

Current Approaches to Citizen Involvement in Performance Measurement and Questions They Raise

BY ANNE SPRAY KINNEY

Public managers have considerable discretion on whether and to what extent to involve citizens in governmental performance measurement and management processes. Local government managers have used that discretion to devise numerous mechanisms for bringing citizens into their performance measurement initiatives, in an attempt to better align goals and measures with citizen preferences. But unlike fields such as governmental accounting, where national standards and practices are well established, citizen involvement is an evolving field, characterized by experimentation and variation in approaches but little standardization. Although governments willingly share information about their citizen involvement efforts, there are not yet many places governments can turn to find such information efficiently.

This article presents information on the citizen involvement methods local governments have undertaken to support their performance measurement and management processes; it is based on an ongoing research project of the Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA). The overall purpose of the GFOA project is to identify current local government practices in performance measurement and management and make this information available as a resource to local governments in an electronic database that will be regularly updated. A principal component of the research is to learn about local governments' citizen involvement practices as they relate to performance measurement and management.

Managers' Views on Citizen Involvement

To be sure, not all managers see direct citizen involvement as a positive development. Some are uneasy about directly involving citizens because it

creates uncertainty about their own responsibilities. They wonder how citizen involvement will affect their ability to plan and strategize, manage resources, and be held accountable. They are not clear about how new forms of citizen involvement will affect their relationship to the elected officials to whom they report. They also have concerns about potential conflict between the professional or technical standards they follow and what citizens might say they expect.

Other managers welcome direct citizen involvement as a tool that can help them do a better job at producing results citizens need and want. Rather than having to rely only on their own assumptions about what the public wants, managers can find out what real live citizens say, and plan accordingly. They believe involving citizens can make themselves as managers, as well as government as a whole, more accountable. Further, they do not perceive an inherent conflict between their professional or technical roles and citizens' viewpoints. Rather, they believe they can get better results by combining their technical knowledge with citizen input. For example, managers responsible for moving traffic across a river would not, unless they were very foolish or disingenuous, ask citizens to tell them how to design a bridge. But if they really want to get the bridge built, they are likely to see considerable advantage in consulting with the public about where to locate the bridge, asking people who live nearby about the possible impact on the community, and seeking the viewpoints of people who use the river for recreational purposes.

In addition to considerations about the relationship between managers' traditional responsibilities and the accountability benefits of citizen involvement, there are many other factors managers need to

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address. If it is to be meaningful and useful, citizen involvement requires managers to invest time and other scarce resources. Involvement also needs to come at the right time. If it comes too late in the process (for example, budget hearings after the mayor has sent the budget to the city council), it may not be possible to incorporate input, no matter how useful, into decisions. Because citizens don't always have the same viewpoint, it may be difficult or impossible to reach consensus, potentially creating controversy where there was none apparent previously. Local governments have found ways to address each of these considerations, but managers must think through all of them in designing citizen involvement efforts suitable for their local environment and organizational culture.

Regardless of managers' perspectives, or how they address practical considerations, direct citizen involvement is an accepted and expected part of today's local government environment. Consequently, from a practical management perspective the manager's task is to decide whether to incorporate citizen involvement into the performance measurement or management process, what the purpose will be for involving citizens, and what types of involvement are best suited to that purpose. Assuming that managers are focused on improving results, and that they believe the results they target should flow from citizens' preferences and expectations, how should they design the citizen involvement components of their performance measurement and management systems? To answer this question, managers need more and better information on what types of involvement are being used now, at what points in the process they are being used, as well as how they

are working. We present results from GFOA's research project to describe various types of involvement being used. (On the question of how they are working, much more evaluative work needs to be done; that issue is not addressed here.)

Citizen Involvement Methods: The GFOA Study

In 2006, GFOA initiated a research project to learn more about the performance measurement and management practices of governments in the United States and Canada. The project will culminate in the creation of an electronic database of local, state, and provincial governments that have instituted organizationwide performance measurement, and a related publication that will include the database. One of the areas we set out to explore was how governments involve citizens in their measurement systems. Because much of the information on citizen involvement in this article comes from that research, a summary of the project is presented here.

Research Methodology

The GFOA research was limited to governments having a population of twenty-five thousand or greater. To identify jurisdictions that use performance measures and better understand how they have used performance information, GFOA administered a Web survey and telephone interviews. The survey was sent to all GFOA member governments larger than twenty-five thousand in population. Of the 2,025 member jurisdictions that received the survey, 363 responded. About 60 percent of all jurisdictions replying to this survey reported that performance measurement was being used in their governments in some way.

