

## Public Opinion · Public Policy · Organizations · Campaigns

1987 – Founded in San Diego  
1988 – Phonecenters established in Riverside, CA and San Diego  
1990 – Phonecenters established in Reno, NV and San Diego  
1992 – Predictive dialing installed to double interviewing capacity; CERC calls San Diego Mayor's race  
1993 – "The Edge" newsletter launches  
1998 – Qualitative focus groups introduced  
2000 – CERC calls San Diego Mayor's race  
2003 – KPBS/Competitive Edge Research Poll and annual Super Bowl poll launched  
2004 – CERC calls San Diego Mayor's race (x2)  
2005 – CERC calls San Diego Mayor's race (x2)  
2006 – SDIPR/CERC Opinion Barometer launched; Ballot measures paper presented at AAPOR Conference  
2008 – CERC calls San Diego Mayor's race; Convenes post-election summit @ USD  
2009 – Interviewer effects paper presented at AAPOR Conference  
2010 – Web-based interviewing and custom panels introduced  
2012 – Dial-testing introduced; CERC calls San Diego Mayor's race (x2)  
2013 – CERC calls San Diego Mayor's race; Business Forecast survey launched  
2014 – CERC calls San Diego Mayor's race  
2016 – CERC calls San Diego Mayor's race  
2017 – Phonecenter established in El Paso, TX  
2018 – CERC calls CA Governor's race (x2)  
2019 – Ballot measure wording paper presented at AAPOR Conference

***John Nienstedt, MA Political Science:*** President  
Member, American Association for Public Opinion Research  
Insights Association  
San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce  
SBA Entrepreneurial Success Award (2000)  
Pollster of the year (x6)

***Rachel Lawler, MA Political Science:*** Research Analyst  
Member, American Association for Public Opinion Research

***Ronald Zavala:*** Director of Operations  
***Lawrence Sherman:*** Research Manager  
***James Iwu:*** Research Assistant



Sweetwater Authority  
Developer Study  
January 12, 2021



# Summary

<b>Research Objectives:</b>	1) Develop an understanding of SWA's strengths and weaknesses 2) Derive comparisons to other local water agencies 3) Create a post-project evaluation for developers
<b># of Interviews:</b>	n=13 SWA developers; n=9 non-SWA developers
<b>Methodology:</b>	SWA: Client supplied list; Non-SWA: Building Industry Association supplied list
<b>Jurisdiction:</b>	San Diego County
<b>Eligibility:</b>	SWA: Developers working with SWA since 2015; Non-SWA: Developers who have not worked with SWA
<b>Interview Method:</b>	In-depth interviews using Microsoft Teams
<b>Field Dates:</b>	December 14-21, 2020
<b>Project Director:</b>	John Nienstedt, Sr.
<b>Research Analyst:</b>	Rachel Lawler

# Background

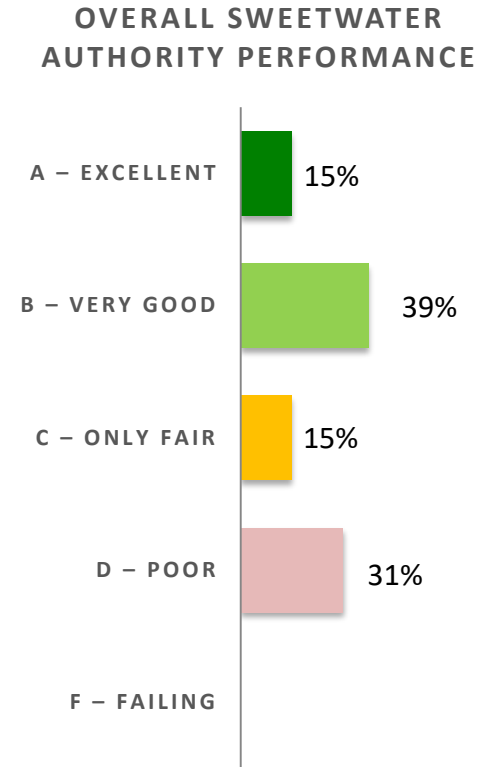
# Property Developers are Almost All Men

- The SWA developers we spoke with:
  - Nearly one-third are Latino
  - Work with an average of 4 water agencies besides SWA
    - Particularly the City of San Diego
  - Often smaller operations
- Non-SWA developers we interviewed:
  - Only one-in-ten are Latino
  - Tend to be working with multiple water agencies
    - 5 agencies on average
    - Frequently the City of San Diego, Otay, Vallecitos
  - Averaged 35 projects with water agencies in last 5 years.

# Overall SWA Performance

# Wide Range of Opinions Results in a “C” Average

- Slim majority award an “A” or “B” grade
- No developers failed the Authority
- But 46% graded the agency at a “C” or “D”
- SWA has both fans and serious detractors
- There is a lot of room to do better by developers.



