

Municipality officer opinions on fiscal status¹

by Gary Deziel, Extension assistant professor

University of Vermont

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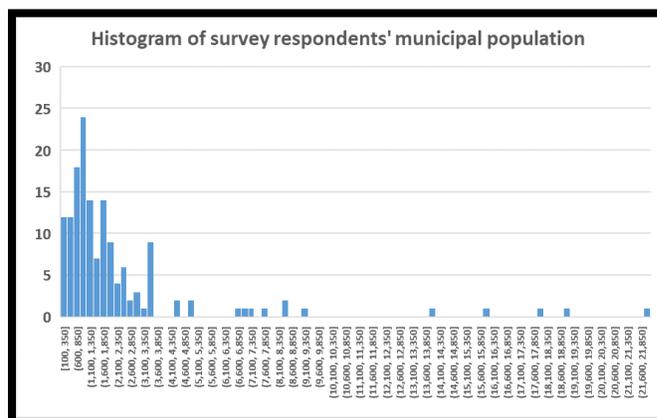
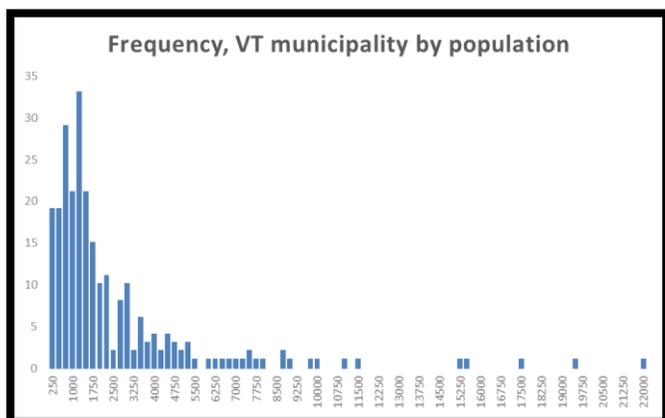


Survey objective

Measure the “pulse” of selected municipal leaders on their current fiscal outlook observations and perceptions.

Survey methodology

- The survey conducted August 31 – September 18, 2020.
- UVM’s *Qualtrics* survey software used for the survey.
- The targeted audience included municipal clerks, treasurers, and selectboard (or equivalent in villages and cities) chairs.
- The survey population was derived entirely from publicly-available contact lists found on the VT Secretary of State’s website. Out of 598 email addresses supplied, a total of 567 (95%) were valid for the first request sent. Three requests were sent out.
- A final 27% response rate was achieved.
- Respondents’ reported municipal population distribution is similar to that of all Vermont towns, skewing slightly smaller. Respondents’ versus Vermont’s municipalities’ median and mean population is 1,300 versus 1,290, and 2,330 versus 2,485, respectively. See histograms, immediately below.



Summary

1. The predominant message from this survey is “wait and see”. The majority of responding clerks, treasurers, and governing board leaders [respondents] feel optimistic or cautiously optimistic (Illustration 1) about **the coming fiscal year**. A detailed look (Table 1) at respondents shows governing board leaders to be qualitatively more pessimistic than clerks, treasurers, and clerk/treasurer respondents.
2. Compared to last fiscal year at this time, the slight majority of respondents reported (illustration 2) that **sales and fees** in their municipality were about the same or increased. One-quarter of respondents reported sales and fees were lower than this time last fiscal year.
3. The take-home message from respondents is that **property tax receipts** are still unknown due to impending payment deadlines (Illustration 3). An equivalent minority of respondents reported that property tax receipts were both up and down, with 29% reporting unchanged.
4. Sixty-two percent of respondents reported that the municipal governing board's current thinking on the municipality's **budget for next fiscal year** was “wait and see”, although some reported flat (10%) or reduced budgets (4%). Perceptions about **bond votes and capital expenditures** showed 68% reporting that their

municipality was definitely not or probably not considering delaying bond votes or other capital expenditures (Illustration 5).

5. Respondents reported little confidence that **federal / state pandemic-related special funding** will help their municipalities make it “through” the pandemic by covering costs associated with COVID-19. Fifteen percent reported definitely yes or probably yes to aid helping out (Illustration 6).

Illustration 1. What's your outlook about the next fiscal year?

