

Citizen-driven Government Performance: Lessons from Montclair

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Montclair is an upper-middle class suburban community of approximately 38,000 people located approximately 12 miles west of New York City. More precisely, it is an urban suburb, as described in a 1996 cover story in *New York Magazine*. In that article the township was referred to as the Upper West Side of New Jersey and as more families from Brooklyn moved to the township in the last several years it also earned the distinction as the Park Slope of New Jersey. Part of the attractiveness to New Yorkers is the easy commute to midtown Manhattan. By bus or train the door-to-door commute for many takes less than thirty minutes.

Montclair, a racially and economically diverse community of 38,000, was selected to participate in the Sloan-funded citizen-driven performance project for several reasons. Possibly, the most important reason for its selection is its long and long and well-documented history of citizen participation and involvement. There are literally dozens of “unofficial” community organizations, some small and socially oriented such as block associations, others much larger and issue oriented. There is an alphabet soup of citizen organizations: RANT-Residents Against New Jersey Transit; TUF, Tax Us Fairly; CUTS, Citizens United for Taxes and the Schools. Montclair citizens are passionate about their community and are very vocal about their passions. As local author, Jon Katz, explained, Montclair is a “community where you can walk on your street alone, unmolested at two in the morning, but where you need to carry a gun to a Board of Education meeting.”

In addition to the informal and issue-oriented grass-roots organizations, citizens in Montclair have the opportunity to serve on twenty-six different citizen advisory committees,

commissions and boards ranging from parks and recreation to senior citizens to parking to civil rights and planning. Some advisory committees, deemed more prestigious than others, have long waiting lists, while others consistently seek new members.

The citizen-driven, results-oriented assessment of government performance project officially began in January 1997. A project team from the National Center for Public Productivity at Rutgers-Newark convened numerous, informal, meetings with citizens, citizen groups, elected officials and municipal managers to develop an understanding of two critical aspects of the township:

- ? How do citizens, municipal managers and elected officials communicate and interact with each other?
- ? How do citizens, municipal managers and elected officials determine the Township of Montclair is doing a good job providing services?

In an effort to answer these questions focus group discussions were held with over one hundred citizens participating. Citizens were asked to discuss the ways they interacted with the township administration and governing body; their frustrations and satisfactions with the level and quality of interaction; their reasons for getting involved; and how they know the township is doing a good job. Similar discussions were held with elected officials and department heads, asking them how they knew they were doing a good job providing services. The response from citizens, elected officials and municipal department heads indicated that most measures of performance at that time were purely subjective. “The streets are pretty clean.” “There are too many banks and nails salons in the commercial districts.” “I feel safe in my neighborhood.”

The citizen-driven performance measurement project was a tough sell in the beginning. We found it difficult to keep people focused on performance measurement as it tended not to

generate excitement, passion and commitment, especially from people unfamiliar with the concept. As a result, we spent a great deal of time reinforcing the goals and objectives of this project to citizens, elected officials and municipal managers. We continually reminded people that the overall project goal was to involve community stakeholders in assessing and improving government performance, and in influencing how government services could be made more responsive to community needs and priorities. In support of that goal our aim was to:

1. Have citizens intimately involved in identifying issues and measures of performance.
2. Support the use performance indicators in public decision processes.
3. Develop a partnership built among citizens, local government, and Rutgers University.
4. Encourage participating citizens, elected officials and government administrators to learn from each other and from related projects across the country; and
5. Develop a long-term institutional capacity to support citizen participation.

The challenge of getting citizens and municipal managers to focus on performance measures was compounded by the fact that the township did not have a strong performance measurement history. For the Township government as a whole, performance measurement was a relatively new concept when this project first began, having been introduced a few years earlier through a “program budget” format that the Township Manager had introduced. Separate from the budget process, several departments maintained their own manual or automated databases that provided useful performance information. But, overall, the availability of useful data varied by department.