*Why?*



# Cooperation, responsiveness are positive stand-outs

- *“I haven’t had any issues. They reply to questions very quickly, can get concerns resolved very quickly. Time is critical in my business”*
- Turn offs:
  - Lack of clear communication
  - Bureaucratic process
    - Bigger gripe among more experienced contractors
  - Generally poor customer service
- *“Bureaucratic policies that aren’t realistic relative to industry... slow to change requirement of \$10 million of general liability insurance.*
- *They also have a policy – prevailing wage basis – that adds a couple hundred thousand dollars [to a project].*
- *The amount of paperwork is too much, it should be done online or with an internet-based platform so as to save time on both ends. Issues with accuracy of plans.”*

# SWA vs. Other Water Agencies

# SWA Doesn't Stand Out Either Way

- Most SWA developers who have worked with other water agencies say their experiences were about the same
- Half say SWA is about even with others when it comes to innovation
  - Although three in ten say SWA is somewhat behind the curve
- A recurring theme is that SWA isn't perceived as any better or worse than other water agencies
- Opportunity to bolster SWA's strengths to create a positive and memorable experience.

# What Goes Right with Water Agencies?

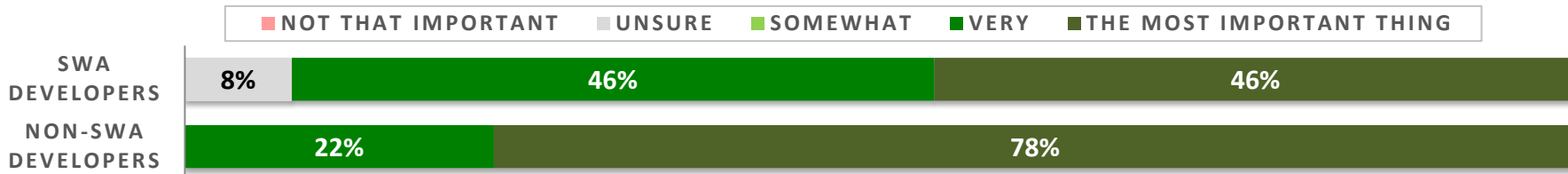
- Many SWA developers couldn't pinpoint a specific reason for things going right
  - More so, they could not recall having any major issues
- But good relationships with SWA personnel, communication, responsiveness were highlights
  - “[Employee] was my main contact; he was really responsive, and I have enjoyed working with him.... he had good customer service. I appreciated him advocating on our behalf to the manager. Customer service has always been good; engineering staff always been good”
- As for non-SWA developers, “clarity” is the main mark of a good agency
- Listening, reasonable fees, and timeliness are also good practices
  - “We hang on every word they say”
- SWA developers more easily able to describe negatives, but responses are broad
  - “Length of process, paperwork, too long to get certainty on costs, could streamline process using newer tech”
  - White developers and more experienced contractors are more critical of SWA's processes
- Inconsistency in the application of policies is the main killer among non-SWA developers
- Delays, high fees, jurisdictional conflicts, indecision, bonding requirements are also mentioned.

# Importance of Elements of the Approval Process

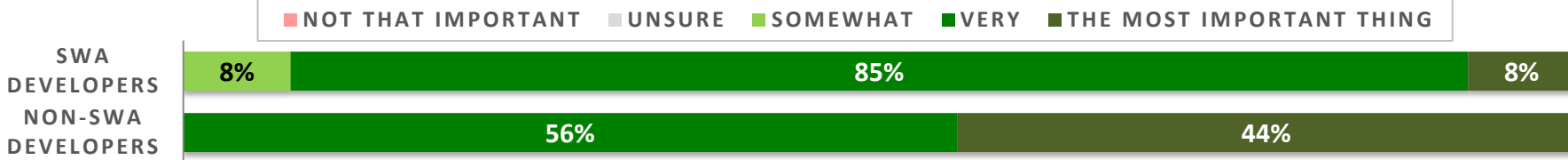
# Certainty is Most Critical

- Certainty of the project approval process is tops for SWA and non-SWA developers alike
- Cost and speed are very important but typically not the most important
  - Cannot move forward without approval
  - Uncertainty created by water agency delays/errors really hits developers in the pocketbook
  - *“Time is money.”*

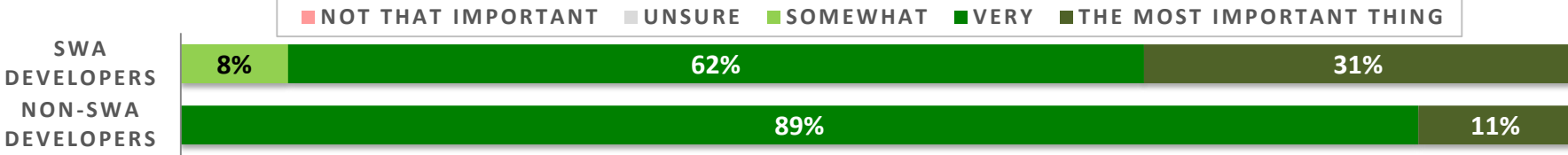
“WHEN WORKING WITH WATER AGENCIES, GENERALLY HOW IMPORTANT IS IT TO YOU TO HAVE CERTAINTY REGARDING YOUR PROJECT'S APPROVAL PROCESS?”