Next, GFOA added to the database cities and counties meeting the population threshold that did not respond to the initial Web survey. These jurisdictions were contacted by phone for a brief interview. The caller first determined whether or not the organization had implemented a jurisdictionwide

performance measurement system, and if so, proceeded to ask questions about the program's specific elements. (For the purpose of this project, a jurisdiction is classified as using performance measurement only if the initiative is jurisdictionwide rather than in a single or in a few suborganizational units only.) Through August 2007, GFOA conducted interviews with representatives from 1,284 governments, 514 (40 percent) of which met our criteria for having jurisdictionwide performance measurement systems.

Jurisdictions were asked two questions specifically related to citizen involvement: (1) Do you have a means of soliciting citizen feedback? (2) Are citizens involved in developing performance measures? Also relevant to this article, another series of questions focused on means by which jurisdictions report their performance—whether in a budget document, a performance report, or other format.

Initial Findings

From the Web survey, telephone interviews, and additional research, we reached several conclusions about the current state of performance measurement and management in local government. First, performance measurement is steadily evolving, and some governments have moved from simply developing measures and including them in the budget document or other report to routinely incorporating measurement information into planning, budgeting, operational, and policy-making processes. Second, we have found that there are several distinct types of systems currently used by local governments, each comprising a set of interrelated elements. Further, governments usually use elements from more than one type of system. For example, a government that measures performance as part of an integrated strategic planning, budgeting, and measurement system may also use a "stats" system for monitoring operational performance.

Most relevant for this article, we have also found many examples of citizen involvement. We conclude

that citizen involvement is one of two practices governments use to assist them in measuring and managing performance regardless of the type of overall system they have adopted. (Technology is the second cross-cutting practice.) Across the governments surveyed, we identified numerous ways in which governments are involving citizens in their performance and management efforts. Figure 1 presents the kinds of citizen involvement efforts we found. Individual approaches are grouped along a continuum ranging from simply reporting measures in the budget document all the way through inviting citizens to participate in decision-making processes, working directly with management and elected officials. Types of involvement are categorized according to the direction of information flow as well as the depth of involvement. GFOA found a variety of practices within each category, with a few governments experimenting with innovative practices in each.

Each grouping, along with examples of emerging practices, is discussed here.

Before reviewing these approaches, however, it is important to offer a caveat. As with any artificial construct such as this continuum, there is no clear delineation in real life. One grouping on the continuum in fact fades into the next grouping. A report to citizens, for example, may include a questionnaire citizens are invited to return to the government. There is also no clear line between involving citizens in developing measures and the more in-depth practices related to citizen involvement in decision making. The governments that are most active in citizen-informed performance measurement and management use a combination of methods.

As illustrated, the most common and least intense form of citizen involvement is performance reporting, typically in a jurisdiction's budget document. As governments become more experienced with setting targets and measuring, they begin to use citizen feedback to inform the process, rather than simply to report results. Related activities are illustrated by the