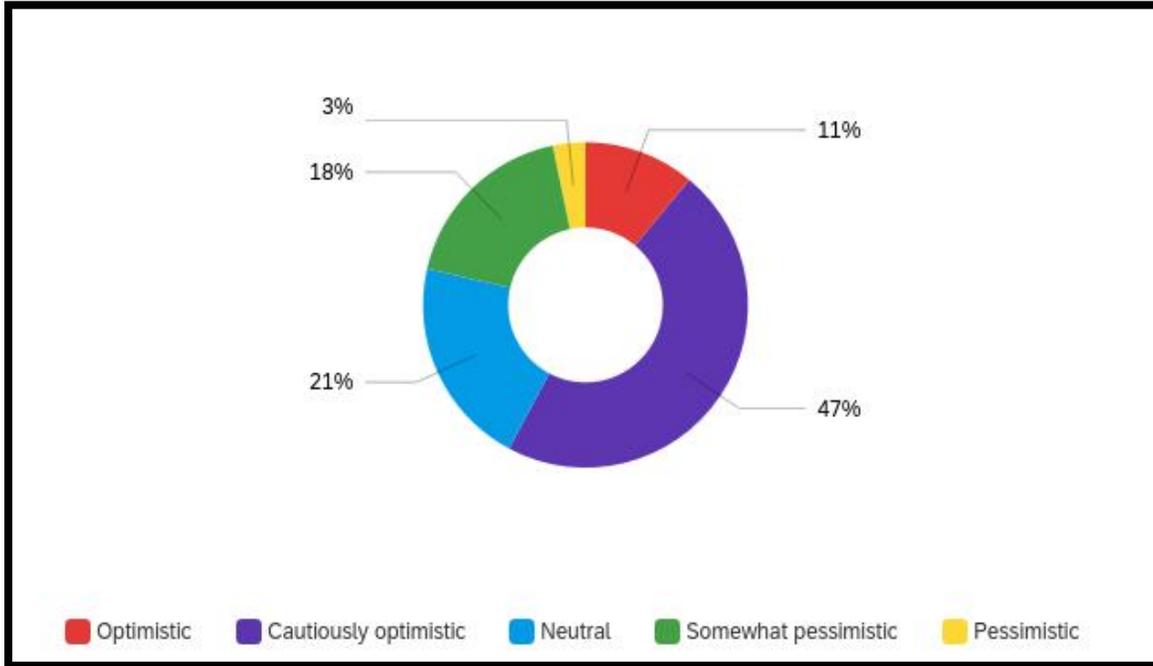


Table 1.

What's your outlook about the next fiscal year?	Clerk	Board member	Treasurer/ clerk	Treasurer
Optimistic	20%	7%	14%	11%
Cautiously optimistic	40%	46%	51%	57%
Neutral	20%	16%	22%	21%
Somewhat pessimistic	10%	28%	11%	11%
Pessimistic	10%	3%	3%	0%

Illustration 2. Compared to last fiscal year at this time, do you think that sales and fees (impact, sewer and water, et cetera) in your municipality are up, down, or about the same?

