



The Research Bureau

Promoting a Healthier Business Climate

How do older industrial cities redirect their assets and infrastructures (e.g. old factory buildings and brownfields) and reinvent their economies to attract current and emerging industries? What are the systemic obstacles to revitalizing the Commonwealth's failing urban centers? The Research Bureau believes that in order for these cities to develop a healthy business climate, they must improve local governance, and that this goal can be facilitated by measuring and improving administrative performance.

Since 2001, The Research Bureau has been benchmarking government performance in Worcester in the areas of economic development, public education, public safety and municipal and neighborhood services. Many changes in government operations have occurred during this period:

- While residents had long complained of a perceived increase in abandoned vehicles, our ComNET (Computerized Neighborhood Environment Tracking) neighborhood surveys made it possible to document the problem by pinpointing the exact location of each one. Since Worcester's Department of Public Works & Parks (DPWP) assumed control of the abandoned vehicle removal program in 2003, more than 6,000 vehicles have been removed from the streets. The program, which was aided by the DPWP's abandoned vehicle hotline, now pays for itself through the collection of fines and storage fees.
- The DPWP established a customer service center with a single phone number to provide residents direct access to municipal government for registering complaints about potholes and illegal dumping for instance, and making requests and inquiries. The center responded to almost 100,000 calls in FY07. About one-quarter resulted in work orders logged 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 both cut response times and saved thousands of dollars a year, because fewer people are needed to answer phones. (Previously, there were 15 different service numbers for the DPWP.)

- About 70% of the physical problems identified in the thirteen neighborhoods in which we have been conducting our ComNET surveys have been resolved.¹

The Research Bureau is now joining forces with the Pioneer Institute for Public Policy Research to develop citizen-based government performance measures for eight “middle cities” in Massachusetts (defined as urban communities with more than 40,000 residents where the per capita income is below \$20,000). Worcester, Leominster, and Fitchburg are the three “middle cities” located in this region that are participating. The four policy areas that will be benchmarked – public safety, public education, fiscal management and economic development – were selected on the basis of interviews with city officials, chambers of commerce, and other business and neighborhood groups across cities in Massachusetts. These were the concerns most consistently cited as providing the foundation for cohesive, thriving communities. In each city, The Research Bureau will be working with a diverse group of citizens to develop government performance measures. Once the city results are reported back to the CEO’s of the participating cities, they, as a group, will make the final decision on common benchmarks to be used. Data for these measures will be tracked consistently over several years and strategies designed and “best practices” pursued to improve results. We also hope to engage state government in designing a set of financial incentives for local government improvement in the four service areas.

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¹ See Benchmarking reports at www.wrrb.org