# Involving the Public in Measuring and Reporting Local Government Performance

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Local governments supply basic services to the public that enable us to plan and conduct our daily lives. Although responsibilities vary from place to place, these services usually include police and fire protection, roadway and other infrastructure maintenance, traffic control, management of parks, water supply, emergency services, public education, public libraries, code enforcement, recreation, services for children and for people with special needs, and more. We depend on these services being delivered predictably and well; we pay local taxes to ensure this outcome. Yet information to the public about how our local governments are doing is made available inconsistently, if at all.

Regular reporting to the public about the range of government performance has not been commonplace, but involving the public in selecting information to be measured and reported is even more infrequent. Constructive conversations between the public and government on the subject of performance measures and reports are rarer still. Yet our research at the Fund for the City of New York's Center on Government Performance revealed that the public assesses government by using indicators that differ from some of government's standard measures. Hence, engaging the public is critically important if we are to have government actions aligned with the public's needs.

The idea that local governments should produce measures of their performance is not new, and the practice of doing so has expanded in recent years. Governments keep tabs on and produce reports that are used for accounting, auditing, budgeting, and management purposes as well as to comply with legislative mandates. They compile data about revenues and expenditures. They count work that comes in (such as the number of applications and complaints) and work produced (such as applications processed, tons of refuse collected, lane miles paved). These are data usually described as operating statistics—inputs and outputs. They are often used for internal management and budget purposes only. The data are significant and necessary for any well-run government.

However, the measurement and reporting of the results of governmental efforts—the "outcomes"—are still uncommon in government reports. Yet we learned that it is the results of governmental efforts that the public sees and wants. In this context, the public is variously described as the ultimate stakeholder and consumer of government services, not to mention the electors of its government leaders and the taxpayer supporting governmental efforts.

Private sector organizations measure and produce reports about their performance to investors and shareholders. For them, success is measured ultimately by profitability and the various elements that influence profit. Government performance has no single criterion of success. While private sector organizations must find out if they are meeting their customers' needs and expectations in order to survive, grow, maintain, or increase their market share, there is no comparable, compelling survival requirement for local governments to consult with their constituents.

Public hearings, when required to be held or customary in a jurisdiction, are one way for some members of the public to express their views regarding programs or legislation. Typically, the only people attending the events are those who are directly affected by the issues getting a "hearing." What often transpires is a series of prepared statements met with respectful silence or defensive answers

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instead of dialogue. At worst, these are confrontational exchanges with little learned or changed on the part of government or the public.

One could argue that people make their decisions at election time, exerting the ultimate influence on their local government leadership and direction, and therefore additional public input is not needed. Yet the process and results of local elections do not include members of the public weighing in on their satisfaction with how specific services are delivered or how responsive government officials are to their needs. Nor does the election process give the public an opportunity to learn about the scope of its government's activities and reasons why their government is doing what it is doing.

The gap in information flow and communication between the public and local government probably accounts for the feeling expressed frequently in our focus groups that people think they are powerless to affect changes in city services. "You can't change the system" or "You can't fight city hall" are typical comments.

To be sure, local government's work is not easy. It must reckon with a plethora of local, state, and federal laws, regulations, and codes, sometimes inconsistent with one another. Intractable problems need to be addressed even if local government policies and practices are not responsible for them. Local media cast bright lights, crises occur, and gearing up for the next election is omnipresent. Some local government functions require special technical, technological, engineering, legal, medical, or other expertise that is difficult to explain to the general public or too technical for most people to want to know or to have an opinion about.

It is easy to understand, then, why governments proceed to manage, make decisions, and set priorities that are not informed by the public's will or needs and for the public to be out of the loop in learning about why, when, and how their local governments are taking actions that affect their lives, in big and in small but important ways.

A major push by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation started in the mid-1990s to narrow this gap, beginning with our work at the Fund for the City of New York's Center on Government Performance and continuing into what has become a national and even international initiative. Over the past thirteen years, much has been learned, tried, and set into motion. Although not yet the norm, a movement and increased willingness on the part of governments to consider new ways to listen to and communicate with the public seems to be afoot, along with new interest from nonprofit organizations to engage in performance measurement and reporting about local government activities.

Of course, local government is not required to accept the public's recommendations that emerge from any of these initiatives, but when citizen surveys, focus groups, and other types of carefully planned, inclusive feedback sessions are designed and conducted with outside nonpartisan, professional assistance they offer opportunities for government to hear from the public in new, nonconfrontational, constructive ways. When done with sincerity and demonstrated respect for the public, people can feel a new level of confidence that their government cares about them.

