

# The Des Moines Experience with Citizen-Informed Performance Measurement and Reporting

BY MICHAEL MATTHES

*The author gratefully acknowledges the assistance of Lauren Palmer, now the assistant city manager of Manhattan, Kansas, in the preparation of this article.*

## A Brief History (or, Eating Celery)

The City of Des Moines has been measuring its performance in some fashion for many decades. It also reported some basic performance information as early as 1959 (referenced in the city's 1961 annual report). In more recent history, performance measurement and reporting has been an exercise almost exclusively for budget analysts. Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, most city departments collected measures and reported results in the annual budget. Managers did not use performance measurement beyond the act of preparing and printing. The Des Moines City Council, staff, and public did not use the measures.

This lack of attention to performance measures may have something to do with the fact that they nearly all were workload measures. Two examples are "number of crossing guard locations" and "street light plats reviewed." In addition, there are a large number of measures. The 1995 fiscal year budget is a 486-page document containing 1,371 measures, each measured four times. In most of the budgets there are no targets for performance, and the measures themselves do not relate to any particular strategic plan goals. Therefore in reading the document one is left yawning.

This brief comment about budget measures describes the extent of the city's experience until the mid-1990s. It did not use strategic planning, surveys of residents, or scientifically valid focus groups. Much work was being done, with almost no value added to the community or the government (like

eating celery—a lot of chewing with nearly zero calories). In addition to this, citizens were not calling for the use of measures. They focused instead on outcomes and accordingly the city council called for a strategic plan developed by citizens.

## Hope for Gain: 1995 Strategic Plan (or, Pushing Rope)

The strategic plan commissioned by the city council focused on citizen input. In fact, the council appointed twenty-nine individuals to the Strategic Planning Committee and charged them with developing the plan. City staff supplied technical expertise throughout the planning process. As noted in *Des Moines—Today and Tomorrow*, the published strategic plan, "In writing and prioritizing the goals, the committee members worked diligently to use all the information provided to them and propose the ideas that would be best for the future of Des Moines" (1995, p. 75). Interestingly, the final product covered many areas of city government services and other areas the city was not empowered to have much impact on, such as education. The plan was also heavily focused on economic development (five of the twelve strategies were targeted to financial and economic development matters).

With a fully realized strategic plan in place, there was renewed hope for a more effective performance measurement system. The dream of data-driven management was rekindled. Within a year of completion of the strategic plan, an overhaul of the performance measures in the budget started. All departments reported workload, efficiency, and productivity measures. This was accomplished with a great deal of internal resistance. Department managers argued that their work could not be measured effectively, that this initiative was the "flavor of the month," and that it bore little relation to the day-to-day realities facing

local governments in Iowa. (The Iowa State Legislature controls local taxation such that revenue increases are held to a level significantly lower than inflation, through a Byzantine system of valuation and rate caps.)

The city also joined the Center for Performance Measurement (CPM) of the International City/County Management Association (ICMA). This required a second round of data gathering and reporting, which was also received poorly by department managers. The upside of these measures is that they can be compared across all CPM participating jurisdictions. Although the fifteen templates of CPM do not cover all services delivered by local governments, it is the best apples-to-apples benchmarking effort happening in the country. It is also relatively affordable with the average cost of participation roughly \$5,000 per year. The work of the ICMA to clean the data, testing it for internal mathematical consistency and investigating outliers, is an important element that builds credibility for the product. The data produced by this tool were available to all. However, it was only once analyzed methodically and transmitted to all departments. The hope prevailed that departments would begin to use these management tools, but they rarely used the data. This may be explained by the fact that much of Des Moines's strategic plan deals with goals and objectives not always related to the fifteen templates available through CPM.

Finally, a third approach to gathering performance information took the form of CIPA (Citizen Initiated Performance Assessment). An Alfred P. Sloan Foundation grant to Iowa State University initiated this program to explore ways of involving the community in designing measures that cities would use to measure performance. It was (and is) a laudable goal. Exciting at the start, the Des Moines experience eventually stalled.

