for the increased level of retail development in Town.
1d. When you think about what the Town government has done regarding growth over the last two years, what comes to mind—either positive or negative?

Session 1

The participants thought the Town was doing a very good job with growth in the past two years. They liked that the Town reduced spending on many capital projects such as downtown development and reduced development due to the poor economic conditions. One respondent stated he thought the Town had put $70-$80 million of new projects on hold. The participants also complimented the Town on the greenways throughout Cary but did not like the new posts erected in Town.

Session 2

The conversation turned to roads and streets in Cary. One participant indicated the roads were better while another member thought maintenance on them was actually worse. A participant suggested the Town used stop signs and traffic lights too often when roundabouts would work more effectively. This individual cited how long the traffic lights take on Tryon Road and Cary Parkway and thought the Town was doing a good job with growth.

1e. What do you think the Town should be doing to better manage growth?

Session 1

Several participants had concerns about development on the outskirts or fringes of Town. They felt the cost to move infrastructure items to the development could be too expensive. Several participants agreed the Town should work to fill in areas inside Town where it would be less expensive since infrastructure items are in place. The participants stressed the need for more balance between the two. Another member was not sure this was entirely feasible and noted developers prefer to build 100 houses instead of a few. One member expressed concern with out-of-town developers taking money away from the area and having too much influence. Toward the end of the conversation one participant indicated the Town is fortunate to have a growth problem while other areas did not have growth. There was concern that building too many houses in the market may damage property values but another member stated market forces would determine the amount of building.

Session 2

One participant indicated the Town needed a new post office and several others agreed. The participants liked what the Town had done with community policing. They liked the concept of having police officers and captains that can be contacted and are familiar with the area. One big concern that was discussed in more detail was the perception the Town had eliminated the required buffers with the lost of mature trees and greenspace in newer developments. They mentioned Maynard Road, Chatham Street, and Old Apex Road as areas they noted this occurring. One other member suggested road construction should be completed at night when possible.

1f. What would be the ideal situation in Cary?

Session 1
The participants preferred controlled growth in Cary. They stressed the need for infrastructure items such as police, fire, EMS, and schools. Water and housing turnover were also mentioned as contributing factors. A member would like the Town to go slower with growth and regularly evaluate the impact of the growth. One participant stressed the need to have an ultimate goal for growth such as what they did in Chapel Hill. This resulted in negative consequences for trying to inhibit growth such as making the place too expensive to live in.

Session 2

The participants expressed a concern for having too many houses for sale in the area and its impact on property values. One member mentioned the growth cessation period put in place by Mayor Lang. This participant also stressed the number of apartments, townhomes, condos, houses, and retail spaces for sale while there continues to be development. The idea of stopping growth for a while was appealing to this member. The concept of slow, steady, controlled growth was the theme of the conversation. There was also a concern for protecting environmental aspects in future developments.

Traffic

2a. Now let’s talk traffic. Are most of the problem spots more in Cary or outside Cary. Can you name specific times of day?

Session 1

The participants mentioned several specific areas in Cary and other general concerns for traffic. One member complimented the Town for responding quickly to alter the intersection of Green Level to Durham Road after a serious accident occurred. The area around Cary Elementary was also mentioned as a concern especially in the morning. The Town was going to put a circle in to help the problem but it had been delayed. There was a long discussion on the lack of left turns in Cary. The areas of Harrison & Maynard and Davis & High House were cited as examples. A participant thought the decision to eliminate left turns was made several years earlier to stop traffic from backing up. Another member was not sure if it was needed as much today considering the wider roads with left turn lanes in Town. Another issue was the fact that lanes change into left or right turn only especially in the downtown area with West Chatham and Cary Parkway cited as examples. The participants felt this was not a concern for residents but it makes the Town not driver friendly for visitors and more signage is needed to warn drivers of the lane change.

Session 2

The participants mentioned several areas inside of Cary as traffic problems. One area mentioned was Maynard Road. Highways 55 and 540 were mentioned for poor traffic light timing with the main problems occurring during rush hour. Two other areas viewed as problem areas for traffic backups due to light timing were High House & Cary Parkway and High House & Davis Drive. Green Level to Durham was also viewed as a road in poor condition. One of the participants was uncertain if all of these were Cary's problems but may be State concerns.

2b. What ideas do you have for how the Town should improve traffic?

