



---

# **Godbe** Research & Analysis

## Western Riverside County Inter-Regional Commuter Focus Group Study

Presented to the  
I-15 Interregional Partnership

May 14, 2001

---

60 Stone Pine Road  
Half Moon Bay CA 94019-1739  
Phone 650/712-3137  
Fax 650/712-3131

95 South Market Street, Suite 300  
San Jose CA 95113-2350  
Phone 408/288-9232  
Fax 408/288-9212

445 South Figueroa Street, 2600  
Los Angeles CA 90071-1631  
Phone 213/624-8863  
Fax 213/624-8864

640 Grand Avenue, Suite G  
Carlsbad CA 92008-2365  
Phone 760/730-2941  
Fax 760/720-4706

## Table of Contents

---

Introduction.....	1
Methodology .....	3
Summary .....	6
Discussion Guide .....	Appendix A
Worksheets .....	Appendix B
Participant Demographics .....	Appendix C

## Introduction

---

### *Research Objectives*

Godbe Research & Analysis (GRA) is pleased to present the following summary report to the I-15 Interregional Partnership, which is comprised of SANDAG, WRCOG, OCCOG, SCAG and additional public transit and planning agencies. This report summarizes the major findings of the four resident focus groups conducted on April 31st and May 1st in Western Riverside County.

The resident focus groups summarized in this report represent the first of a four-part research study designed to A) profile the existing jobs/housing imbalance that exists between Western Riverside County and its neighboring counties to the south and west (San Diego, Orange County and Los Angeles County) and B) better understand the factors, rationales and decisions of residents and employers that cause the jobs/housing imbalance and associated congestion on the I-15 and SR-91. In addition to the initial resident focus groups, the study will include a survey of residents and commuters who live in Western Riverside County (Stage 2), a survey of businesses (Stage 3), and resident focus groups to gauge reactions to short-term and long-term strategies developed to address the jobs/housing imbalance and associated congestion on the I-15 and SR-91 (Stage 4).

The instrumental purpose of the Stage 1 focus groups was to inform the development of the survey instrument for Stage 2. Put simply, the research team wanted to understand what factors and issues residents consider, and how they perceive the trade-offs, when they choose to live in Western Riverside County and work in different locations. The focus groups were an important exercise in this process, for they allowed the team to explore these issues with residents in an open-ended discussion. As expected, the groups helped the team ‘flesh-out’ its understanding of how residents think about these issues, as well as generated new insights and ideas.

### *Structure of the Report*

Because the purpose of the Stage 1 focus groups was to inform the development of the survey instrument for Stage 2, the content of this report is limited to an overview of the major findings of the groups, GRA’s recommendations on how to refine the survey instrument based on the results of the focus groups, and background materials.

Specifically, this report includes the following sections:

- The *Methodology* section of this report discusses the process of focus group research, recruitment of the participants, and the materials used in the sessions.
- The *Executive Summary* provides the *Key Findings & Conclusions* of the focus group sessions, an *Implications* section that briefly discusses the implications of the research for the IRP’s task of rectifying the jobs/housing imbalance, and a *Refining the Stage 2 Survey* section which presents GRA’s recommendations for how to refine the Stage 2 survey instrument based on the focus group research.

- *Appendix A* provides the discussion guide used for the focus group sessions.
- *Appendix B* provides the worksheets used in the four groups.
- *Appendix C* provides the participant demographics for the four groups.

## Methodology

---

### *When is a focus group appropriate?*

Focus groups are a qualitative research technique that allow for considerable interaction between the participants and moderator and permit in-depth exploration of themes and ideas that arise throughout the course of discussion. Focus groups are a particularly useful tool for generating ideas and insights about why people behave in certain ways, such as choosing to live in Western Riverside County and work in a neighboring county. It is important to note, however, that because of the small number of individuals participating in a focus group and the opportunity for group dynamics to shape some participants' behavior, the findings of a focus group should not be generalized to the larger population. The role of the focus group is thus to generate ideas and insights -- it is the role of a survey to test these ideas and insights to determine if they apply to the larger population.