The all-citizen, all-volunteer team of twenty-three individuals developed twenty-seven performance

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measures related to the city's nuisance control services. Because of increased costs, the city was not able to measure thirteen of the twenty-seven measures. An example was the measure "police officer time spent on duties other than traffic enforcement." The city did not have the ability to track officer time to that level of specificity. Another measure was the incidence of histoplasmosis cases because the county, not the city, tracks the incident rates of communicable diseases. Another reason for not tracking the disease was the rarity of histoplasmosis. Even though half the measures contained obstacles such as these, the larger problem of sustainability plagued the CIPA project. Volunteer organizations routinely grapple with absent team members, long periods between meetings, and an eventual drop in interest on the part of participants.

With these new and renewed efforts at collecting meaningful information about performance, use of the information improved, but slightly. A handful of city services were analyzed and processes were altered, resulting in performance improvements. Some high-profile improvements were achieved with the permitting process, such as animal licensing. Most of these services, however, were not at the core of the mission of the city government.

Still the dream of performance-driven management and broad-based community involvement eluded the efforts of reform-minded employees, in part because so few people knew about the effort, or seemed to care. Let's face it, almost no one reads the budget. Even fewer read the CAFR (Comprehensive Annual

Financial Report). There is no doubt that these documents are critically important to good government. There is also no doubt that these documents poorly communicate what the vast majority of people living in a city want to know. Namely, “What did you do with my money?” The purpose of the budget and CAFR are, of course, to answer that question. Unfortunately, they might as well be written in Latin for all they communicate. Not willing to throw in the towel on measuring performance just yet, City Manager Eric Anderson (now the manager in Tacoma, Washington) tried what was a new approach for Des Moines in learning what citizens wanted from their government.

#### **Enter Surveys: Profound Learning (or, We Didn't Know We Didn't Know)**

Over the course of a few years (starting in 2002), city government surveyed residents about their satisfaction with various aspects of the services they receive from city government. Through these surveys, the city learned three alarming things: residents were very dissatisfied with the condition of streets, with the effort of the government to involve them in decision making (accessibility), and with the city's effort to keep them informed about what it was doing (accountability).

Accessibility and accountability are two central elements of the city's vision. In fact the vision states, “. . . We require innovative governance that is accessible, accountable, and efficient. . . .” In regard to these three areas, we learned we were not giving the community what it wanted. The city council and city manager acted quickly to improve all three—listening (accessibility), communicating (accountability), and paving.

#### **Communicating with the Public (or, Selling the Invisible)**

In Iowa, cities are routinely looking for new revenue streams. Des Moines is no exception. It happened

that a new source of revenue was indeed developed at the same time the city learned about the big three issues. That serendipitous funding was dedicated in its entirety to resurfacing streets. Within one year, the number of lane miles resurfaced annually tripled (from twenty-five to seventy-five miles—with about two thousand lane miles left to go . . .).

The city next turned its attention to the problem of citizens feeling uninvolved in decision making. This can be interpreted to mean people want to be able to access the government to give their input, and that they want to be listened to. We learned from our survey administrator (ETC Institute of Olathe, Kansas) that as dismal as our results were (31 percent satisfied), Des Moines citizens were more satisfied than the average city they surveyed. Des Moines permits the traditional access to government that most council-manager forms of government do. Meetings of decision-making bodies are open to the public, and their agendas are publicized in advance. Anyone can put an item on the agenda. Council meetings are televised live and replayed on the city's cable channel. Nearly every document produced (except personnel matters for one) is a public document and available to anyone who requests it. The city maintains a Website with information about nearly every service it delivers and how to access those services. The council has established twenty-three citizen boards and commissions to oversee and advise staff.

It is also true that Des Moines, like most other cities, has a dedicated core of citizens who can be counted on to attend every meeting. Although this is welcomed and helpful, it suffers from the fact that not every point of view in the city is represented; in our case, this core group of involved citizens missed three things that were widely and deeply felt in the community as a whole. The new citizen satisfaction survey approach seemed to fill that void. After all, we learned things we didn't know before, in spite of all of the “access” we supported. With the use of an annual survey, the decision was to wait and see if this improved over time.