Session 1
One participant indicated synchronizing lights with the new fiber optic network can be a problem for side streets entering the main road such as Kildaire Farm. The participant wanted more intelligent traffic lights that would operate independently when needed to let cars on side streets go when no traffic was present. It was thought that Lochmere Drive works that way. There were concerns for Cary Parkway & High House where there is a short left-turn traffic light cycle paired with a short left-turn lane. This causes a backup for those in the straight lane. Several participants indicated it is only a problem for approximately three hours a day and thought Lochmere Drive works that way. Another participant indicated Davis & High House does not have the same problem and works more efficiently due to more lanes. Again, the lack of left turns was discussed.

Session 2

The participants suggested better synchronization of traffic lights especially for areas such as High House & Cary Parkway and High House & Davis. The use of roundabouts was also mentioned. One participant thought they would work well in residential areas by slowing traffic while keeping it moving without stopping it like speed bumps. Several participants noted the lack of bike lanes. They were nonexistent in certain areas. They stressed they served to slow traffic especially when turning across through lanes such as on Evans & Aviation. They would like to see more signs telling drivers in advance so they will not stop when merging. Finally, there was a call to increase the length of the acceleration ramp for drivers pulling off the Beltline to Cary.

Street Maintenance

3a. Another of the concerns raised in the survey was street maintenance, things like fixing potholes and repaving. In this issue, who do you think is responsible for paving streets and fixing potholes in Cary?

Session 1

It was correctly answered that it depends on the street.

Session 2

It was correctly answered that it depends on the street.

3b. The correct answer is that it depends on the street. Some streets are owned by the State (NCDOT), some are Town maintained road, or a private road that's maintained by the people who live along it. First one: Kildaire Farm Road is a State road? How many think it's a Town road? Any of you think it’s private?

Session 1

There were two participants who correctly identified that it was a State road while two other participants thought it was a Town road. The other two were not sure and did not answer.

Session 2
Only one participant correctly identified that Kildaire Farm was a State road while the other six believed it was a Cary main road. They were surprised to find it was a State road not a Town road.

**3c. Let’s do another one. Raise your hands if you think Maynard Road is a State road?** How many think it’s private?

**Session 1**

Only one participant correctly identified that Maynard Road was a State road while four believed it was a Town road. The other respondent was not sure and did not respond. In addition, the participants seemed surprised when informed it was a State road.

**Session 2**

The same pattern emerged in this group, only one participant correctly identified that Maynard Road was a State road while the other six believed it was a Town road. The participant who identified it as a State road admitted he recently read that in the newspaper when told it was a State road.

**3d. Two more. Raise your hands if you think Cary Parkway is a State road?** How many think it’s a Town road?

**Session 1**

There was more uncertainty as to Cary Parkway. Only one participant thought it was a State road while two participants thought it was a Town road. The three other participants were uncertain and did not respond.

**Session 2**

In this group, one participant identified Cary Parkway as a State road while the other six perceived it to be a Town road.

**3e. Last one. Raise your hands if you think Academy Street is a State road?** How many think it’s private?

**Session 1**

There was more certainty for Academy Street. There was only one participant who thought that it was a State road. The other five correctly identified it to be a Town road.

**Session 2**

All seven participants correctly identified Academy Street as a Town road.
3f. So, while no one likes potholes, there is an equity issue that the Town would like your thoughts on. Should Cary citizens pay twice to have State roads maintained – once through our state taxes and once through our local taxes. Or should the Town continue to do what it's doing which is letting the State know when they need to come fix a pothole or make other repairs?

Session 1

The participants felt the Town should keep doing what they are doing by informing the State about the potholes or needed road maintenance and let them repair the road. The residents should only pay once. One participant was not sure if the Town would repair the road for the State. The participants were concerned if the Town were to make the repairs that were their responsibility. One of the members was unsure who to contact when they wanted to report a pothole since they did not know if the road was Town or State maintained. Another participant directed them to the Town’s website. The Town’s website the participants were very complimentary. They mentioned they use it to get information up for events. Several of the participants receive email notifications.

Session 2

In the initial conversation, a participant indicated Cary should repair it and be reimbursed by the State. If there was no reimbursement, the participants all agreed the Town should not repair the roads. The participants agreed Cary should repair roads in emergency situations when the road could cause damage to cars. One participant thought the State was supposed to repair a maintenance problem that is reported within 72 hours.

Revenue and Spending

4a. Okay on to money. We heard some conflicting ideas in the survey this year and want to get your thoughts on them. Many people want the Town to keep taxes and fees low and slow growth but at the same time spend more on roads and new projects. As you can imagine, the revenues the Town gets from consumer spending, like sales tax and wine & beer tax, are way down because of the economy’s impact on citizen spending habits and the Town hasn’t raised property taxes in over 20 years and growth is way down too. The revenues that come from sales taxes and growth make up a big part of the money Cary gets to provide you with new and better things. Keep in mind that to live within its means without raising your taxes, the Town has already had to cut its operations way back and cancel or delay indefinitely many projects, like improving downtown. So, we’d like your ideas on how to deal with the conflict of citizens wanting the Town to slow growth even further, not raise taxes, yet still pay for improvements.