### *General Information*

The Stage 1 focus groups consisted of two focus groups conducted on April 31 and two groups conducted on May 1, 2002. The April 31 focus groups were conducted at Atkins focus group facility in the City of Riverside. Participants for these groups were recruited from the northern part of Western Riverside County, which included all areas north of Lake Elsinore. The May 1 focus groups were conducted at the Temecula Creek Inn in the City of Temecula. Participants for these groups were recruited from the southern portion of Western Riverside County, which included Lake Elsinore and all areas south. The group discussions, which were videotaped, were moderated by Dr. Timothy McLarney, Director of Research at GRA. In addition, Rick Sarles and Jaime Barraha observed the group interactions and took notes throughout each focus group session.

### *Recruitment of Participants*

Although focus groups are not meant to generate statistically valid results for the reasons stated above, it is important that the individuals chosen for the group be as representative as possible of the different types of individuals that are of interest to the study. For the April 31 focus groups, participants were recruited from the northern section of Western Riverside County. Only individuals who commuted to work at least 30 minutes during peak commute times on SR-91 at least three days per week were accepted. For the May 1 groups, participants were recruited from the southern section of Western Riverside County. For these groups, individuals were accepted if they commuted at least 30 minutes to work during peak commute times on I-15 at least three days per week. Finally, the goal was to have the groups represent a good mix of gender, age, occupation type and residence location within the respective areas.

Focus group participants were offered a \$75 incentive to participate. In all, 33 individuals participated in the four focus groups. A summary of the general demographics of the participants can be found in Appendix C.

*Discussion Guide*

The goal of a focus group is to have individuals engage in an open, fluid dialogue about the issues of interest for a study. With this in mind, the focus group discussion guide was designed to start with a general discussion about what participants think about living in Western Riverside County and how they feel it differs from living in neighboring counties, specifically Los Angeles, Orange and San Diego counties. Of particular interest was what negative and positive things they associated with living in Western Riverside County that they do not associate with one or more of the neighboring counties. The discussion next turned to why participants chose to reside in Western Riverside County, centering on the various factors that they considered and the possible trade-offs they made when choosing to reside in Western Riverside County. Participants' thoughts about their commute was the next topic of discussion, including what they anticipate their commute to be like in the future.

At this point in the groups, participants were asked to complete Exercise #1. In the first part of this exercise, participants were asked to list the positive aspects of living in Western Riverside County and commuting to their work, as well as why these aspects were important to them. They were then asked to list the negative aspects and why the negative aspects were important to them. A group discussion followed Exercise #1 that focused on whether respondents felt the positive aspects of living in Western Riverside County outweigh the negative aspects and whether they expect their current situation to persist despite changing traffic conditions.

The moderator then reversed the discussion to explore respondents' feelings about working locally rather than commuting to their current place of work. The discussion centered on whether participants have investigated opportunities to work locally, their reasons for not acting on opportunities to work locally, and the trade-offs they would be willing to make to work locally.

The final portion of the group involved a second exercise in which respondents were asked to indicate what changes or trade-offs they would be willing to make to A) move to where they currently work, or B) work locally.

A copy of the actual discussion guide used by the moderator can be found in Appendix A.

*Participant Worksheets*

The exercises employed in each of the focus groups involved participants recording their responses on worksheets. In discussing the findings of the focus groups, these worksheets present a good opportunity to review the opinions of every participant rather than just those that spoke at a particular time. Once again, it is important to note that because of the considerably small sample size involved the results presented here are not necessarily representative of the larger population of Western Riverside County residents that commute on I-15 or SR-91. They are intended, rather, to provide a summary of the focus groups and to provide valuable information in designing the survey instrument that will be the focus of the quanti-

tative stage of the study. A copy of the actual worksheets presented to the participants can be found in Appendix B.