Beginning in 2003, forty-seven governments have been participating as Trailblazers, initiating citizen-informed performance measurement and reporting,


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as grantees in programs run by our Center on Government Performance at the National Center for Civic Innovation, the national sister organization of the Fund for the City of New York. The Sloan Foundation also supports these programs. The grantees experiment with various ways to disseminate their performance reports to the public for the first time and to obtain the public's reaction to the content and style of the reports.

### Public Versus Government Perceptions on Performance

Reports from Trailblazer grantee governments and focus groups conducted by the Center on Government Performance, Fund for the City of New York, reveal a number of differences in how the public judges local government performance and how local governments tend to measure and report about their performance:

- The public is interested in outcomes and the quality of work performed. Governments report about workloads, costs, and number of full-time employees.
- People do not care about which agency or level of government is responsible for what. Governments report performance by agency and level of government—local, county, state, federal.
- People expect services to be coordinated even if they are delivered by different agencies, governmental bodies, and contractors hired by government. Typically, governments report performance by agency.
- People rate government performance by their first impressions, including how they are treated, how accessible an office and information are, and how clean a facility is kept. Few governments gather data about these matters or report about them.
- People understand that government work is complex and often difficult. They do not expect perfection and instant responses, but they do expect to be treated with courtesy, respect, and compassion. They think that government employees must exhibit knowledge in their area of work, be helpful and responsive, take initiative to solve problems, and give timely responses. They also think that government should deliver even-handed treatment to all people, in all neighborhoods. Typically, data about the interactions the public experiences with government are not acquired, analyzed, or reported.

Here are examples of specific services local governments supply and the indicators that some governments report about them, as contrasted with the cues and results the public looks for:

A. Public Libraries
   - Government measure: number of reference queries; number of feet of shelf space
   - Public measure: staff helpfulness; availability of materials needed; accessible hours

B. Emergency Medical Services
   - Government measure: response time
   - Public measure: response time plus knowledge and responsiveness to the problem at hand

C. Health Code Enforcement
   - Government measure: number of restaurants and food stores inspected
   - Public measure: cleanliness and food safety ratings for each restaurant and food store

D. Roadway Maintenance
   - Government measure: number of work requests; roadway lane miles resurfaced
   - Public measure: smoothness score; number of major jolts encountered per mile; quality of roadway repair and smoothness after repair; need to repair again after a short time

E. Street Cleanliness
   - Government measure: tons of refuse collected
   - Public measure: absence of litter; reliable schedule for refuse collection

When some local governments asked members of their public for feedback about traditional performance reports, people said the reports were hard to

understand, ponderous, and otherwise unappealing. They said that many of the measures were irrelevant and inconsequential to them.

Nonetheless, people in their focus groups and ours said they wanted and needed information from government. When asked to describe the types of reports they would like, they said they wanted:

- Reports and information presented clearly and simply
- Honest reports about how government programs are working
- All the news, not just good news
- To understand the challenges that their government and their community are facing
- To know how and where they can obtain additional information about services and key issues
- To be able to evaluate information for themselves, without spin
- To know what other jurisdictions are doing and how they are doing in comparison

In many jurisdictions, new findings and lessons are emerging that are consistent with our first research efforts in 1995: people do care about their local government's work, they want and need information about what their government is doing, and they understand that much of what local government must do is difficult and complex. They do not expect perfection, but they want to be treated with respect and courtesy, expect responsive and reasonably timely reactions to their questions and requests, and want to know how they can obtain information about government's programs and activities. Conversely, they consider it intolerable if their government agencies and employees are inaccessible, disrespectful, nonresponsive, or goofing off.

### New Measures and Data Developed After Listening to the Public

Developing these new measures of government performance is not always easy and may require discovering new ways to collect and analyze data. In the process of doing so, however, we are finding that governments are realizing that some of the data they have been collecting are rarely used and are not particularly useful. On the other hand, the public's response to the new measures is positive and also relevant to government's benchmarking, strategic planning, and management improvement work. Three examples describe initiatives undertaken by our Center on Government Performance to apply the public's perspectives to some government services and obtain data that both government and the public can trust.

First, we learned from focus group participants that people judge government performance by a range of conditions they see on city streets. Knowing that there are no measures or reports that synthesize them since many governmental agencies, units within agencies, public utilities, private organizations, and individuals have responsibilities for these conditions, the Fund for the City of New York's Center on Government Performance created ComNET (Computerized Neighborhood Environment Tracking).