Session 1

The participants felt you cannot have slow growth, not raise taxes, and add new improvement projects. One participant would like the Town to use an online survey to ask the public which projects to pursue with the funds that are available like a mini-referendum. Other participants thought participation would be a concern with the online survey and how many citizens need to participate to make it valid. There was a discussion by the participants that the taxes in Cary are low compared to other areas and they may possibly be willing to pay more for keeping services such as greenways at a high level. Although they were careful to indicate this does not endorse a tax increase. Other members expressed concerns that additional funds could lead to pursuing projects that are not needed. They stressed the need for the Town to be as efficient as possible first.

Session 2
A participant stressed that Cary must live within its budget just like everyone else. The Town needs to look at where it is wasting money. Wasteful projects were mentioned (flashing yellow lights and informational signs) and it was stressed not to buy something just to say you have it. The participants all agreed Cary has done an overall good job in the past two years living within the budget and not raising taxes.

4b. Are there certain types of projects or activities that you think should have a higher priority than others? For example, do you think the Town should focus more on maintenance and upkeep of existing facilities and focus less on new things? Or should the Town strike a balance between the two or what?

Session 1

The participants all agreed the Town should focus on upkeep and maintenance of existing facilities. One participant indicated the Town seems to have everything now and they are very happy here. One other participant thought the economic conditions may have helped by giving the Town time to step back and evaluate the need for certain projects.

Session 2

All the participants agreed the Town should first focus on maintaining the existing services and facilities. One participant indicated the Town is like a house where you maintain it properly before you look to add any additions. Another member said they have and make things high quality rather than spend money a bit here and there and not have anything they would like to see Cary spend money on, the participants mentioned more police/EMS, parks, and greenways. The participants were very complimentary of the greenways, parks, and activities provided by the parks & recreation department. The participants also liked the new recycle bins provided by the Town.

4c. Staying with this for a few more minutes, do you generally agree or disagree with the things the Town is spending taxpayers’ dollars on? Do you think the Town is spending money wisely and appropriately?

Session 1

All the participants agreed the Town was spending money wisely.

Session 2

The participants all felt Cary was spending money wisely. They noted the Town has not raised taxes in the last two years and continues to provide the same level of service. When asked about the tax rate compared to other areas they felt Cary was low. When asked about the tax rate compared to other places they have lived, they felt the tax rate was good. However, a couple of the participants indicated the tax rate in Cary was somewhat higher than some areas they had lived in but the rate was reasonable.

4d. Is there anything that sticks out in your mind as something you wish the Town hadn’t or wouldn’t pursue?

Session 1
The conversation started with the Town spending more on roads but the participants recognized that many of the roads may be State maintained. One member felt needed road repairs sometimes take too long. The participants had a relatively difficult time thinking of items they wish the Town had not pursued. One item with a degree of discussion was the aquatic center and its usage. However, the participants noted Cary has selected projects to provide activities for everyone and to attract people to Town such as the soccer facility and baseball park. Other participants indicated that Cary has not gotten carried away with adding amenities compared to Raleigh with the new convention center and higher tier facilities that they can be proud of and they add a wow factor for visitors. Another member was cautious that Cary not get caught up in the race to add facilities and overspend. There was a conversation concerning the usage of facilities and the aquatic center compared to the soccer and baseball facilities. The participants recognized the facilities are not just for residents but also visitors who bring money into Town. Overall, there was agreement the Town is pursuing appropriate projects.

Session 2

One participant indicated the new flashing yellow lights for left turns and the informational signs. The only comment was to improve snow removal.

Communications

5a. The Town is very interested in having citizens participate in the governing process. They want to create, implement, and make good decisions on programs, projects, policies, and laws. They want these decisions to reflect the wants, needs, and values of the community. They want you to be happy with how things are going. So, lets start by defining involvement in Town government, what kinds of things come to mind?

Session 1

The participants indicated voting was a key method to get involved. One participant stressed going to Town Council meetings. When asked if they watch the meetings on Cary TV, a few of the participants indicated they watch occasionally. The conversation turned to representation on Town Council. One of the participants noted there are only 4 districts representing 140,000 residents. Each member represent an increasing number of people and areas. It was suggested more districts would result in better representation and knowledge of the specific problems in different regions. This was highly supported by the other participants.