“WHEN WORKING WITH WATER AGENCIES, GENERALLY HOW IMPORTANT IS IT FOR THE APPROVAL PROCESS TO MOVE ALONG QUICKLY?”



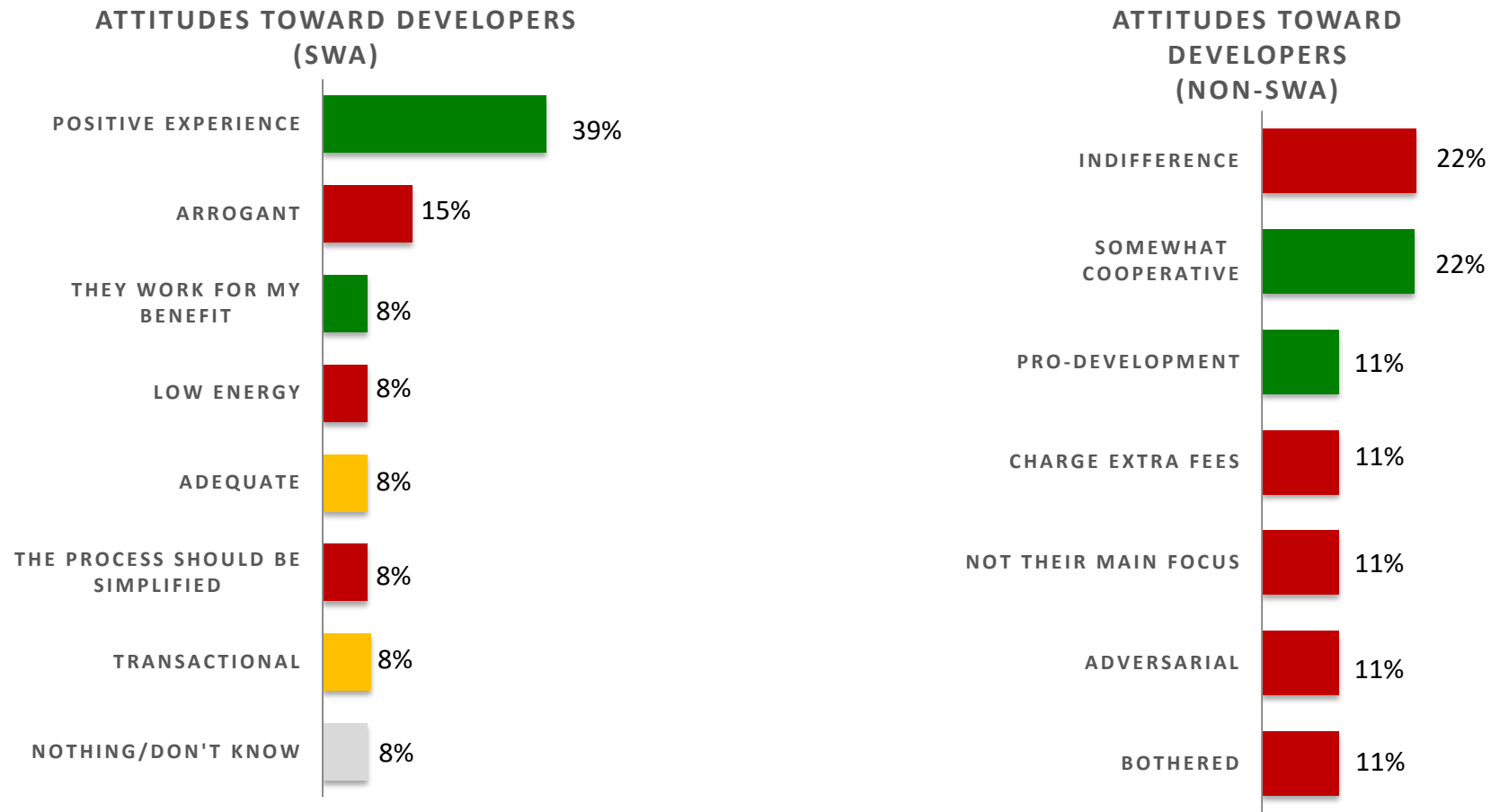
“WHEN WORKING WITH WATER AGENCIES, GENERALLY HOW IMPORTANT IS COST OF THE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS TO YOU?”



