Poll: Majority in N.H. Call Economy 'Weak'

By John P. Gregg

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Hanover -- A new statewide poll conducted by Dartmouth's Rockefeller Center for Public Policy has found that more than half of New Hampshire residents regard the state's economy to be "weak."

Only about 17 percent said they planned to spend their federal stimulus payments, worth up to $1,200 per couple, on a large consumer item or vacation, suggesting that the payments "will do little to stimulate economic growth in the state," the survey concluded.

Some 33.1 percent of respondents said they would use the stimulus checks to pay bills or pay off credit card debt, while 19.3 percent said the money would go to savings. Another 17.6 percent said it would go to normal daily purchases. Along with vacation spending (7.9 percent), some 9.3 percent said it would go to a "large consumer item," and 12.8 percent said it would be spent on "something else."

"The bounce the economy is going to get out of these (stimulus payments) is minimal at best," said Ronald Shaiko, a senior fellow and associate director at the Rockefeller Center.

Shaiko oversees the Rockefeller Center's "policy research shop," where students conduct research for legislators in New Hampshire and Vermont.

Dartmouth's "State of the State" poll in New Hampshire will become an annual event in the spring, Shaiko said, with students in the fall semester analyzing the results to provide greater insight for policymakers.

The poll, which has a margin of error of 5 percentage points, was conducted during the week of April 28 and May 2 and covered 401 voters across New Hampshire.

The survey, which was released last week, involved about 250 hours of student time. The Dartmouth undergraduates were paid $10 an hour to conduct the research, which involved telephone polling working off a statewide voter list.

Shaiko, who has conducted statewide polls in New York and exit polls for TV stations and political candidates, said students discovered the meticulous work involved in formulating questions, including the order of the queries, before the poll was even conducted.

"I think they have a new appreciation of just what kind of time and effort it takes to put one of these together," Shaiko said.

While 51.1 percent of respondents said the economy is "weak," 41.2 percent said it is "stable." But only 3.5 percent regarded the economy as "strong."
In other results, 40.4 percent of New Hampshire residents said the antitax "pledge" is "very important," and 16.1 percent said it was "somewhat important."

By contrast, 26 percent said it was "not important at all" and 11.8 percent said it was "not very important."

When asked how to solve a $1.7 billion deficit for repairing New Hampshire's roads and bridges over the next decade, a whopping 81 percent of respondents said they favored raising the cigarette tax by 25 cents a pack. And 54.8 percent said they favored a 5 percent increase in the state's motor vehicle tax.

Shaiko said he thought it was noteworthy that 40 percent also supported a 1 percent sales tax.

But when questioned about a budget problem in local towns, 44 percent said they would favor cutting services, while just 30.4 percent said they would opt to raise taxes to solve the problem. Another 19 percent said it would depend on the service or program that might be affected.

On the political front, Gov. John Lynch enjoyed a 56.4 percent favorable rating, while incumbent U.S. Sen. John Sununu, R-N.H., garnered 35.9 percent support compared with 46 percent for former Gov. Jeanne Shaheen, his likely Democratic rival. Fully 18 percent are undecided.

Meanwhile, Republican presidential candidate John McCain held a narrow, 2.5 percentage point lead over Barack Obama in the poll, and an 8.8 percentage point lead over Hillary Clinton.

Shaiko said the disparity among Republican candidates shows that Democrats' claim that McCain represents the "third term of Bush" has no resonance, at least in New Hampshire."

Shaiko said he started the policy research shop poll in New Hampshire, since that is where Dartmouth is located, but would be interested in conducting a similar poll in Vermont down the road if it does not step on other institutional toes.

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