Session 2

The conversation started with one participant mentioning involvement would mean attending the Town Council meetings. The participant quickly brought up Channel 11. Several of the members had concerns about the interest level generated by Channel 11. When asked what the concerns were, the participants mentioned that the information displays were horizontal and vertical, no focus on one topic, and stimulus overload. They did feel Channel 11 was a good way to get quick information on what was happening in Town. Other members stated they are on the email list for the Town. They thought with emails and Channel 11 you can stay very well informed. Advisory panels were also mentioned as a method to get involved. Finally, one other member was complimentary to BUD for giving Town information.

5b. Generally speaking, how interested are you in being involved in Town government? Talk a little about this—would you say you're very interested or somewhat interested? Depends on the issue?
There was limited discussion with the participants indicating the issue would be the key reason to get involved. The focus group reflected more involvement than most residents.

Session 2

The participants were more concerned about staying informed than involved; although, two of the members would like to be more involved to some degree. The concern was for their neighborhood and one member indicated the police and fire departments were doing a good job meeting with them. There was a comment to add an online suggestion box to communicate with the Town and all members also agreed with the statement that the level of involvement depends on the issue.

5c. What kinds of things would motivate you to get more involved?

Session 1

The participants all generally agreed they would get involved if the Town did something or proposed something they did not agree with. The participants then stated they were not involved due to apathy, but because they were satisfied with what the Town was doing. One of the participants then stated they were not involved due to apathy, but because they were satisfied with what the Town was doing. The other members agreed. Several participants noted the Town is a great retirement area and a good place to raise a family. When asked if Cary was a better place to live compared to previous places they lived, all agreed it was better. One participant stated seniors moving to the area can be positive since they don't overburden schools and result in fewer families as long as Cary does not turn into Florida.

Session 2

The participants generally indicated it would depend on the issue and how it affected them. Several participants noted the Town is a great retirement area and a good place to raise a family. When asked if Cary was a better place to live compared to previous places they lived, all agreed it was better. One participant stated seniors moving to the area can be positive since they don't overburden schools and result in fewer families as long as Cary does not turn into Florida.

5d. Outside of participating in the survey and this focus group, how many of you had some level of involvement in Town issues in the past two years – raise hands.

Session 1

None had involvement in Town issues in the past two years.

Session 2

Three of the participants had involvement with the Town in the past two years.

5e. What were you involved in, what did you do?
Session 2

One member had involvement through their homeowners association (HOA). They had an issue and the member would have preferred more specifics from the Town as to what is right and wrong for the HOA to do. The issue was eventually resolved by the police speaking with the neighbors. Another participant indicated the police were very helpful in setting up a neighborhood watch in their community. One other participant contacted the Town concerning signage and the number of words that can be on a sign.

5f. Do you think you benefited from the experience? How?

Session 1

Not applicable.

Session 2

See responses from 5e. It appears all benefited from the involvement and interaction with the Town. Although one participant would have liked the Town to give more definite advice to their homeowners association.

5g. How did you find out about the issue and how to get involved?

Session 1

Not applicable.

Session 2

With the exception of the signage issue, the two other participants were involved due to the fact that it was a neighborhood-based problem.

5h. Finally and real quick. How many people who read print media are reading it online?

Session 1

All of the participants indicated they read print media both hard copy and online.

Session 2
The participants indicated Cary News was their major source of information about the Town. All of the members who indicated they also read online. One member stated he reads online during the week but gets the newspaper on the weekends. One other member indicated they read online emails from the Town as their primary news source.

Other Comments

6. In closing, is there anything else about the Town of Cary government that you’d like to share?

Session 1

The participants were concerned about their email address being accessed by others when they signed up for the Town of Cary emailing service. Several members indicated they are getting unsolicited emails. They would have liked prior notification that this could happen before they signed up. They would like the Town to find a way around the Freedom of Information provisions.

Session 2

There were several comments by the participants. One member wanted to know where to get tree mulch. The Cary police and fire departments were complimented for being very approachable. There was a comment that Cary should stay Cary with what makes it a good place to live. There was also a call for Cary to fight to protect the water supply at Jordan Lake. The participants liked the alternative day watering system; although, one participant would like to know how to change days. There were several compliments on the landscaping in Town. There was a concern expressed by one participant of building the sewage plant in someone else’s backyard (New Hill). One participant wanted to know if Cary was planning to add cisterns for the water issues. The restrictions on garage size were viewed as too narrow for two cars and families. One participant who completed an addition noted that Cary was wonderful to work with and the inspector made the contractor do the