# Agency Attitudes Toward Developers

# SWA Generally Seen Having Positive Attitude

- Good contrast here with non-SWA developers

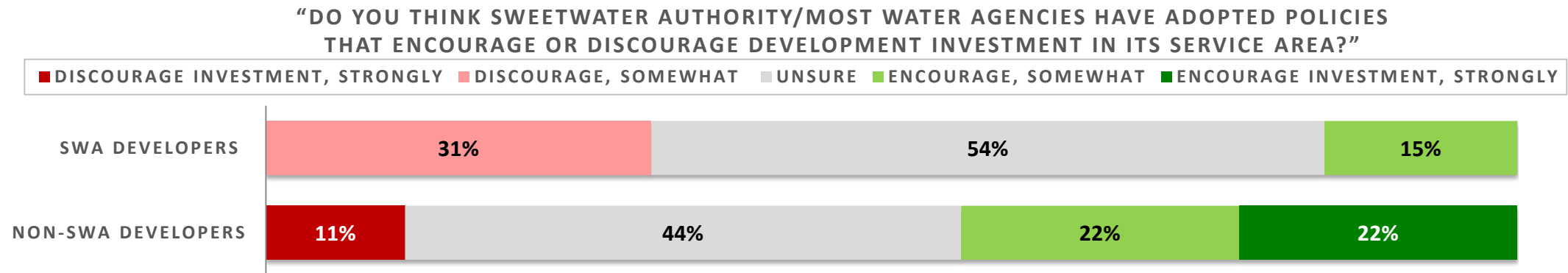


- Non-SWA developers complain about agencies being “indifferent,” “bothered,” or even “adversarial”
- *“Bothered; every time you bring them a new project, you're giving them more work which is funding them and bringing them more money and more customers, but it's like you're just a pain to them.”*



# Encouraging/Discouraging Development isn't the Issue

- Most SWA developers are unsure about a water agency's role in development
  - Just not something they have considered
- SWA developers are twice as likely to say the agency discourages development
  - When they do, changing/contradictory policies, the number of plan changes, and fees are playing a role

