

Could Measuring Local Government Performance Make A Difference?

By James M. Trutko

“In God We Trust. All others must bring data.”

W. Edward Deming, statistician

If recent local elections are a guide, how well local governments are actually delivering services doesn't seem to matter much in Cleveland-area politics. Most City of Cleveland and Cuyahoga County voters seem satisfied with political anecdotes rather than data and they rely largely on party affiliation and name recognition to decide how to vote. As a result, local elections have a predictable outcome: Democrats with the longest tenure and best name recognition usually win, regardless of their competence in governance.

In theory, the chief executive, usually the county executive or city mayor, is responsible for the delivery of government services and the legislative bodies are responsible for monitoring the cost and quality of services. Local media organizations and civic organizations are expected to digest what's happening and inform the public. The ideal voter is then able to base his or her vote on the effective delivery of public services.

Unfortunately, actual comparative data on public services shows the theory isn't working well in metropolitan Cleveland. A 2018 study by WalletHub ranked Cleveland as 141st (out of 150 US cities) in its list of Best-Run/Worst-Run Cities. In terms of comparative cost, a recent study from the Greater Cleveland Partnership confirmed that local taxes were substantially higher than other regional competitors.

Maintaining transportation networks is a key government responsibility. A study by TRIP, a national transportation research group, ranked metropolitan road conditions near Cleveland as the worst among Ohio's large cities and substantially below the national median. Cleveland Hopkins Airport, an important economic development asset, was ranked 43rd in The Points Guy's rating of the top 50 US airports. J.D. Power recently confirmed the airport's poor operation, ranking it 16th of 17 medium-sized North American airports.

A famous politician once said, “Elections have consequences.” In Cuyahoga County, the “consequence” of absence of performance data is that no politician is ever held accountable at election time for delivering government services effectively and efficiently. Ultimately, if voters do not punish politicians for government ineptitude, the “consequence” for the community is poor quality and relatively expensive public services and the area is less attractive to entrepreneurs and migrants.

What metropolitan Cleveland needs is a widely available scoreboard that summarizes how well government is delivering public services, compared to other communities. Like the scoreboard at an Indians, Browns or Cavs game, the public needs to know whether “our team” is winning or losing and whether the coach needs to be fired or given a longer contract.

The major problem in developing a public scoreboard is that it is difficult to do a dashboard that is interesting and meaningful to the public. Much data is available, but tables of numbers are typically boring or confusing to the public and they don't have meaning unless they're simplified and put in context without transparent bias.

A government scoreboard should begin with the two largest and most important local government entities, the City of Cleveland and Cuyahoga County, and compare them to similar midwestern governments. The basis of comparison should generally be annualized rates of change covering the post-recession period since 2010.

The scoreboard should have a simple, standardized format with limited explanatory text. Supplementary data should be available online for those with more specific interests. It should be designed to work in print, laptop or phone formats. The scoreboard should be linked to the area's existing media networks so that it is effectively transmitted to as much of the public as possible.

A public sector scoreboard should concentrate specifically on metrics that show how well the local governments are accomplishing their main goals at a reasonable cost- achieving economic development success, ensuring safety and justice, providing quality infrastructure and delivering effective human services and education.

A scoreboard will communicate the burden of government most effectively when costs are also stated on a per household or per capita basis. For example, the average person will find it easier to grasp a \$1.7 billion Cuyahoga County budget when it is presented as \$3,200 per household.

To strengthen credibility and reduce perceived bias, the focus should be on what the data shows about the quality of public services without much commentary on causes, broad societal issues or policy implications. Others in the public arena can and should debate how things happened or what should be done to improve the situation. The scoreboard should tell the public whether the area has "winning or losing" public services.

The presence of an effective, well-publicized local government scoreboard is a "necessary, but not sufficient" condition for a successful community. Local government needs to provide an environment that allows individuals and businesses to grow and prosper. The primary benefit of transparent government performance data is that it provides a timely and rational basis for voters to determine if local government is succeeding or failing and to vote accordingly. To paraphrase an old saying, "You can lead a voter to data, but you can't make them think." But a well-designed public scoreboard would improve the community dialogue and be an important first step toward better public services.

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