

Fund for the City of New York

Case in Brief

The Fund for the City of New York, a non-partisan and independent operating foundation established in 1968, strives to improve the performance of local government and the quality of life for citizens in New York City. Through its Center on Municipal Government Performance (CMGP), established in 1995 as the first grantee of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation's National Assessment of Government Performance Program, the organization uses new technologies and traditional market research techniques to create quantifiable performance measurements based on the public's concerns and experiences. This effort provides reliable, non-partisan and objective information about the effectiveness of the city.

CMGP's initial objective was to focus on a few services of critical importance to citizens, not try to create and verify new indicators for the entire City of New York. In particular, the Fund undertook the street smoothness project for six reasons. First, everyone experiences the streets. Second, this study would provide data for the public and government to use in monitoring service changes. Third, the public's perspective is needed from the user's standpoint. Fourth, bumpy and uneven streets can precipitate accidents, as evidenced by the 411 settlements and judgments for roadway related claims totaling more than \$16 million, made by the city in the 1996 fiscal year alone. Fifth, smoother streets mean less fatigued drivers and consequently less accidents. Finally, smoother streets extend the life of vehicles, including those owned by the city.

As its first priority, the Fund listened to citizens of the city. A total of 15 focus groups, comprised of 151 people from twenty-nine different communities and drawn from the five boroughs of the city, were interviewed. The respondents represented a cross-section of racial and ethnic groups as well as of socioeconomic status, in order to reflect the diversity of the city's citizens. As users of the streets, the public was dissatisfied based largely on their own experiences and/or media hearsay. They judged the condition of the streets and the quality of maintenance by the presence of potholes and bumpy streets, and what resulted from those conditions such as vehicle damage and palpable discomfort.

Citizens' responses to four questions served as indicators in developing the measures for performance. The questions posed to participating citizens were as follows:

How do citizens determine a service is being delivered well?

Where do citizens get information about the way that services are delivered?

Is there a difference between the way people rate a service and the way government rates that service?

Is there a difference between the way people rate a service and the way they talk about or experience it?

The Fund's Street Smoothness project was the first of its kind in the country. The Fund used a "Profilometer" to consistently give reliable road roughness measures at variable speeds under typical road conditions. The device uses laser technology to scan the streets' surface, counting and measuring every dip and rise encountered as an indication of such problems as potholes, bumps, misaligned utility covers, uneven repairs and more. The data is then converted into a City Roughness Index.

The Street Smoothness project has led to a number of immediate and long-term benefits. This includes: introduction of a new performance measure considered critical by the public; assessment of street conditions by shifting from the exclusive perspective of government engineers to that of the public as everyday users; non-judgmental and purely objective measurement of street profiles; and the government and public can now secure easy-to-understand information about the rideability of city streets.

Furthermore, what is new and different about this study is that it identified what the public considers to be the indicators of good road conditions and maintenance for city streets: smoothness and lack of severe jolts. It also demonstrates that it is feasible to measure the smoothness of city streets. This study will then serve as a baseline for future research and will be equally helpful to other cities wanting to assess their performance on street maintenance. If this method is adopted elsewhere, it will be possible to conduct intercity comparisons which would prove valuable to all municipal transportation officials and to the public in forming realistic expectations of government performance.

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