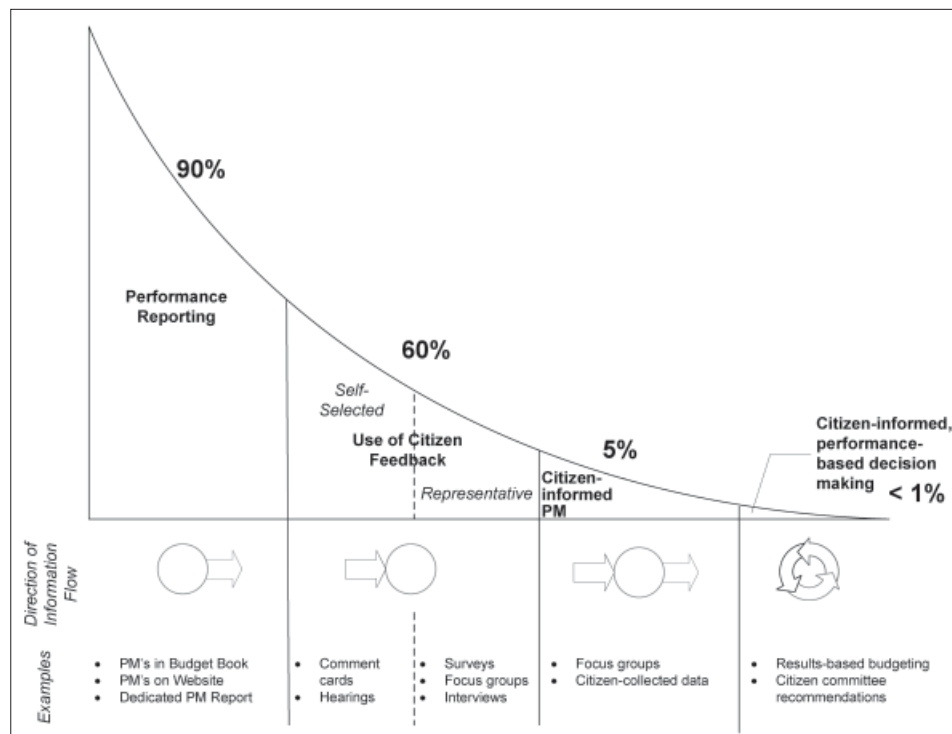


Figure 1. Citizen Participation and Performance Measurement

practices included in the second stage on the continuum. Through the second stage, information flow is mostly one-way, although there are notable exceptions, which we have identified in the study as “emerging practices.” In reporting, information flows mostly from the government to citizens. In the feedback stage, information flows mostly from citizens to the government.

In the next two groupings, the methods are built around information flowing from the government to citizens and from citizens to the government. Practices represent a more in-depth level of involvement, characterized by direct citizen participation in parts of the process that traditionally were the domain of administrators and elected officials. In the third grouping, “citizen-informed” performance measurement, citizens are directly involved in developing measures and in some cases also collect and report measures and evaluate results.

The grouping we identified as “citizen-informed, performance-based decision making” is the most in-depth level of direct involvement and has a more continuous, interactive information flow. Very few governments undertake this intense degree of citizen involvement. In fact, only one government interviewed by GFOA could arguably fit into this category, although other governments have implemented some practices that could be interpreted as such. Experimental programs, such as the Iowa Citizen-Initiated Performance Assessment described by Alfred Ho and Paul Coates, have attempted to implement this intense level of involvement.

Reporting

Performance reporting was the most common form of citizen involvement among governments we interviewed. The budget document is by far the primary reporting vehicle.

Reporting alone involves citizens less than any of the methods explored in the GFOA research project. For example, in the budget document measures are presented for the prospective year and past budget years. Assuming citizens know how to access such information and choose to read it and that there is a fairly clear connection made between reported measures and what the government is doing, they may gain some information about results. This example highlights the limitations of reporting as a good mechanism for citizen involvement or accountability.

When people talk about reporting as an accountability tool, they assume that if citizens know what results governments are producing this will in some unspecified way ensure that the government will begin to do a better job of meeting citizen expectations; however, the gap between producing a report and improving results is vast.

Performance reporting is evolving, and the level of citizen involvement and interaction is increasing. Some governments have made concerted efforts to report information that citizens say they want.

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A good example is governments that are involved in a grant program of the National Center for Civic Innovation's Center on Government Performance, funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. Grantees are required to involve citizens as they design measures and their reporting formats, so the information flow is not just one way. In the best cases, citizens are able to help the government focus the report on services and results they care about. In addition, reports are more accessible. (The GFOA study found that next to reporting performance in the budget document, Websites are the second most used medium by jurisdictions in their study.)

Technology is a major enabler of innovation in performance reporting by making reporting more interactive. Data on Demand, a system being implemented in Chicago, is an example of a leading practice that enables citizens to customize the performance data they are seeking, thus making reporting much more than a unidirectional effort by government and letting citizens learn about areas they are most interested in, not just areas the government decides they will be interested in. A citizen can log on and compare test scores for two neighborhood schools or crime rates for several neighborhoods. Chicago also makes its performance measurement database available online and allows citizens to access the same Web-based performance data city departments use to manage their operations. Although this system is in its early stages, the plan is for the database to be updated frequently with activity and program information. According to the city's Website, citizens can review performance measures by department, departmental programs, and specific department activities. They can access historical information, current year budget targets, and current year results. In another example of leading practice in reporting, District of Columbia residents can access operational data by subscribing to live data feeds that are updated hourly, daily, or weekly. This allows residents to monitor government performance and activities that permit greater accountability in all business groups and agencies.

Citizen Feedback Mechanisms

The next most frequently used method for involving the public, as found in the GFOA research, is to ask citizens for feedback on their preferences. More than 60 percent of the governments we interviewed who use performance measurement incorporate citizen feedback tools of some sort, ranging from traditional self-selected mechanisms such as public budget hearings or comment cards to more representative methods such as random surveys and focus groups. At this stage of the continuum, citizens are producers of

information, and the information flow is still largely unidirectional from citizen to government. Of course, simply conducting a survey is to some degree a form of communication from the government to its residents, sending a signal that the government is interested in knowing what residents think.

An important issue managers need to consider is whether and to what extent the feedback tools they use will give them a broad *citizen perspective*. Governments that have grappled with involving citizens in performance measurement and management have typically used a variety of approaches and forums to ensure that they go beyond advocacy groups and special interests.