*Reporting on Focus Groups*

Because focus groups provide an opportunity to learn more about the perceptions, attitudes, and opinions of participants, focus group reports discuss the comments and opinions without regard to the objective accuracy of participants' statements. For example, occasionally there was some confusion expressed in the groups about future transportation projects. Rather than correcting false perceptions or providing information, the moderator was instructed to probe respondents for the sources of their beliefs and opinions in the understanding that the confusion itself may provide valuable insight into the attitudes and opinions of the general public.

## Summary

---

### Key Findings & Conclusions

Based on the general themes and issues uncovered in the four focus groups, GRA offers the following key findings:

*Residents expressed positive feelings about living in Western Riverside County and view Riverside County favorably when compared to neighboring counties.*

When asked to describe what things and feelings come to mind when they consider daily life in Western Riverside County, respondents were generally positive about living in the region. Both the northern and southern groups were quick to point out that Riverside has a ‘small town feel’ and ‘slower pace’ compared with neighboring counties. It is centrally located, has open spaces and pretty scenery, is less congested, and generally has a comparatively higher standard of living and quality of life. Although Los Angeles and Orange counties were viewed as having better job markets and better paying jobs, participants also associated life in these counties with higher crime, more ‘chaos’ and congestion, higher stress, and a much higher cost of living. Both Los Angeles and Orange counties were also disparaged for their predominately urban nature and lack of open spaces. San Diego was viewed more favorably than either Los Angeles or Orange counties, but participants were quick to note that it is also expensive. It is worth noting, moreover, that many of the negative aspects participants associated with Riverside County, such as traffic congestion, growth, frustration and long commutes, were also attributed to Los Angeles, Orange and San Diego counties.

Thus, one of the clear patterns to emerge from the focus groups was that residents of Western Riverside County view the place that they live in a comparatively favorable light when juxtaposed with daily life in neighboring counties -- especially Los Angeles and Orange counties. They prefer the rural settings, the more relaxed atmosphere, and the ‘small town’ feel of Western Riverside County.

*The positive aspects of living in Western Riverside County outweigh the negative aspects for residents.*

Another clear pattern to emerge from the focus groups was that residents chose to live in Western Riverside County for many reasons in addition to cost of living. And, despite the negative aspects associated with living in Western Riverside County and commuting to their place of employment, participants were nearly unanimous that -- all things considered -- they are better off in their current situation than if they were to relocate to be near their present job.

When asked to indicate the positive aspects of living in Western Riverside County and commuting to their place of employment in Orange or Los Angeles counties, the most common responses centered on housing. Both the northern and southern groups indicated that the affordability, quality and size of homes that are available in Western Riverside County are major reasons for why they moved there and continue to be some of the benefits of living in the region. Northern group participants cited the scenic open spaces, central location, less local traffic and less crime as other important, positive aspects of living in Western Riverside

County. Although the southern groups agreed that the scenic, open spaces and lower crime rates are an important positive aspect of life in Western Riverside County, participants in the southern groups also focused on the quality of the community and good schools as positive aspects.

Interestingly, the major difference between the northern and southern groups was with respect to local traffic and pollution. The northern groups listed the lack of local traffic congestion as a positive aspect of daily life in Riverside, whereas the southern groups cited local traffic congestion as one of the major negative aspects. The pattern was the opposite with respect to pollution. The northern groups complained loudly about the poor air quality in Riverside County, whereas the southern groups cited good air quality as one of the positive aspects of life in Western Riverside County.

*There are factors in addition to cost of living that lead residents to choose Western Riverside County for their place of residence.*

As expected, the lower cost of housing in Western Riverside County was the reason that most respondents cited as the primary factor in their decision to locate in the area. What was not expected was the weight that participants attached to other factors in addition to cost of living, such as rural setting, open spaces, slower pace, sense of privacy, and family oriented communities. Indeed, many of the positive aspects of living in Western Riverside County that were identified above were listed by participants as important reasons for why they chose to reside in the area and intend to continue to do so in the future. The sense from all four groups was that these factors were collectively as important as cost of living in their decision to locate in Western Riverside County.