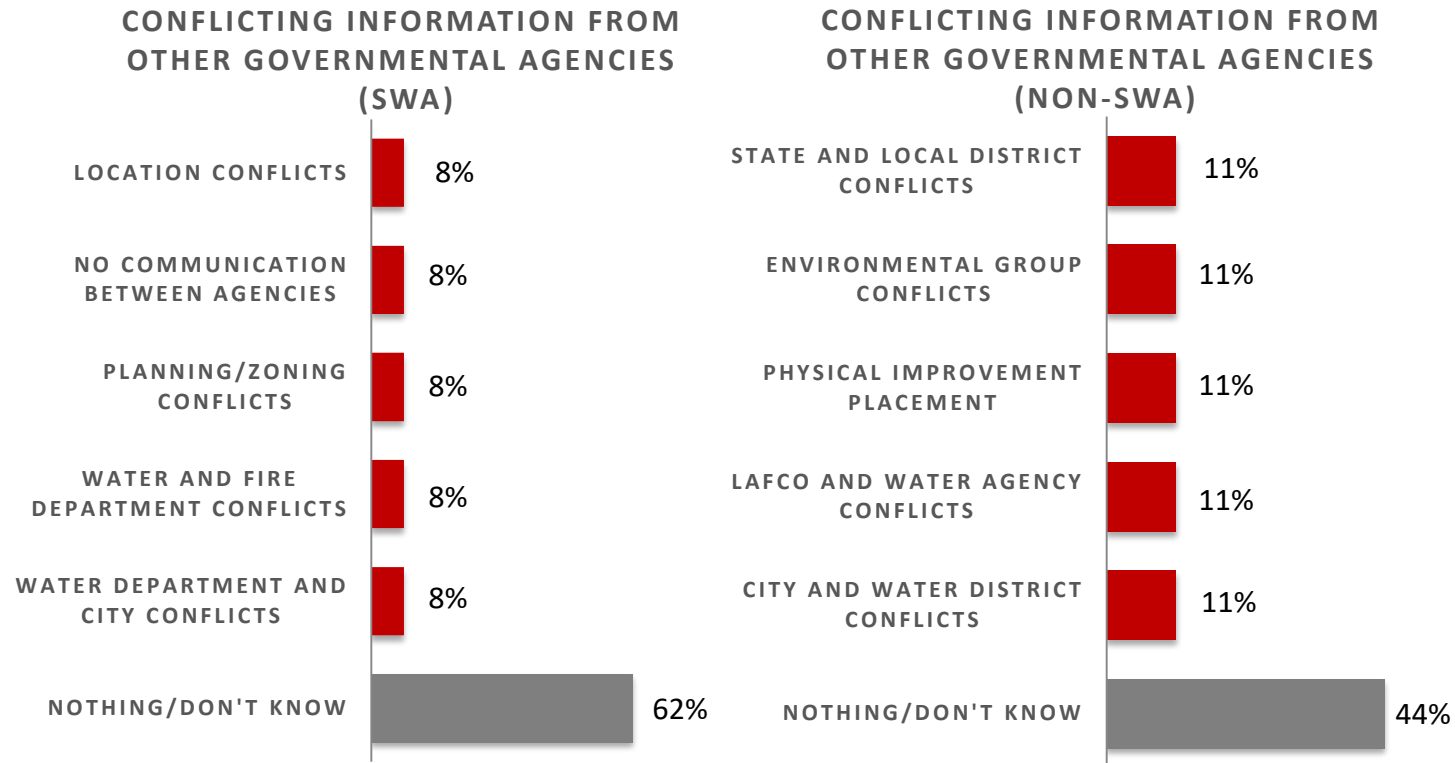


- Non-SWA developers are about as unsure on this question
- But almost none feel that the policies are meant to discourage investment
- Developers who do think development is encouraged typically don't know why
- Overall, this is a more political issue.

# Conflicting Information from Other Governmental Agencies

# Conflicting Information is Atypical for SWA Developers

- Conflicts with the City, fire department, and a lack of communication between agencies were mentioned
- But these were not the norm



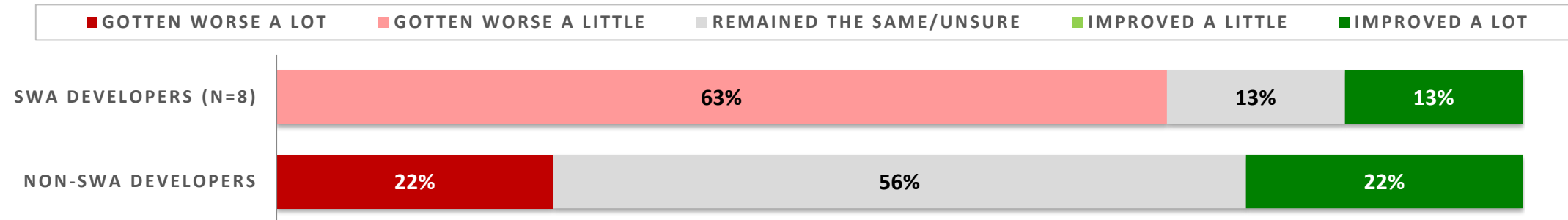
- However, most non-SWA developers have had issues
  - City, LAFCO, environmental agencies, and state entities have given conflicting advice or regulations.

# Water Agency Performance Trend

# No change for SWA or other water agencies

- With no clear changes as to how agencies are doing business, the results here are very mixed
- Changes in ways of working due to COVID-19 create challenges as well as opportunities.

“GENERALLY SPEAKING, HAS WORKING WITH SWA/WATER AGENCIES OVER THE YEARS IMPROVED, GOTTEN WORSE OR REMAINED THE SAME?”

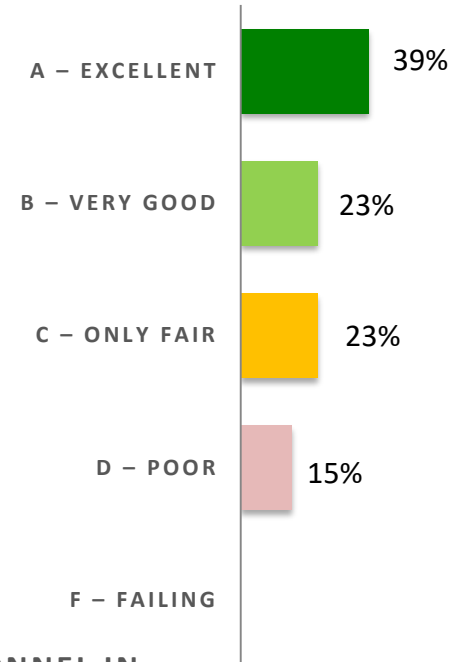


# Performance on Specific Elements in the Development Process

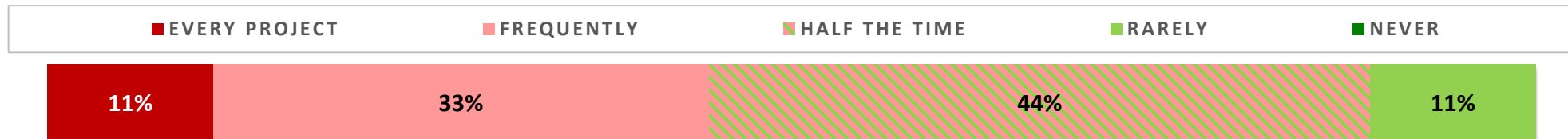
# SWA's Personnel are a Strong Point

- “Very good” 2.9 GPA for staff competency, efficiency, and politeness
- Suggests individuals are better regarded than working with SWA overall
- It’s about:
  - Competence
  - Speedy communication
  - Positive, can-do attitude
- Negatives include incompetence, unresponsiveness, lack of authority
- Could well be that impressions of personnel vary by the person the developer is required to work with