ComNET is now a major national citizen engagement initiative and has inspired related programs throughout the United States and abroad. With its use of handheld computers, ComNET enables community groups to gather information about all the problems on city streets (fire hydrants impaired, litter, abandoned vehicles, graffiti, and so forth) in an accurate and verifiable manner. Our software requires precise information about the problem and its location and associates conditions found with agencies responsible for repairing them. Via a Web-enabled database, clear reports and charts are produced containing unemotional, verifiable information that enable communities and government to have constructive conversations about mutual concerns. As of this writing, ComNET has been implemented with local community groups in eighty-three neighborhoods in


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New York City, Seattle, Des Moines, Durham, Yonkers (N.Y.), Irving (Texas), Worcester, and elsewhere.

Second, after learning that people rate government agencies by how they are treated, we introduced the Citizen Gauge concept. An impartial Website (http://www.fcny.org) that can be hosted to collect people's reported experiences and ratings of their encounters with government, it encourages reports about positive experiences as well as information about where improvements are needed.

Third, every focus group we conducted wanted to talk about the condition and maintenance of city roadways. People said that bumpy roads and potholes were unacceptable, a safety hazard, and a reflection of poor workmanship and lack of government pride. As a result, we created Smoothness and Jolt Scores for city roadways, using profilometry equipment that generated verifiable, reliable measures of roadway surfaces. Focus group participants defined the ratings to be used ("good, fair, poor, or terrible") after riding on sample roadway segments. They also told us when a bump in the road should be counted as a "jolt." There was a high correlation between the focus group's judgments and the profilometer readings. We conducted two surveys of almost seven hundred miles of city streets each, using these measures and producing reports at the community level.

### The Elements and Language of This New Movement

As with many things that are new, terminology is created. During the past thirteen years of this Sloan Foundation initiative, several descriptors have been used, are sometimes used interchangeably, and are still being honed. For now, the following distinctions are useful.

Performance measurements and reports that are referred to as "citizen-based," "citizen-driven," or "citizen-initiated" literally emanate from outside government—either directly from existing citizen groups or from nonprofit good government organizations, advocacy groups, and universities that work directly with the public. They often conduct research, collect data, produce reports, confer with government about their findings, and make recommendations. They can focus on particular government services such as the condition of public parks, the reliability and rideability of public transportation, or the adequacy of public schools. Or they may cover a broader range of governmental services.

The term "citizen-informed performance measurement and reporting" is used when local governments take the initiative. In the best examples, they reach out to a broad, representative swath of their public and invite them, in nonconfrontational settings, to comment on existing governmental performance measures and reports. These local governments often ask professional market or other researchers to design the manner in which members of the public will be selected, help create the survey or other research instruments to be used, have professional moderators conduct the sessions with the public, and help interpret the results.

As people look at performance measures and reports now, it can be useful to consider two sets of questions.

First, *who is doing the measuring?* government itself? an advocacy group? an objective outside organization? Who decides what is being measured? How are the data derived? Does the public have the means to be informed about what is involved in the measures? Are the methods used credible to the public? Is there a process in place so that the public can identify measures that are meaningful from their perspective?

Second, *who is doing the reporting?* government itself? an advocacy group? an objective outside organization? Who has access to the reports? Does

the public have a way to influence the content or style of the report? Do the reports cover all major local government functions?

It is fitting now to view various aspects and implications of this maturing initiative, which, if sustained, can invigorate public participation and influence in their local governments. One can think of no better place than the *National Civic Review* to present the first single publication devoted to this subject.

This issue is devoted to presenting perspectives and examples from government, communities, nonprofit organizations, researchers, and the academy about this body of work that started thirteen years ago. This knowledge and information involves new ways for government employees to think about their work and new ways for the public to understand, sometimes influence, and appreciate government. Though still developing, these efforts are moving us along a path of establishing government practices that are more open to the public, enabling opportunities for the public and government to communicate with one another more productively, using data they both understand and can trust, and helping to bring government employees back to the reason many entered public service in the first place: to serve the public and make their part of the world better.

There are many telling examples of what has been tried and learned over the past thirteen years. Many professionals are contributing, from think tanks, nonprofit good government groups, professional associations, universities, community organizations, youth-serving institutions, consulting firms, and government itself. It has been daunting to select among them for this issue, but space and time limits what we can include here. The compelling judgment was to include various perspectives and results with the hope that more will be added to the literature and the practice in the near future.