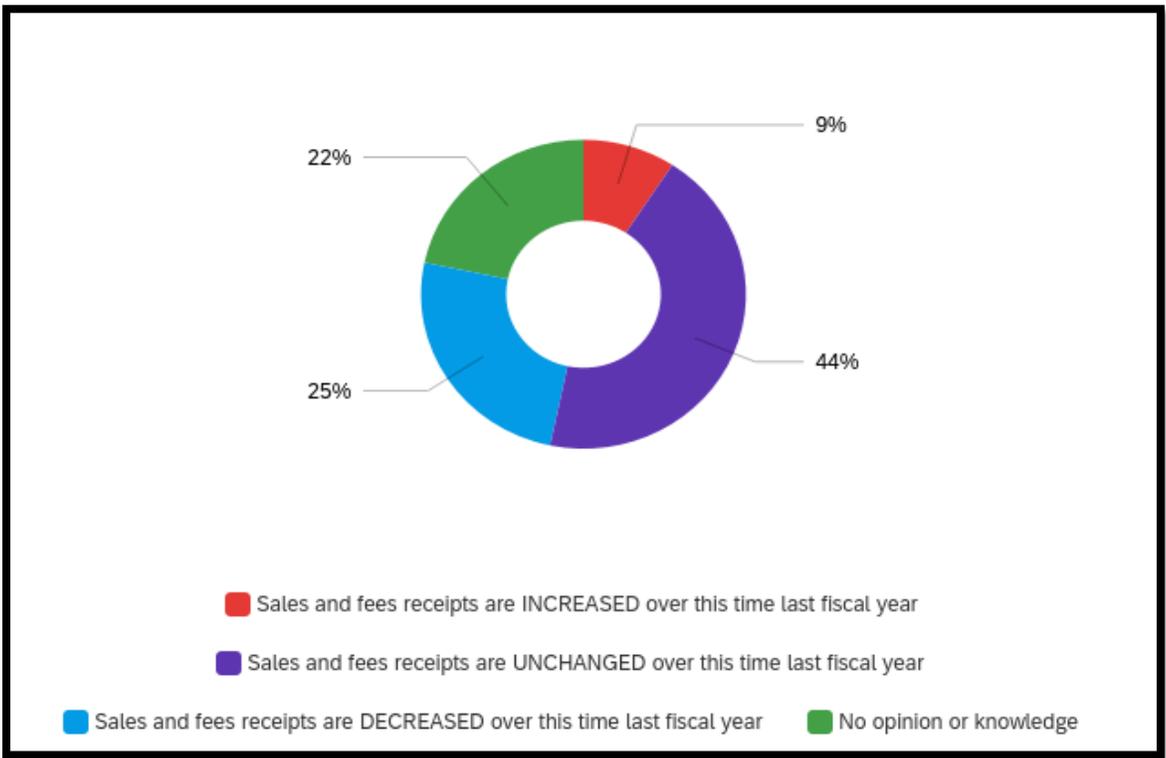


Illustration 3. Are property tax receipts up, down, or unchanged for the year compared to last year?

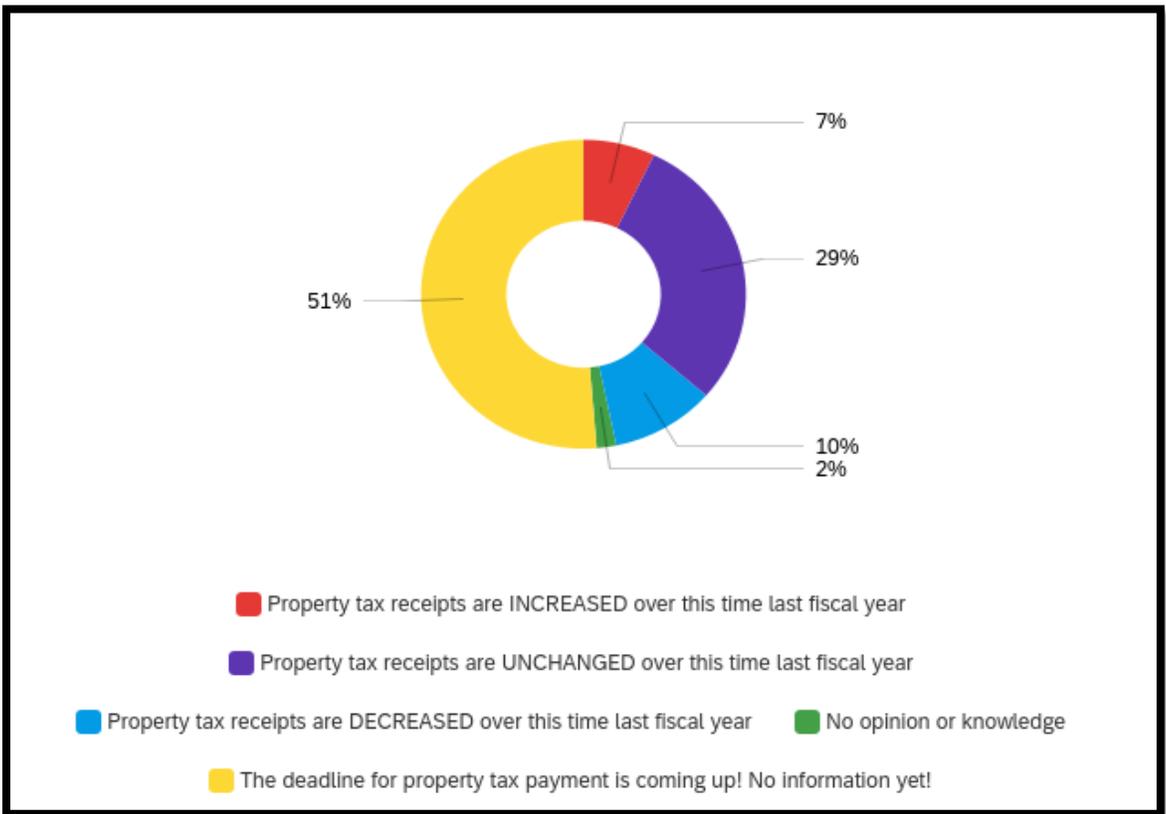


Illustration 4. In your opinion, what is the municipal governing board's (e.g., select board, aldermen, city council) current thinking on the municipality's budget for next fiscal year?