SWEETWATER AUTHORITY  
PERSONNEL PERFORMANCE



“HOW OFTEN, IF EVER, DO YOU RUN INTO PROBLEMS WITH WATER AGENCY PERSONNEL IN TERMS OF THEIR COMPETENCY, EFFICIENCY AND POLITENESS?”

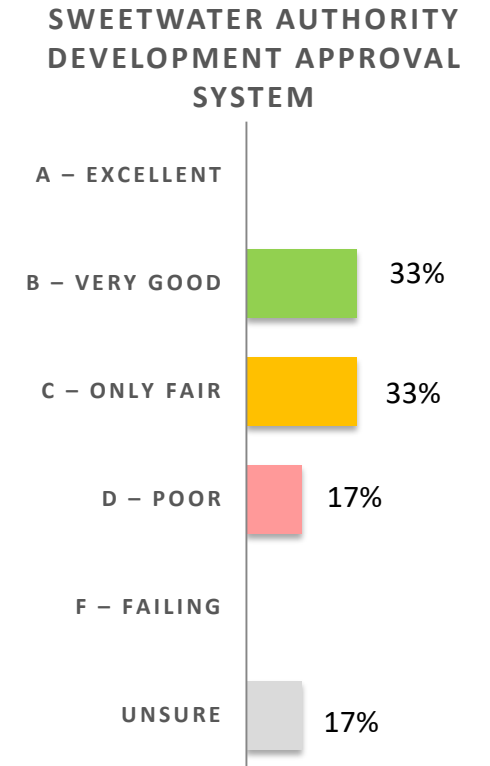
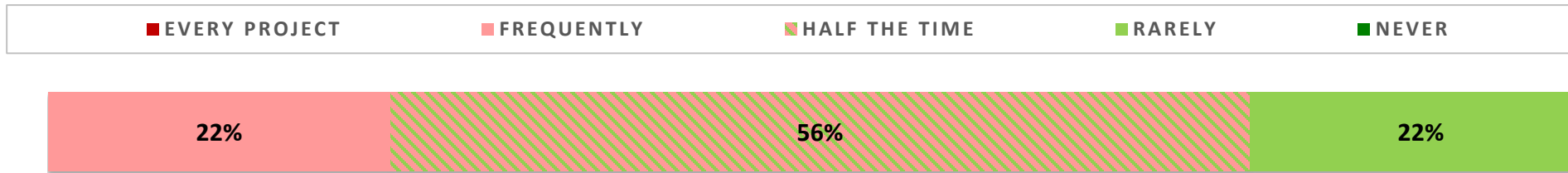


- A whopping 8 of the 9 non-SWA developers encounter problems with personnel at least half the time
  - Perceived lack of knowledge or experience and issues with timing are main criticisms.

# SWA's Project Approval System Falls Short

- None award an A, half grade the system at a C or D level
- Many have trouble pinpointing why
- But a low-tech approach hampers the process
- SWA *“didn’t have the type of formal response system we are used to dealing with. Others have online records you can access online and download directly without human contact”*

“HOW OFTEN, IF EVER, SO YOU RUN INTO PROBLEMS WITH A WATER AGENCY’S DEVELOPMENT APPROVAL SYSTEM?”



- Non-SWA developers are slightly less critical of the approval systems than the personnel they encounter
  - Some even focused again on issues related to personnel
- Process-related grievances include:
  - Not promptly getting a Will Serve letter
  - Outdated standards.



# Most SWA developers confident project will be approved “eventually”

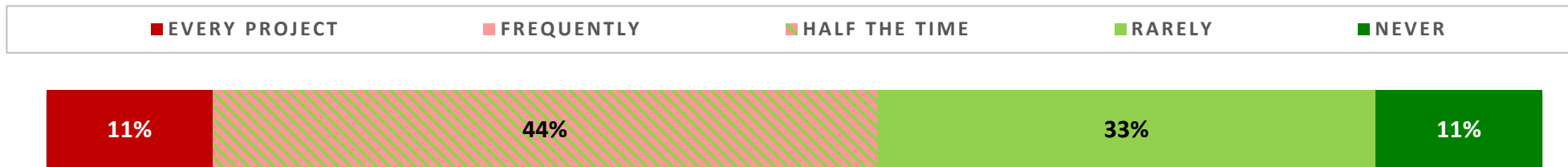
- It’s a matter of how many plan adjustments they will have to go through
- So, most positive sentiment surrounding certainty with SWA’s process is soft
- But 31% feel the process lacks certainty and 8% are unsure

“WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE LEVEL OF CERTAINTY YOU HAVE WHEN DEALING WITH SWEETWATER AUTHORITY’S PROJECT APPROVAL PROCESS AS...”



