

Starting Performance Measurement from Outside Government in Worcester

BY ROBERTA R. SCHAEFER

For more than a century, local government in the United States has tried, among other things, to become more businesslike in its operations (as exemplified by the movement to appoint professional city managers) and to encourage greater citizen participation (typified by legal requirements for citizen-run boards for planning, zoning, and education). Research bureaus were also the product of the “good government” movement at the turn of the twentieth century, created to clean up political party corruption by making government more businesslike and creating independent watchdog agencies to keep a check on corruption. Citizen-based performance measurement and reporting can bring together these three developments of the Progressive Era to improve government performance.

Over the past few decades, governments have tried to adopt the business practice of developing strategic plans for setting goals and tracking accomplishments. In 1993, Worcester’s city manager decided to involve the city’s residents in developing Worcester’s first strategic plan. He appointed a Strategic Planning Committee composed of twenty-four members from around the city, representing diverse interests and backgrounds. The committee held five public hearings across the city and then met with a facilitator to sift the findings of those hearings into the five broad goals of a seven-year strategic plan:

1. Improve the academic achievement of students in the Worcester Public Schools
2. Increase economic development
3. Improve public safety
4. Improve municipal and neighborhood services
5. Improve youth services

Over the next several years, the city council and public were kept informed of the resources being

devoted to these goals; however, no one was tracking outcomes such as decreases in the crime rate or improvements in student test scores. The Worcester Regional Research Bureau, which had served on the 1993 committee that established the plan and goals, decided to take on the task of measuring government performance.

The bureau was founded in 1985 by Worcester businesspeople who felt the need for an organization to conduct independent, nonpartisan research on public policy; assist Worcester’s city manager with recommendations for more effective and efficient municipal government; and monitor charter changes on public policies and electoral politics. They were concerned about the city’s capacity to sustain services and quality of life during its transformation from an older industrial economy into one with growing strength in health care, related industries, and higher education. The bureau’s mission is to serve the public interest of the Greater Worcester region by conducting independent, nonpartisan research and analysis of public policy issues to promote informed public debate and decision making. For the first fifteen years of the bureau’s existence, both municipal government and citizens saw it as a watch-dog agency. Government officials viewed our studies as factual and objective, but they could ignore the recommendations unless a crisis compelled them to do otherwise. Businesses were pleased that someone was looking critically at how tax dollars were being spent, while residents thought that because we were supported by businesses the research bureau was largely concerned about the welfare of the business community.

In 1999, the bureau began working with groups of citizens (many of whom had been involved in developing the original strategic plan) representing a

broad cross-section of the population to develop and refine measures that would benchmark Worcester's progress toward achieving the five goals of the strategic plan. As a result of multiple sessions with each group, who were selected by business associations, neighborhood associations, government agencies, and nonprofit organizations, we developed a consensus around five or six measures for each goal that would offer a fairly good indication of whether we were making progress toward achieving them. In 2000, the bureau received a planning grant from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation to develop a three-year project to institute citizen-based government performance measurement in Worcester. While researching similar projects, we learned about a program designed by the Fund for the City of New York's Center on Government Performance called ComNET (Computerized Neighborhood Environment Tracking), which can be used to measure delivery of neighborhood services and document changes in neighborhood conditions.

ComNET involves local residents in the process of first identifying street-level conditions of concern to them and then using handheld computers to collect data on the exact location of those community problems and assets. The multiple aims of ComNET are for citizens to collect accurate data, systematically review them, learn what is and is not government's responsibility, and decide which issues they want to refer to government. The precise location and description of their findings must be verifiable so that their reports to government will be factual and trustworthy. Digital cameras document some of the conditions found, to furnish additional evidence when necessary. In the course of starting a ComNET project, residents learn the nomenclature of government so that they can communicate successfully with one another.

The bureau adapted ComNET to fit Worcester's specific character, circumstances, and challenges. Because this one measure has had considerable impact

on service delivery such as streamlining the process for removing abandoned vehicles, and on relations among the bureau, government, and citizens, we focus our attention on it here.