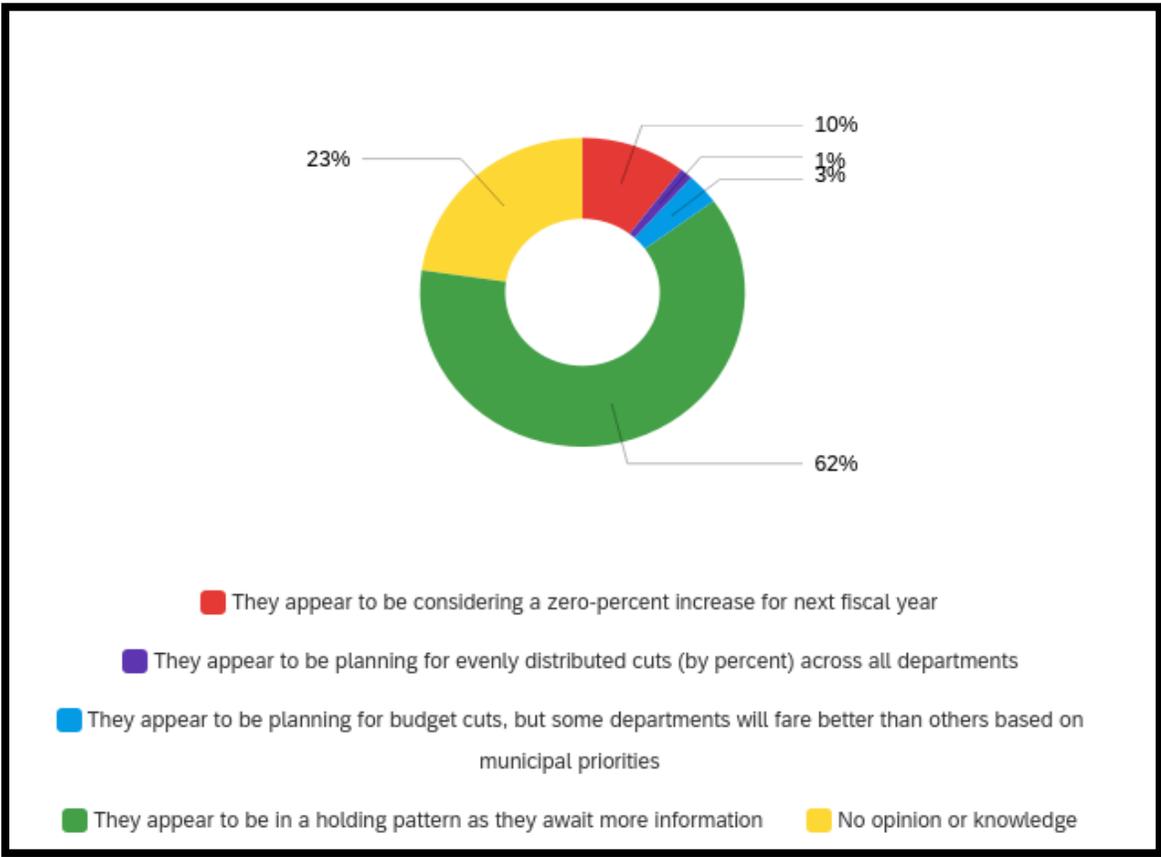


Illustration 5. Is your town considering delaying bond votes or other capital expenditures?