*Residents were reluctant to relocate from Western Riverside County to live near their current employer.*

One of the expectations prior to conducting the focus groups was that residents who live in Western Riverside County and commute to Orange County or San Diego County would naturally prefer to live near their work, but for a variety of reasons -- most importantly cost of living -- elect to reside in Western Riverside County and commute to work. One of the more surprising findings of the focus groups was that this pattern was virtually absent in the Northwestern Riverside County focus groups, and certainly less prominent than expected in the Southwestern groups. In short, the positive aspects of living in Western Riverside County noted by participants -- rural atmosphere, open spaces, more privacy, less congestion, family oriented communities -- appeared to underlie residents' general reluctance to relocate to be nearer to their place of work, even if they could afford a similar home.

It should be noted that this pattern was much stronger in the Northwestern groups, perhaps due to the more obvious environmental differences between Orange County and Northwestern Riverside County than between Southwestern Riverside County and San Diego County.

In the second exercise, participants were asked to consider what trade-offs they would be willing to make to be able to live near their current place of employment. Consistent with the patterns identified above, at least half of the participants in each group indicated that they were unwilling to make any trade-offs. They like where they live and were not interested in

moving. Moreover, of the participants willing to make trade-offs, several identified pay *increases* as a 'trade-off'. The most common trade-off cited was accepting a smaller home, but this was often qualified with words like 'safe', 'calm', 'affordable' and/or near a particular amenity such as the beach. Finally, one respondent indicated he would be willing to move if there was better public transportation, and another would move if he could be within walking distance to his place of employment.

Another pattern that emerged during the discussions was that those individuals who have established homes and are well into paying off their mortgage were much less likely to consider moving than their counterparts. These individuals tended to be older, long-time residents of the area.

*Residents seem to accept the commute as an unfortunate part of life.*

When asked to describe their commute, participants in the Northwestern groups used strong language such as 'horrible', 'frustrating' and 'stressful'. They also anticipated that the commute would continue to get worse during the next three years. Participants in the Southwestern groups expressed less intense negative feelings about their commute, which is arguably a reflection of the state of congestion on the I-15 as opposed to SR-91. Nevertheless, they too expected that their commutes would continue to become more congested and take more time in the future.

Despite anticipating that the commute would continue to get worse, when probed most respondents indicated that they would simply accept a longer commute rather than make changes to reduce their commute such as relocate their place of work or residence. For some, this decision was because they had grown 'comfortable' in their present living and working conditions, and had accepted the commute as routine. For others, they didn't see any other options than endure the commute. Since most commuters reported a commute time of 1 hour, the moderator probed the groups about whether an additional 30 minutes each way would prompt changes. Almost without exception, participants indicated that they preferred to endure the longer commute. This pattern was especially present in the Southwestern groups. Although some respondents indicated that they would 'deal' with the longer commute by leaving earlier in the morning, few indicated that they would alter their living or working location in response to a longer commute.

*Most residents felt there are inadequate opportunities to work locally, but are willing to consider trade-offs to work locally.*

Most participants felt that the job opportunities in Riverside County simply do not compare to those in Orange, Los Angeles or San Diego counties. Although a similar occupation may exist in Riverside County, participants often complained that compensation for the same job in Riverside County was significantly less than in neighboring counties. They felt it was generally better to commute and earn the additional salary, benefits and growth opportunities than to work in the same occupation locally. Of course, other participants felt that Riverside County simply did not have a similar industry or occupation that would allow them to work locally in their chosen career.

Interestingly, however, several participants felt that bringing additional employers to Southwestern Riverside County may not be a good thing, for it would bring additional growth, urbanization, traffic congestion, and possibly pollution. The sensitivity to growth and development among many of the southwestern participants was not as prevalent among the northwestern groups, who appeared much more interested in attracting higher paying local jobs.