The opening article by Ted Greenwood, program director of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, describes its approach in developing their wide-ranging program starting in 1995. The underpinning of their concern is to ensure that the public receives accurate and full information about its government's performance.

The next article in this issue describes the eleven-year journey that the city of Des Moines, Iowa, embarked on to achieve what is now a multiple award-winning citizen-informed performance measurement and reporting practice. The trip was fraught with obstacles and detours, many of which spurred unusual, creative solutions. With a new understanding of the public's concerns, they responded to what they learned and have evidence that the citizenry recognizes the changes. Des Moines assistant city manager Michael Matthes tells their story in such an engaging way that his next award may be one for being able to add humor and clarity to a complex and serious subject. The City of Des Moines is a Trailblazer grant recipient of the National Center for Civic Innovation.

If governments are going to be the ones to spearhead development of citizen-informed performance measures and reports, there must be a sea change in how public servants are trained, how their jobs are described, and how their own performance is evaluated. Typically, learning how to be responsive to the public is not part of formal university curricula or in-service training. There are few courses and little practice in designing and understanding citizen opinion and satisfaction research. Job descriptions and individual performance ratings rarely include standards for being respectful and responsive to the public.

Two articles address these matters. First, Marc Holzer, dean of the School of Public Affairs and Administration and Board of Governors Professor of Public Administration at Rutgers University-Newark; and Younhee Kim, assistant professor there, discuss their experiences at Rutgers in crafting degree and responsive nondegree offerings about citizen influenced performance measurement for stu-


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dents and practitioners of public administration, candidly pointing out some of the challenges for universities and making some recommendations.

Second, Brooke A. Myhre uses the City of San Jose's experience to highlight how government employees can and need to be a critical part of the effort to work effectively with performance measurement and public involvement. During a twenty-eight-year career in local government linking performance monitoring and improvements, budgeting, management practices, and workforce development, he was involved in the award-winning Investing in Results program to transform the government of San Jose into a customer-focused and results-driven organization. San Jose received a Certificate of Distinction from the International City/County Management Association for its performance measurement work.

We have much to learn from how the private sector conducts market research and trend analyses. Madelyn Hochstein, president of DYG, the world-renowned social research firm, has years of experience crafting original research used by industry leaders, federal agencies, and major nonprofit organizations. She helped our Center on Government Performance at the Fund for the City of New York design its extensive and comprehensive focus group research, which revealed many important findings, including the fact that the public often assesses local government performance differently from government's typical measures. That finding is now being confirmed in many other cities in this country. She has advised grantees in the National Center for Civic Innovation's Trailblazer Government Performance Reporting program and government finance officers on how to conduct credible research to learn about the viewpoint of the public. We asked her to identify some tips for those who are thinking of starting a "listening to the public" initiative and to comment about whether an increase in the public's interest in local government performance is part of any of the trends that her organization tracks.

Roberta R. Schaefer is the founding executive director of the Worcester Regional Research Bureau (WRRB) in Worcester, Massachusetts. Worcester civic leaders formed the WRRB twenty-two years ago because they felt the need for an organization to conduct independent, nonpartisan research on public policy. Schaefer describes the evolution of her research bureau since 2000, when it sought hard data to assess an element of Worcester's strategic plan: "improve municipal and neighborhood services."

She amassed data using one of the best known and widely used examples of citizen-driven performance measurement, ComNET, developed by the Fund for the City of New York in response to our findings that people judge cities on the basis of a whole array of things they see on the streets. Anne Spray Kinney was budget director for Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and executive director of the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District. After leaving government service and becoming a senior partner in the Public Strategies Group, she helped local and state governments reinvent themselves by becoming more efficient and responsive. Today, she is director of research and consulting for the Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA), the 101-year-old organization that serves more than seventeen thousand finance officers in the United States and Canada by identifying and developing financial policies and practices and promoting them through education, training, and leadership. In her article, Kinney reminds us that measurements and reports alone are not sufficient and performance improvement should be the goal. She also presents research findings and raises questions to consider, including if and when, perhaps, citizen involvement can overreach into government's realm.

In the final article, Ted Greenwood argues that the government performance measurement and reporting initiatives the Sloan Foundation is helping to support should combine forces with the long-standing Community Indicators movement. If governments do citizen-informed performance measurement and

reporting and community indicators include government performance measures, then detailed government performance measures will be linked with high level community indicators, making performance measures more relevant to citizens and community indicators more able to influence government actions.

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