Finally (the focus of the remainder of this piece) the city explored ways to improve resident satisfaction with its efforts to keep them informed. After researching best practices, the city implemented a quarterly newsletter mailed to every residential address (home owner and renter). The primary purpose of the newsletter is to present as much information as possible about city services (how to sign up for recreation programs) and public policy debates (such as supplying facts about a proposed one cent sales tax increase). The newsletter has been well received according to the survey results obtained after implementation of the newsletter. From the point at which the city learned of these three main issues, it changed only two services: resurfacing more streets and implementing a newsletter and annual performance report (it was already surveying residents). The survey results were dramatic. Of seventy-three areas contained in the survey, sixty-five saw an increase in satisfaction. The satisfaction with streets increased to 32 percent satisfaction, up from 24 percent. Satisfaction with the city's efforts to communicate increased from 43 percent to 52 percent). Satisfaction with public involvement in decision making increased to 38 percent from 31 percent. This clearly demonstrates that listening to the public, reacting to what people say, and communicating that you heard what they had to say and did something about it is a powerful way to ensure government is responsive to the community it serves. It seems simple, doesn't it?

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The newsletter is a highly effective tool for helping to keep the public informed about what the city is

doing, but it doesn't present a significant opportunity to answer the public's fundamental question, "What did you do with my money?" Answering this simple question is anything but simple. However, the city manager challenged staff to find a way to do so.

Staff turned once again to searching for best practices as a guide to developing our approach. After much research (getting every municipal-level report we could find), it became apparent that many governments are effusive with praise for their own successes and reticent about their failures. This tendency appeared to be especially true in party-driven or strong mayor systems. After a short internal debate, it was decided that Des Moines did not want to produce a public relations piece, but rather an honest treatment of the strengths and weaknesses of the government. Some good examples exist, such as the work in Portland. For sixteen years, their auditor produced a report exploring service levels across the organization, good or bad. This honesty builds a level of credibility over time that is crucial for the relationship between citizens and their government. This is the kind of accountability Des Moines wanted to achieve, and staff turned to the Governmental Accounting Standards Board (GASB) for help. Jay Fountain from GASB delivered a compelling overview of the guidance contained in their "green book," *Reporting Performance Information* (2003), which appeared to be exactly the approach Des Moines staff had been looking for.

### Reporting Performance (or, Warts and All!)

Anything new in government (and life, I suppose) is much easier to attempt if someone else is paying. To the City of Des Moines's great relief, the National Center for Civic Innovation (NCCI), with a grant from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, developed a three-year grant program to assist cities in their effort to produce SEA reports. Des Moines was lucky enough to be one of the thirty cities chosen for this grant. Along with attending some excellent workshops in New York City and \$30,000, the

grant required each city to produce two annual reports, using the guidance contained in GASB's green book. For Des Moines, this was the critical assistance that enabled the report to be produced. It created a safety net that allowed the city to attempt a new endeavor in reporting performance in ways preferred by citizens. Effectively we were finally able to attempt to answer the question, "What did you do with my money?"

In our first effort, we realized that our report should capture the interest of potential readers. By using graphic design to make the report attractive, we wanted to give people a reason to open the document and read it. The report was produced for less than \$15,000 and resulted in a printing of twelve thousand copies. These were distributed to the Des Moines City Council, all eighteen hundred city employees, all members of boards and commissions, and most of the grocery stores throughout the city. Staff hoped to receive significant positive feedback from the public. That didn't happen. However, we did receive very strong and positive feedback from the council and those routinely active citizens. This report was the first public discussion of the very low satisfaction with street conditions and what the council had done to address the issue (which was to devote large amounts of new revenue to it).

At this time, the AGA began awarding Certificates of Excellence in Service Efforts and Accomplishments Reporting. This is another important way to encourage SEA reporting and gives cities engaged in the work another selling point for their continued production. Des Moines had carefully followed the GASB guidance for production of its SEA report (although we called it a Performance Report) and was grateful to receive the award.

The second report produced by the NCCI grant enabled staff to try another approach to capture the public's interest in the report. We decided to incorporate original work from local artists. The idea was to once again give the public a reason to pick up the

report and take it home. As inflation would have it, we were able to print only 11,500 copies of that year's report. We distributed the report in much the same fashion as before, except that we also left piles of the reports in the busiest coffee shops throughout the city. The response to this report was more intense and positive than the first report and generated significant buzz in the art community. This report was also awarded an AGA Certificate of Excellence.