- Non-SWA developers encounter issues with certainty half the time or more frequently
  - Big firms with more projects tend to experience uncertainty

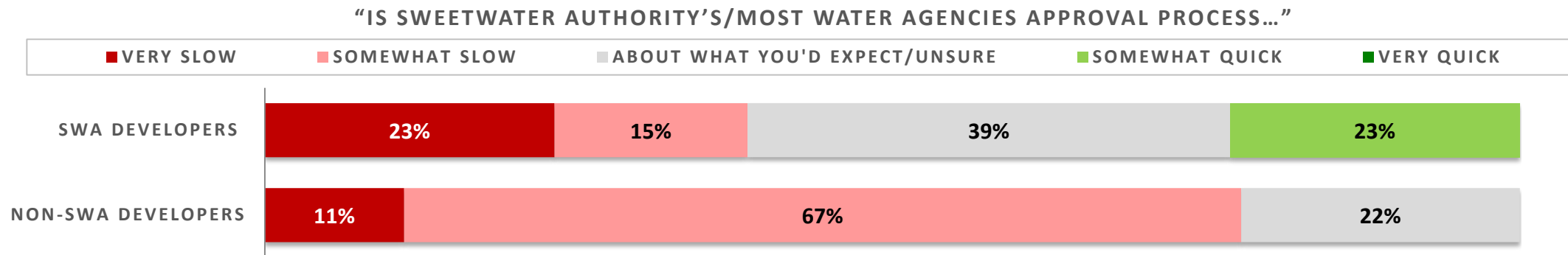
“HOW OFTEN, IF EVER, DO YOU EXPERIENCE UNCERTAINTY WITH A WATER AGENCY’S PROJECT APPROVAL PROCESS”



- SWA appears to be doing better than other water agencies when it comes to certainty.

# Almost All Water Agencies are Regarded as Slow

- 4 in 10 describe SWA’s approval process as slow
- Further, half of SWA’s developers think the approval process is slower compared to other agencies
- But the contrast with the non-SWA developers is striking...
- **Two-thirds** say the process at most water agencies is somewhat slow
  - An additional 11% say it is very slow
- Although developers operating in SWA’s jurisdiction feel it’s slower than its counterparts, SWA actually appears to be faster than the norm

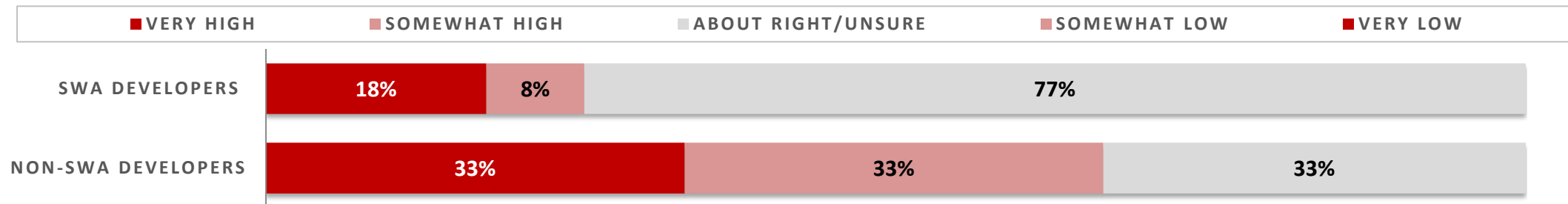


- COVID-19 has impacted approval speed...
- *An SWA developer: “We were able to get through it, it just wasn’t great and could have gone better/smoothier. It seems like it [the plan] sits around with no one looking at it. No one cares about time. It’s problematic across the board, especially with COVID. Just goes too slow”*
- Room for SWA to improve and move more decidedly into the “somewhat quick” and “very quick” categories.

# SWA's costs seen as about right

- No one said costs are low
- But SWA's are *less often* seen as high compared to the costs of other water agencies
- Only 23% see SWA's costs as high
- Costs are more of a problem outside SWA.