Whereas the majority of participants were unwilling to make trade-offs to live where they currently work, almost all participants did identify trade-offs that they would be willing to make to work locally. Approximately half of the participants in each of the groups indicated that they would be willing to work locally for a reduced salary, typically between five and ten percent. A chief concern for many of those willing to take a reduction in compensation (as well as others) was that their benefits and retirement fund remain intact. Several participants in each group were also willing to change careers, although they often qualified this trade-off by insisting that the new career have growth opportunities, be 'appealing', and that if education and training were required, the employer would pay for it. A few participants were willing to work locally, even if it meant that they would have fewer opportunities for advancement, less discretionary money, and a less desirable vehicle.

When asked about the trade-offs they would be willing to make to live where they currently work, it was found that older, established residents were less likely to change their residence. This pattern was also found with respect to changing one's place of employment. In general, participants who were in established careers and had been with an employer for a comparatively long time (10+ years) were much less likely to express interest in working locally than their counterparts. They cited job security, comfort, seniority, benefits and fellow employees as reasons for not wanting to change employers.

### Implications

It is important to keep in mind that the Stage 1 focus groups were designed to generate ideas and insights about why people behave in certain ways, such as choosing to live in Western Riverside County and work in a neighboring county. The Stage 2 survey is the appropriate tool for testing whether the hypotheses and insights suggested by the focus groups hold true for the entire population -- or at least important segments of the population. Thus, in speaking about the 'findings' of the focus groups, it is always implied that these findings may not reflect the patterns found in the population as a whole.

Having stated the above, it is worth noting that the pattern of discussion and responses of participants in the four groups suggest that the challenge of rectifying the jobs/housing imbalance may be more difficult than originally anticipated. Not only did most residents express a preference for living in Western Riverside County for a variety of reasons, they were generally unwilling to make trade-offs to live closer to their current employer. This pattern persisted even when faced with the possibility of 50 percent increases in commute times.

Thus, the strategy of providing incentives to Western Riverside County residents to move closer to their current employers appears to be more difficult than one would expect if residents were choosing to live in Western Riverside County simply because it is more affordable. Neither positive sanctions (e.g., providing incentives for relocation through affordable housing programs) nor negative sanctions (e.g., greater congestion and longer commutes) appeared compelling reasons for participants to relocate their place of residence, especially if it involved sacrificing the perceived benefits of living in Western Riverside County.

On the other hand, most participants expressed an interest and willingness to change their place of employment to work locally. This suggests that as local employment opportunities improve, a significant portion of residents who currently commute will seriously consider making trade-offs to work locally and avoid the commute. Given the above, the findings of the focus groups underscore the importance of attracting businesses to Western Riverside County.

### Refining the Stage 2 Survey

As noted in the introduction, the instrumental purpose of the Stage 1 resident focus groups was to aid in the development of the Stage 2 survey. This section identifies some of the changes and refinements suggested by the focus groups that GRA feels should be considered for the Stage 2 survey instrument.

- Include measures of whether a respondent receives benefits, a pension, seniority, etc. at their current job.
- Include a measure of how long the respondent has been working for the same employer.
- As possible reasons for choosing one's residence location, include items such as 'open spaces/ rural area', 'size of home', 'density or number of people', 'crime rate', 'air quality' and 'family oriented community'.
- Include a question regarding the desirability of attracting new businesses to Western Riverside County.
- Add a question about whether the respondent would be willing to move to their current place of employment if they could afford a similar home.
- Add a question which asks if the person expects to retire in the occupation they currently have.
- Ask a question which measures how comfortable the person is with change, in general.
- Ask a question about whether their employer allows them to work flexible hours.

Based on the focus group research, GRA anticipates that the characteristics that separate individuals who are willing to change their residence and/or place of employment to avoid commuting from their unwilling counterparts may be convoluted and difficult to tease-out from simple descriptive statistics. Accordingly, we propose to analyze the attitudinal and demographic data using techniques such as cluster analysis and regression analysis to iden-

tify which attitudes and demographic characteristics shape willingness to change. This analysis will provide a profile of the commuting population and will identify which groups can be expected to be responsive to opportunities for change -- which is a key step in developing strategies for improving the jobs/housing imbalance.