

Dayton, Ohio

Case in Brief

Dayton, Ohio has a long established system of citizen participation through seven Priority Boards. The Dayton project had two overarching objectives. The first was to facilitate the selection of Quality of Life Indicators by seven Priority Boards, ensure the initial production of the indicators and institutionalize their annual publication within the City of Dayton Planning Department. The second was to engage in a Priority Board reform process and development of a set of Citizen Participation indicators to assess the degree of citizen participation in the life of neighborhoods and Priority Boards.

The project was conceived with the support of the Priority Boards to promote citizen participation in an effort to influence government policy and neighborhood life. Dayton's seven Priority Boards chose a set of Quality of Life Indicators to serve as goals and as a statistical backdrop for the strategic planning that each board undertook as part of the "CitiPlan 2020" strategic plan. The Sloan funded project focused on the development, production and institutionalization of six sets of Quality of Life Indicators:

- Economic Development
- Community Development
- Youth, Education and Human Services
- Open Space and Quality of Life
- Downtown
- City Services

The City Planning Board, the Association Chairs and representatives of the more disenfranchised communities established a committee of experts, practitioners and citizens. Each Priority Board in turn formed advisory groups comprised of a cross-section of citizens.

The Dayton project, however, did not limit its focus to performance indicators relevant to municipal departments. The project also included the city's school system.

Initially, the project encountered some obstacles. This included the difficulty of securing data. The fragmentation and unreliability of the existing information system was compounded by an exodus of some citizens, who had joined the Priority Boards only to leave in frustration as they came to believe the Boards were ineffectual in representing their interests. Yet Dayton attributed the project's overall success to the following:

- Active cooperation of the City Planning Department
- Buy-in and participation of the Priority Boards, including extensive hours of citizen volunteer time, strong political ties, strong group process skills, and strong quantitative data analysis and management skills
- Good political ties by a portion of the project team
- Good group process skills
- Strong quantitative data analysis and management skills

At least four of the seven Priority Boards have since realized immediate benefits using the strategic planning process. For example, the Northeast Priority Board continues with a major initiative to close junkyards that blemish the community. In the Southeast Priority Board, there is a strong initiative underway to provide some additional community support for public schools. The Northwest Priority Board has initiated a tutoring program designed to address the after-school and youth crime problems. Another Priority Board has established its own campaign to enhance the community's general appearance.

The true long-term benefit, however, of combining citizen-driven strategic planning with performance measurement is the promise of strengthened citizen participation organizations. As the Priority Boards move forward within the context of a strategic plan with concrete timetables and periodic measures to remind them of their progress, the chances of retaining and recruiting additional citizens are improved.

Any community considering this process should first gain the support and commitment of three key groups: first, an initial commitment of cooperation by the city government; second, a citizen group that has some authority in the community; and finally, academic assistance with two different skill sets—one involving design and facilitation of public consultative services, and the other involving sophisticated data manipulation and geographic information system capabilities. Although it may be difficult to find this combination of skills within the same organization, a team must typically be comprised of partners with these specific competencies.

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