With these initial successes made possible by the safety net of NCCI's grant, and the AGA awards, the city was ready to risk its own funds for this kind of reporting. Perhaps the most important outcome of this help was that the city was now comfortable enough with "warts-and-all reporting" that we developed the five goals for our third report (our first without the safety net of the NCCI grant).

#### **Prepare Meaningful Performance Information**

The first goal is to prepare meaningful performance information for the public that integrates the various components of our performance measurement program.

GASB guidelines for SEA reporting were particularly helpful as we worked to achieve this goal. One of the concepts in those guidelines calls for real analysis around performance (Why was performance what it was? What obstacles exist for the government to meet its stated goals? What are we doing about it?). This analysis allowed us to give better information to the public. Instead of just making the raw data publicly available, as had been done in the past, the report helped us identify and expose areas in which the city excelled and also areas that need improvement. For example, we learned that although satisfaction with traffic enforcement is low, Des Moines issues more moving citations than other city our size (as measured by ICMA's Center for Performance Measurement). By communicating this to residents, we hope to educate them about the high performance being achieved by our police department compared



to other communities. We also intend to do additional analysis to determine if satisfaction is low because our residents feel the city does too much traffic enforcement. This level of understanding about the connections between survey results and other data was not available before SEA reporting.

### **Use an Understandable Format**

The second goal is to present the information in a format that is easy to read and understand.

We included a glossary to familiarize readers with difficult terms and government jargon. A thorough executive summary gave readers an introduction to the report and a bird's-eye view of the city's overall performance for the previous year. We also used colorful charts and graphs to help visually illustrate the performance data in the report. The writers of the report worked diligently to keep the readability of the report below a twelfth-grade reading level so that the content would be accessible to the widest possible audience.

### **Attract Residents and Visitors to the Information**

The third goal is to present the information in a format that is appealing to residents and visitors who may not typically interact with local government.

This goal is met primarily by acquiring the talents of a professional graphic designer. The design of the report displays a balance between quick facts (to draw the attention of the reader) and detailed content (to offer deeper analysis). The designer helps with every aspect of the look and readability of the entire report. This is an area in which many cities are uncomfortable. However, many public-bidding laws permit hiring the most talented graphic artist, as opposed to the cheapest. Des Moines has been blessed to work with Elizabeth Regenold, a highly talented designer, who virtually donates her time.

The city also partnered with the Greater Des Moines Public Art Foundation, which awarded a \$9,000 grant to finance the art competition, and the Metro Arts Alliance, which managed the competition, to

incorporate original art in the report. We held an art competition and selected nine pieces from local artists to be used for the cover and section dividers. This combination of art and science has been well received by the art community and has generated tremendous attention for the report. Metro Arts Alliance and the Art Dive, a local art gallery, sponsored a public reception to recognize the winning artists and the report.

The city also partnered with the New Iowan Center to produce a Spanish language translation of the executive summary. This reflects the city's ongoing effort to reach out to its growing Latino population. One of Des Moines's long-term goals is to celebrate the diversity of its people and value their social, economic, and cultural contributions. These contributions inspired the theme of the report: *building community*.

### **Make Information Widely Available**

The fourth goal is to make the information widely available to all members of the public.

Des Moines City Manager Richard Clark supported a significant increase in expenditures for the performance report so that a copy could be mailed to every residential household in Des Moines—nearly eighty nine thousand! Another two thousand copies were printed and made available by request. Complete electronic copies are available on the city's Website, as is the Spanish language translation of the executive summary. The Website is a useful measurement tool because we can track the number of hits on both the report and the Spanish translation. The report has also received media coverage and was featured on the city's cable access channel, DMTV Channel 7.

The point to be made here is that the city decided to actively communicate with the people who live in Des Moines. To do this, traditional approaches will not work. Only 30 percent of residents subscribe to the newspaper. Only 50 percent subscribe to cable television. Only 37 percent visited the city's Website in the past year. Far less than 1 percent of city

dwellers attend public meetings. The community clearly wanted better communication; however, there is no one easy way to communicate with everyone. Even if we used every outlet available—newspaper, television, the Website, and public meetings—we would still only reach about half of the community. People who subscribe to cable television tend to be the same ones who subscribe to the newspaper and use the Internet and other such communication channels. Thus we came to realize that if we were going to improve satisfaction with our efforts to communicate with the community, we would need to reach everyone, and that meant the U.S. mail. This mailing cost \$49,175 (fifty-eight cents per household—less than twenty-five cents per resident).