Worcester's version of ComNET is a system of biennial, technologically assisted surveys of the physical conditions of Worcester's most socioeconomically challenged neighborhoods, in which almost one-third, or fifty-five thousand, of the city's residents live. Although the physical problems plaguing the neighborhoods are not news to their residents or municipal officials, before implementation of ComNET there was no centralized means of collecting and reporting these problems to the appropriate municipal agency or of tracking their resolution. ComNET surveys enable residents and officials to identify and document more than 275 specific problems affecting residents' quality of life—such as potholes, faded crosswalks, abandoned vehicles, illegal dumping, and overgrown vegetation. Once neighborhoods possess this inventory, they have not only a “punch list” of problems but also a baseline for gauging whether their fortunes are rising or declining.

Before employing the ComNET system and technology, the research bureau had to complete some important preparatory work. Our first step was to engage in extended discussion with neighborhood associations on how to define neighborhood boundaries as well as the problems to be recorded. The second step was to create detailed maps for each neighborhood that was to be surveyed, along with the routes to be followed, and then to program the handheld computers with those streets and the physical features and conditions to be recorded. This work benefited from the active assistance of staff at the Fund for the City of New York. They helped the research bureau start the project, providing guidance and examples of route maps, training presentations and materials, a list of commonly identified street features and problems, and field assistance on the first surveys.

The actual process falls into three parts: recording, analyzing, and distribution. Traveling in teams of three or four (typically a scout to keep the team on its prescribed route, the “mobile computer” user to input findings, and one or two others to point out trouble spots), participants record the deficiencies they observe on drop-down menus (for example, “lines fading” or “roof/chimney broken”) falling under three dozen broad categories of physical features (for example, “crosswalks” and “building-residential”). Once the data are uploaded, via the Internet to *ComNET Connection*, the research bureau is able to generate a variety of spreadsheets depending on the desired analysis or action. After analyzing the data, bureau staff share the results with neighborhood associations, giving them a clearer picture of specific areas of need to be addressed and helping them set priorities.

Enlisting the city’s cooperation to respond to the problems recorded is, of course, critical to the success of ComNET. This cooperation was the result of the city manager’s leadership in letting his subordinates know that he considered this project a priority. But second, there was recognition that cooperation was inescapable since we were measuring progress toward achieving the goals of the strategic plan developed by the city manager and adopted by the city council. Thus, when each municipal department receives a detailed electronic listing of the location and type of problems for which it is responsible, and if these problems are not already known to it, they are added to its workload. City departments and neighborhoods are then better able to identify problems, determine responsibility, plan actions, and record progress.

Four neighborhoods in Worcester piloted the program in 2001, and four more were added in each of the next two years. Two have been added more recently. The fifty-four surveys completed during the last five years have led to documentation of more than 516 assets (potential partners in addressing problems, such as schools, churches, and community

centers) and more than twelve thousand problems—for example, litter in more than seventeen hundred locations, more than fourteen hundred sidewalk trip hazards, and thirteen hundred instances of overgrown vegetation.

ComNET has led to a long list of quantitative and qualitative improvements in Worcester.

- Although residents had long complained of a perceived increase in abandoned vehicles, ComNET surveys made it possible to document the extent of the problem by pinpointing the exact location of every one. Since Worcester’s Department of Public Works and Parks (DPWP) assumed control of the abandoned vehicle removal program in 2003, more than seven thousand vehicles have been removed from the streets. The program, which was aided by the DPWP’s abandoned vehicle hotline, now pays for itself through collection of fines and storage fees.
- Instead of having residents wait to resurvey their neighborhood to know whether a problem had been resolved, the DPWP established a customer service center with a single phone number to afford residents direct access to municipal government for registering complaints and making requests and inquiries. The center responded to more than 115,000 calls, 1,100 walk-ins, and 800 e-mails in fiscal year 2006. About one-quarter resulted in work orders logged and tracked electronically by call takers, who collect all necessary information before transmitting requests to the responsible municipal agency. The work order is tracked, allowing a resident to call the customer service center for updates, and closed when the issue is resolved.
- The customer service center has cut response time and saved \$275,000 per year because fewer people are needed to answer phones. (Prior to this, there were fifteen service numbers for the DPWP.) It has recently incorporated handheld computers in the field to expedite further problem resolution, and a Web-based component to

allow citizens to submit requests online is in development.