Managers designing citizen involvement mechanisms should be cautious in how they use information gleaned from surveys. Opinion or satisfaction surveys may help to identify issues or trends, but they are usually better at raising questions than answering them. Survey information should be used as one of several bits of information in setting goals or reaching conclusions about citizen preferences. Governments that use surveys to identify issues or trends and then follow up to get more focused feedback from focus groups or more detailed in-person or phone surveys are likely to get more directly useful information for decisions.

Inviting citizens to assist in setting priorities, creating citizen-based measures, and even collecting and analyzing information does not relieve managers of their duty to decide which information to use, and what to recommend to elected officials. Managers should consider multiple inputs from multiple sources. Governments that rely heavily on citizen input, even those using citizen-based measures, usually also employ internally developed “objective” or technical measures for decision making.

The utility of feedback mechanisms also depends on using them at the right points in the process. For example, rather than conducting a survey for the

purpose of developing an annual budget, a survey would be more helpful in the planning process, when the government is establishing priorities before dollars are allocated.

A leading practice in the area of citizen feedback is to apply private sector market research tools to public sector planning. The work of the Center on Government Performance of the Fund for the City of New York, described by Barbara Cohn Berman (2005), is a good example. Using well-accepted private sector market research practices, the center combined use of focus groups, surveys, and interviews over a six-year period between 1996 and 2001 to determine how the public perceived local government performance. Researchers found that participants were both knowledgeable about public services and reasonable in their expectations. During the focus groups, participants were given brief descriptions of thirty city responsibilities so that all had an equal base level of understanding. Participants then ranked how familiar they were with each service, how important they believed each service to be, and how well each service is performed. Though not statistically quantifiable, these ratings permit insight into the public’s perception of city services, allowing researchers to draw the conclusions mentioned.

The results of this research also demonstrate a good approach for developing citizen-based performance measures, a topic discussed further here. The research demonstrated that citizens in New York were sufficiently familiar with government services to enable governments to create measures and targets that are relevant to citizens. There is no reason to believe that people in other jurisdictions are generally less familiar with government services.

Citizen-Informed Performance Measures

At this stage of the continuum, information is bidirectional. Governments invite citizens to help them create measures to help managers understand what

information and priorities are important to citizens. Ideally, governments then incorporate these types of measures into how they fund and deliver services and how they report performance. Fewer than 5 percent of governments in GFOA's research said they use direct citizen involvement in developing measures. Good examples exist, however.

In Chattanooga, Tennessee, the performance measurement program, a partnership among the city, a nonprofit good government group, and area universities, sought to learn what kind of performance reporting citizens preferred, and whether there was performance information not currently collected or supplied that citizens believed would help them assess the city's effectiveness. Town hall meetings and focus groups were used to develop performance measures and identify six areas that citizens wanted information on, among them affordable housing, neighborhood blight, code enforcement, and job opportunities.

Barbara Cohn Berman (2005) describes the citizen-based performance measures developed through the Fund for the City of New York's work. Using information from focus group discussions that were part of the market research study and from subsequent phone interviews, researchers were able to suggest performance measures that would give citizens information relevant to their concerns. For example, one person had this comment: "I called 911 for my grandmother. They came quickly, knew what to do, and got her to the right hospital on time" (p. 51). From this one comment the researchers derived three potential performance measures: (1) the initial response time to reach the patient; (2) the elapsed time to transport the patient to the appropriate hospital; and (3) the knowledge, compassion, competence, and responsiveness of personnel. The project documented comments and potential performance measures for each of the thirty services ranked. Such an exercise could be easily replicated by jurisdictions and used to validate their current measures or offer new ones that are more important to citizens.

The center also identified governmental functions regarded by citizens as very important but for which there were no performance data. It then developed new tools to produce reliable performance information and applied them to New York. The first tool was concerned with the quality of the roads. Roadway maintenance was considered critically important by more than three-quarters of the 2001 focus group members; yet of the thirty-four services they rated, its performance was among the five lowest. The center adapted a pavement-roughness measurement technology known as profilometry to produce a smoothness score and jolt score for city streets. Focus group members were used to calibrate the technology to easy-to-understand performance measures, and maps were produced to spatially depict the results and observe changes over time. Subsequent to this experiment, other cities have conducted similar studies.