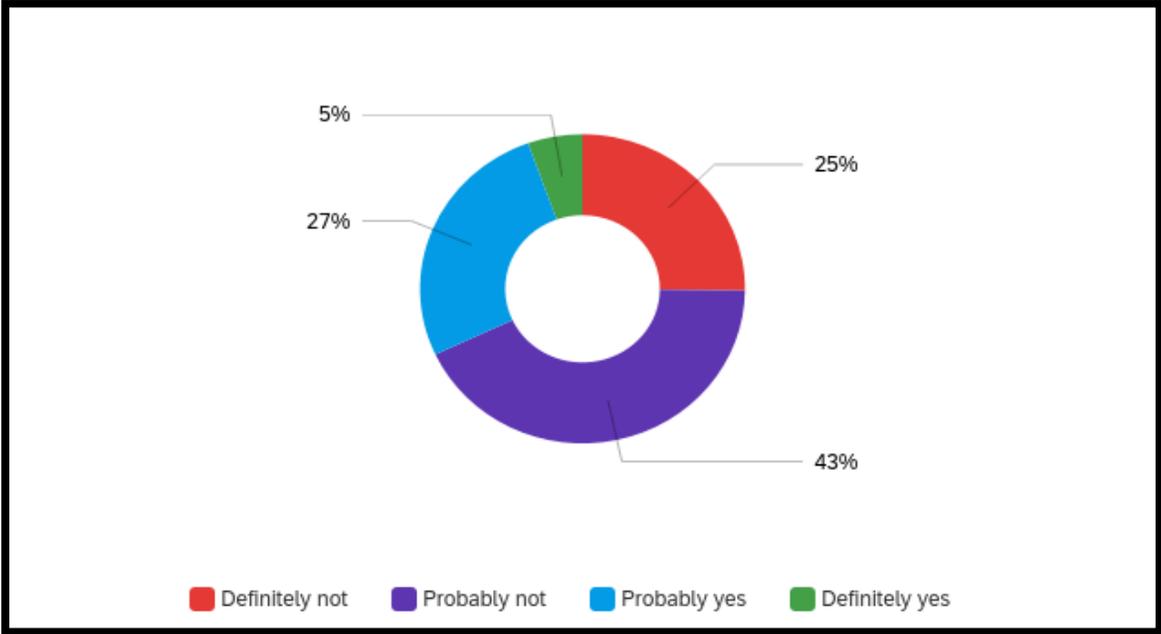
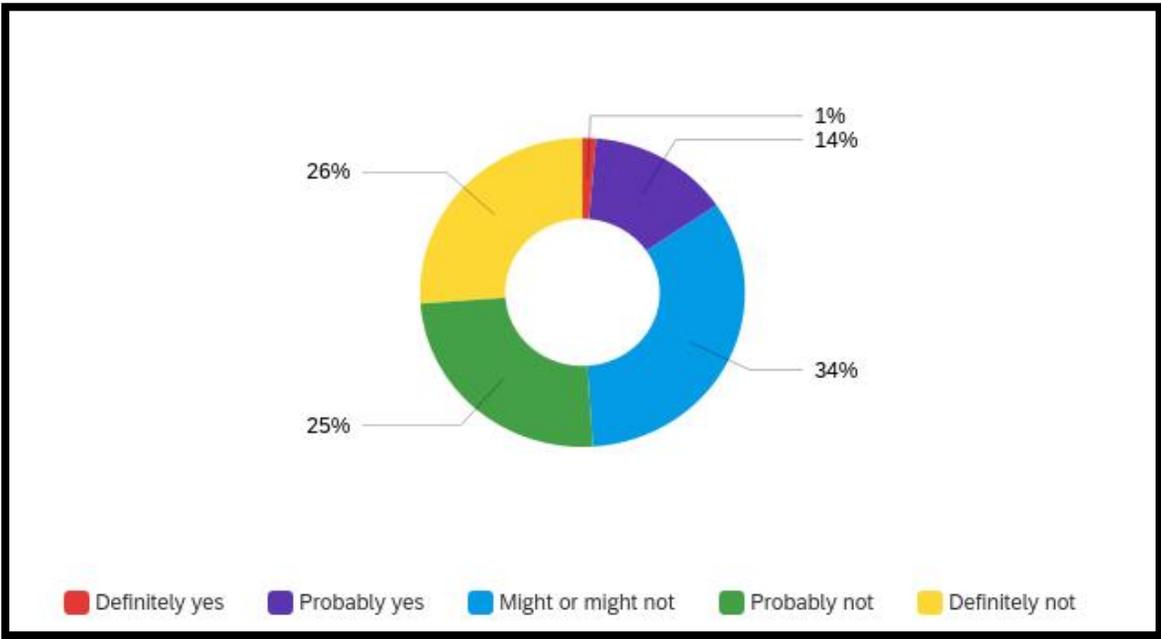


Illustration 6. Is federal / state pandemic-related special funding helping you make it “through” the pandemic by covering costs associated with COVID-19?



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Gary Deziel, MBA, SHRM-CP | Extension Assistant Professor
University of Vermont Extension, Saint Albans, VT
802 524-6501 ext. 444, gdeziel@uvm.edu

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