- The kind of quantitative evidence that ComNET is able to produce has swayed political priorities and funding. Even though Worcester residents and the DPWP have long been aware of the poor condition of the streets and sidewalks, it was ComNET's ability to generate numbers and locations that led to increased funding and a plan for remediation. The fiscal year 2007 budget included \$2 million from tax levy funds for street and sidewalk repair, plus \$6.9 million in capital funding. The city manager proposed a five-year funding plan of \$44.5 million.
- ComNET has also improved how city residents understand the work of the municipal government. ComNET data, for example, have dispelled the perception that some neighborhoods get favored treatment from municipal government, because there have been similar resolution rates for problems across neighborhoods. About two-thirds of all the problems recorded have been resolved since the program began six years ago.
- It has also led the residents to take on more responsibility for physical deficiencies in their neighborhood. For example, according to the commissioner of public works and parks, whose department has responsibility for the largest proportion (57 percent) of the identified problems, because of the process of documenting deficiencies residents now understand the issue of demand versus resources and that the city does not have the budget to address every issue at the same time. This same process of documentation has led to a more complete understanding of who exactly is responsible for remedying which kind of deficiency. ComNET's spreadsheets not only list deficiencies but also clearly designate the agency responsible for remedying each; in about 25 percent of the cases, responsibility lies with the community itself. Community responsibilities include overgrown shrubs and broken fences on private property.
- With the ComNET survey findings in hand, neighborhood residents have shown admirable willingness to step in and deal with these deficiencies themselves. If there is debris accumulating in someone's driveway or yard, for example, neighborhood activists learn how to approach the homeowner and discuss the issue nonconfrontationally, pointing out the importance of neighborhood appearance for quality of life and maintaining property values. In the case of residents who might not have the physical or financial wherewithal to repair or clean up their property, community members have frequently chipped in to get the work done.
- Finally, the ComNET program is helping break down some of the traditional town-and-gown barriers between Worcester and its institutions of higher education. The bureau has teamed up with Holy Cross College to incorporate ComNET into the service-learning component of its curriculum. As part of two courses in urban policy and politics, Holy Cross students join up with the neighborhood teams in conducting the surveys. To accommodate the academic calendar, four surveys are conducted in the fall and four in the spring. As a result of this partnership, the neighborhoods gain volunteers and get to know students as more than intruders in their neighborhoods, and the students become more integrated in the city and gain practical knowledge of the challenges facing urban areas.

Clearly, the same sort of problems that plague Worcester affect most urban areas in Massachusetts and across the nation. However, ComNET is not merely a technology; it depends on the right institutional configuration and community commitment. One key factor in Worcester has been that a credible, independent third party, such as the bureau, has taken responsibility for the project. Although the bureau did not have a long history of working with neighborhood associations, as mentioned earlier it built credibility as an independent, nonpartisan agency over the previous fifteen years before under-

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taking this project. Neighborhood groups in Worcester tended to be skeptical about municipal government because of a history of unkept promises. Knowing that the bureau was not an arm of municipal government gave these neighborhood groups the comfort level they needed. After working with the first set of four neighborhoods in conducting the surveys, sharing the results, and transmitting them to appropriate municipal agencies, many other neighborhoods applied to participate in the project. Residents continue to participate because they have been able to document improved conditions during resurveys of their neighborhood.

ComNET, and our performance measurement project as a whole, have transformed relations between municipal government and the Worcester Regional Research Bureau as well. As a result of our systematic collection and analysis of data for such an array of measures municipal government uses regularly, we now get steady requests from government agencies (as well as from the private and nonprofit sectors) to conduct additional research and data

collection and analysis. This would seem to indicate a greater level of trust between municipal government and the bureau.

As the program has matured, it and the role of the bureau have changed. In what we see as a mark of the program's success, a couple of neighborhoods have withdrawn from the program for the time being because their residents are now confident they can get results dealing directly with the customer service center. In general, as the neighborhoods gain experience with the surveys they are taking on more responsibility. The bureau expects to play a large role again only when a particular neighborhood wishes to undertake a more comprehensive survey or when we are opening up a new territory, as we expect to do in the spring of 2008 in conducting the first survey of Worcester's downtown neighborhood.

As the results of ComNET clearly indicate, citizen-based performance measurement and reporting have led to more effective and efficient delivery of municipal services and a more involved, satisfied, and better-informed citizenry.

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