#### **Use Feedback to Make Adjustments**

The fifth goal is to create avenues for receiving feedback about the performance information and use this information to make necessary adjustments to programs, services, and performance data collection.

The city has worked hard to encourage readers of the report to contact us with their questions and ideas to improve future reports. The report included mail, telephone, and e-mail contact information to give readers options about how to provide their feedback. The online version of the report features a Web form for readers to submit immediate suggestions as they review the document. We are measuring and evaluating this feedback by entering it into the city's customer response system. The city is also currently preparing the 2007 resident satisfaction survey. We will learn about the success of the report by comparing the survey results to previous satisfaction scores, particularly those related to the city's communication efforts.

#### **What Difference Does It Make? Real Improvement That Everyone Can See and Know (or, a Rising Tide Really Does Raise All Boats)**

Des Moines did two basic things: we actually did something the community could see with their own eyes (paved a lot more roads), and we made a point

to communicate with every resident of Des Moines (through the newsletter and the annual performance report). This combination resulted in dramatic improvements across the board (sixty-five of seventy-three areas in the 2006 survey improved). This is believed to be a manifestation of the phenomena of “association” and the “halo effect,” as Harry Beckwith describes in his book *Selling the Invisible* (1997, p. 108), and as Barbara J. Cohn Berman addresses in Chapter Three of her book *Listening to the Public* (regarding “Ten Significant Observations About How People View Local Government,” especially observation three; 2005, p. 29). To illustrate their points, Des Moines focused real effort into resurfacing streets and communicating with the public, and not only did satisfaction with that rise but so did satisfaction with customer service and the cleanliness of the city (services that had not changed).

Street conditions matter much more than we thought, and customer service is far more important (and government is far worse at it) than we want to believe.

This kind of result gave the Des Moines City Council such a level of comfort that the staff is ready to sustain this approach. It has just established “twelve goal statements” to supply new strategic leadership, replacing the 1995 strategic plan. These set the direction for the city for the next five years. The work of staff and the city council will be measured and communicated to everyone who calls Des Moines home.

#### **What Des Moines Learned**

Listening to residents is extremely illuminating. As one can see in Barbara J. Cohn Berman's excellent work with the use of focus groups in New York City, or Des Moines's use of satisfaction surveys, street

conditions matter much more than we thought, and customer service is far more important (and government is far worse at it) than we want to believe.

For Des Moines, a good, scientifically valid survey is critical, but reporting is the vital twin element of improving results. If your organization is gathering performance measures but not reporting, why bother? This is akin to eating celery. If your organization is reporting measures people don't care about or is not admitting its shortcomings, why bother? People are more sophisticated than many public servants understand (Berman, 2005). Residents hate spin and can smell it a mile away. There is also very little tolerance for spending tax dollars on public relations pieces. If you use the traditional approach to communication (accountability), which amounts to simply affording access, then that is really the same as taking an attitude where "if they want to talk to me, they have my phone number." It is our fundamental responsibility to make the call ourselves. In Des Moines, this means mailing the report to everyone in the city.

The GASB's guidance for SEA reporting is actually very helpful and didn't cost us anything, or hurt. Their work to develop guidance for reporting government's efforts and accomplishments helps create meaningful and credible communication with the community. Warts-and-all reporting is the core element to this effort and is received very well by the community.

However, holding up the mirror to the organization can be traumatic. Shattering the "Lake Wobegon Effect," as Harry Beckwith so eloquently refers to it,

can be difficult for the organization. Not everyone here is above average. Learning which areas of our work are not measuring up to residents' expectations takes a thick skin, and disbelief is common among those engaged in such areas. For Des Moines, the idea that our customer service can be lacking has been met in some areas with, "What do you mean, customer service sucks? Our customer service is great!" The critical motivation here is that we enter this work with a willingness to fix what the community says is broken, even if we do it better than anyone else we can find, or even though it is hard to learn we aren't particularly good at something.

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