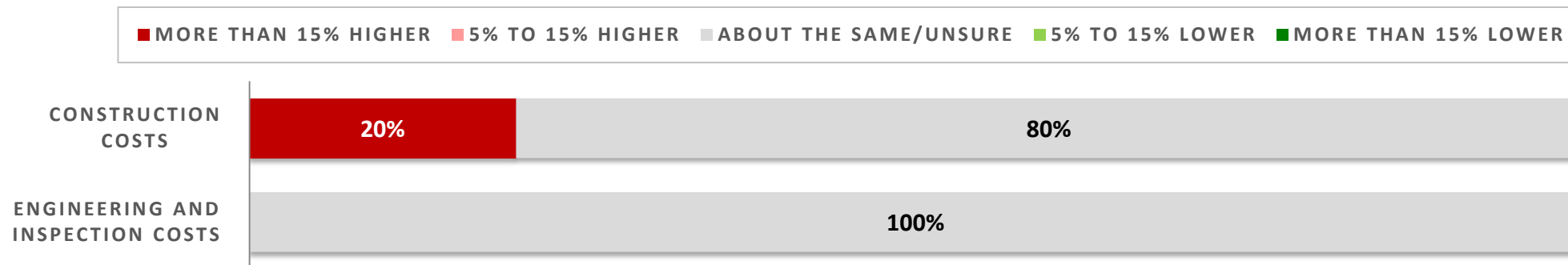
“WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE COSTS ASSOCIATED WITH SWEETWATER AUTHORITY'S/MOST AGENCIES PROJECT APPROVAL PROCESS AS...”



# Bonus: Specific SWA costs Seem In-line w/other water Agencies

- Few SWA developers who worked with other agencies say SWA's construction costs are > 15% higher than other water agencies'
- The cost factor again takes a back seat to certainty and speed of the approval process

"ARE SWEETWATER AUTHORITY'S CONSTRUCTION, ENGINEERING, AND INSPECTION COSTS COMPARED TO THOSE OF OTHER AGENCIES..."



- Costs are a cautious positive for the Authority
- Could be some "play" here.

# Recommendations

1. Certainty in the approval process is surprisingly important, so build it into the system
  - ✓ Mold the Sweetwater Authority brand around certainty
  - ✓ Hold a mandatory “due diligence” meeting at the beginning of a project
  - ✓ Create developer kits containing main contacts, project requirements and schedule, fee due dates, and bonding requirements
  - ✓ Create an online checklist detailing all items needed for first submittal
  - ✓ Maintain an online land records system that is accessible to developers without Authority assistance
  - ✓ Implement a “concierge” service to guide less-experienced developers through the approval process
2. Reduce bureaucracy and adopt a more flexible approach
  - ✓ Create an Office of Developer Relations
  - ✓ Innovate to accommodate developers and further streamline the approval process
  - ✓ Improve tech to allow for online processing, payments, project approval, tracking, and plan checks
    - Eliminates most trips to the Authority and keeps projects moving during pandemic
3. Train personnel to provide a high level of polite, responsive, and proactive service and evaluate accordingly
  - ✓ Empathy: walk a mile in the developer’s moccasins
4. If necessary, increase fees only after approval process becomes speedier and more certain
5. Implement post-project evaluations
6. Good practice to work with overlapping districts to ensure consistency in the rules
7. Maintain accurate contact records of each developer the Authority has worked with.

Thank You!

## Public Opinion · Public Policy · Organizations · Campaigns

1987 – Founded in San Diego  
1988 – Phonecenters established in Riverside, CA and San Diego  
1990 – Phonecenters established in Reno, NV and San Diego  
1992 – Predictive dialing installed to double interviewing capacity; CERC calls San Diego Mayor's race  
1993 – "The Edge" newsletter launches  
1998 – Qualitative focus groups introduced  
2000 – CERC calls San Diego Mayor's race  
2003 – KPBS/Competitive Edge Research Poll and annual Super Bowl poll launched  
2004 – CERC calls San Diego Mayor's race (x2)  
2005 – CERC calls San Diego Mayor's race (x2)  
2006 – SDIPR/CERC Opinion Barometer launched; Ballot measures paper presented at AAPOR Conference  
2008 – CERC calls San Diego Mayor's race; Convenes post-election summit @ USD  
2009 – Interviewer effects paper presented at AAPOR Conference  
2010 – Web-based interviewing and custom panels introduced  
2012 – Dial-testing introduced; CERC calls San Diego Mayor's race (x2)  
2013 – CERC calls San Diego Mayor's race; Business Forecast survey launched  
2014 – CERC calls San Diego Mayor's race  
2016 – CERC calls San Diego Mayor's race  
2017 – Phonecenter established in El Paso, TX  
2018 – CERC calls CA Governor's race (x2)  
2019 – Ballot measure wording paper presented at AAPOR Conference

***John Nienstedt, MA Political Science:*** President  
Member, American Association for Public Opinion Research  
Insights Association  
San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce  
SBA Entrepreneurial Success Award (2000)  
Pollster of the year (x6)

***Rachel Lawler, MA Political Science:*** Research Analyst  
Member, American Association for Public Opinion Research

***Ronald Zavala:*** Director of Operations

***Lawrence Sherman:*** Research Manager

***James Iwu:*** Research Assistant