Citizens may only be involved in developing measures or, as San Francisco's ParkScan initiative illustrates, they may also collect data, analyze them, and report results. San Francisco's program allows direct citizen participation in observing, evaluating, and reporting on conditions at the city's 230 parks and playgrounds. It is a joint project of a nonprofit community-based organization and the San Francisco Recreation and Park Department (RPD). The goal is to improve standards in all of San Francisco's parks by furnishing RPD with information on park conditions and community priorities that can be used to manage park maintenance and repair activities as well as capital improvements.

ParkScan operates a Website where any park user can register and report on conditions at neighborhood parks and playgrounds. Once submitted, the observation reports are forwarded electronically to the RPD's work order system for resolution. Each report receives an ID number, and the status of the city's response can be tracked on the ParkScan Website. The database of citizen reports is searchable by park and other criteria, thus maintaining a

record of observations and status over time. Survey results help the RPD be more responsive to citizen priorities. In 2006, ParkScan had more than seven hundred users and received 1,621 park observations. The city responded to 90.6 percent of citizen observations. Vandalism, such as graffiti, was cited as a factor or cause in more than 60 percent of recorded ParkScan observations. With the help of citizen surveys and ParkScan data, RPD is close to meeting its goal of removing graffiti within forty-eight hours of placement.

Citizen-Informed Performance-Based Decision Making

Logically, the most in-depth citizen involvement level would be to have citizens not only help to identify measures and reporting modes, or help to collect, evaluate, and report data, but also to participate directly in making decisions related to setting priorities, funding programs, and implementing other methods for improving results. Practices in this area include such things as citizen advisory boards and priority setting boards, which directly and routinely advise elected officials or managers. Interaction with elected officials may be direct, as with participating in a meeting of the elected governing body, or indirect, as in furnishing reports that advise specific actions or general direction.

Organizationwide practices in this category are rare. Only one government interviewed by GFOA seems to fit into this category. Kitchener, Ontario, involves citizens in creating surveys to gather information about citizen priorities; then, through another citizen group that develops metrics, it identifies critical community issues and assists the city council to set a three-year shared agenda at the beginning of each new term of the council. Finally, it reports on performance to the council and the community.

In addition to the ability of governments to sustain citizen interest as well as other design and implementation questions, this category of involvement

raises concerns about whether such an approach is even appropriate in a representative democracy, in which the public elects leaders to make decisions. To what extent does this degree of direct citizen involvement support the role of elected leaders, and to what extent might it supplant or subvert it? In addition, this direct hyperinvolvement by citizens raises issues of accountability. To what extent does it blur the citizen role with that of professional managers? Will citizens involved in such efforts become yet another category of “technical experts” that would need to be counterbalanced by other noninvolved citizens? These efforts are relatively recent and rare. More research needs to be conducted on the effect they have. In the meantime, managers should keep themselves informed of the potential benefits and pitfalls.

Conclusions

So far, citizen involvement in performance measurement and management is better established as a good intention than as a common practice. The key for managers is to develop and implement citizen involvement methods that help them achieve better results—results distinguished by the extent to which they meet citizens’ expectations and needs. The mechanisms managers choose need to be workable in their jurisdictional environment. Managers need to be sure that involvement is representative of the citizen perspective broadly defined, and that the information is actually used, so that both citizens and insiders know the involvement is more than window dressing. Most important, managers need to articulate, at the beginning, a solid rationale for involving citizens, because this rationale is the foundation for all that follows. What is needed to enable managers to create effective citizen involvement components of their performance measurement and management processes? I offer four suggestions:

1. Most important, regardless of the citizen feedback mechanisms available or employed, managers at all levels need more information on how

to improve performance so that citizens' expectations are better met. If improvement is the "mega goal" of performance measurement for managers, there need to be more effective methods for identifying and disseminating information on effective strategies, programs, and implementation methods. Regardless of the success of a program in one jurisdiction, differences in implementation at another jurisdiction can mean the difference between success and failure.

2. Managers need more and better information on citizen involvement techniques.
3. Governments need to be aware of and take advantage of advances in technology in two areas. First, in the area of collecting, storing, and analyzing performance information as well as reporting it, the market is finally supplying systems that work for government. New technologies are extremely powerful and cost-effective. Second, technologies for facilitating participation are readily available. So-called constituent relationship management (CRM) systems, for example, are helpful in enabling citizens to contact the right government offices more easily (and more efficiently from the government's perspective), but these systems also produce a wealth of information on citizen preferences that can be mined to improve performance.
4. Finally, much more research is needed on the relationship between citizen involvement and government performance, between citizen

involvement and citizen satisfaction, and on the relative costs and benefits of specific involvement methods. As previously stated, performance measurement and management is constantly evolving and governments continue to experiment with new approaches. The same can be said, even more emphatically, about methods for citizen participation in its newer, more direct form, and those methods need to be evaluated.

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