In three years the NCPP team involved over a hundred Montclair citizens, all municipal departments, the Township Manager, Municipal Clerk, and Township Council in identifying issues of services and community conditions that are priorities for citizens, and ways to measure

performance related to those issues. Perhaps most important, the NCPP worked with citizens to identify their higher aspirations for Montclair, and helped citizens and municipal managers connect performance issues and indicators to those aspirations and the municipal program budget objectives. In particular, the Montclair project:

- ? ***Demonstrated the citizens' ability to work effectively with performance issues and select performance indicators.*** Citizens participated effectively in focus groups, feedback sessions and other meetings, facilitated citizen workshops, and structured meetings of citizens and department managers, to produce to develop “Working Performance Themes and Indicators” with fourteen major themes and over sixty potential indicators for measuring performance related to those themes.
- ? ***Developed citizen-driven “aspirational goals” for Montclair:*** The NCPP team worked with leaders of a 1995 privately-organized “community visioning” project called Montclair 2020 to bring about a “convergence” between Montclair 2020’s emphasis on broad community goals and this project’s emphasis on public service performance. This led to an October 1997 “Goals Weekend” in which participants in Montclair 2020, the Sloan-funded performance project, and others attracted by publicity for the event, developed over 100 specific ideas, or goals, for Montclair and discussed how public services can contribute to the goals. These goals were readily clustered into six “Aspirational Goals” that were used to shape how departments and citizens work with performance measures.
- ? ***Organized a group of citizens interested in conducting a citizen survey, and generated citizen ideas for survey questions related to each aspirational goal:*** Citizens on the “survey committee,” and others who attended meetings or responded to mailings, identified

more than enough ideas for survey questions on each aspirational goal. The NCPP team worked with the survey committee to hone the ideas into a set of usable questions, and conducted a largely volunteer-driven, community-wide survey of citizen perceptions of Montclair, and their satisfaction with public services, as related to the aspirational goals.

The survey was mailed to every household in the community and the responses serve as the baseline data for future surveys and performance related initiatives.

? ***Analyzed municipal department objectives based on the aspirational goals, and refined indicators for performance reporting and development of program budget objectives:***

Shortly before Montclair municipal departments were asked to develop their 1998 program budget objectives, the NCPP team analyzed departments' 1997 objectives and related indicators based on citizens' aspirational goals, and reviewed their results with department managers and citizens. In the analysis and review process, many objectives that related to internal administrative processes and one-time projects were stripped away, leading to focused lists of between 8 and 23 performance indicators for each aspirational goal.

? ***Established a citizen advisory committee on performance measurement:*** A Montclair Citizens' Performance Advisory Committee representing the four wards of the town was created by the Township to institutionalize this process and to insure that performance measurement and citizen involvement in performance measurement remain a priority for the township. In March of 2000, fifteen citizens were appointed to serve on this Committee. The Committee provides advice and direction to the Council vis-a-vis improving the entire performance measurement system, including the data collection aspects and future Citizen Satisfaction Surveys.

LESSONS LEARNED CONCERNING CITIZEN-DRIVEN PERFORMANCE

ASSESSMENT

Lesson One: All citizen participation is local, so citizen-driven performance measurement strategies must be locally-based.

Lesson Two: Considerations of legitimacy and representativeness are always important.

Lesson Three: Citizen involvement makes a difference in how government performance is assessed.

Lesson Four: Partnerships among citizens, public officials, and “outside experts” can be particularly fruitful in developing performance measures that are both practical to measure and responsive to citizen concerns.

Lesson Five: Process, pacing, and presentation are always important when working with citizens on public performance issues.

Lesson Six: Performance measures precipitate further questions, and the need to refine measurement further and conduct follow-up policy research.

Portions of this article are based on preliminary and annual reports submitted to the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. Members of the project team contributing to these reports include: Kathe Callahan, Paul Epstein, Marc Holzer and Vatche Gabriellian.