

Hartford, CT

Case in Brief

Connecticut Policy and Economic Council (CPEC) is an independent, nonpartisan and not-for-profit organization. It provides information and communication resources to help citizens, community leaders, civic organizations and local governments set priorities and improve government performance. CPEC's initiatives increase the capacity of citizens to be involved in public decision-making. Originally founded in 1942 as a center for public policy research and analysis, CPEC is now engaged in fostering local school and government excellence and accountability.

The City Scan project deploys the latest technology—handheld computers, database applications, mapping software, digital imaging and web development—for community priority-setting and accountability. The Hartford-based project has been extended to other cities and now includes:

- Citizen surveys
- Community-specific Parents Guide to Local Schools
- Information for involved parents and community leaders, which includes the CPEC web site, best practices reports, issue briefs and data-at-a-glance pamphlets
- Community goal setting, a facilitation process for school improvement

Funded in part by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund and with support and assistance from the Microsoft Corporation, City Scan puts state-of-the-art technology in the hands of ordinary citizens and is considered a national model for citizen-based assessments of the performance of city government. The project is likely to set the standard for similar projects across the country.

CPEC initiated City Scan to improve communication between the residents of Hartford (especially those in the low income bracket) and City Hall. The organization wanted to provide a way for Hartford residents to identify and prioritize problems such as potholes, or drug paraphernalia in parks, in order to pressure the City to take action. No single service was the focus. Rather, 35 street-level, visible conditions such as graffiti, abandoned houses, conditions of playing fields in public parks and others were of priority concern.

A major premise for the project was to provide tools for neighborhood groups and others to use as accountability measures for local officials.

Neighborhood associations determined which measures they wanted to focus upon. Conditions had to be visible to the naked eye from the street, sidewalk or within public parks. Based on the Onsite Mobile Inspection created by the River Run Software Group, City Scan provides an efficient, cost-effective means for activists to take an inventory of grassroots problems, thereby enabling government to act quickly and improve community life.

Armed with handheld computers, custom-designed software and digital cameras, a group of Hartford high school students conducted a sophisticated, high-tech summer survey of Hartford's parks. They documented conditions and provided the City with a first-of-its-kind resource for municipal government.

Obstacles encountered throughout the project have included the following:

- Local governments were disinterested in participating, which was known from the beginning.
- Community leaders had limited time to collect data and meet with neighborhood groups.

Short-term and long-term benefits stemming from the City Scan project are as follows:

- The high school students who received training and served as data collectors now view their neighborhoods differently.
- Neighborhood groups have better data documenting local conditions to be used for accountability, as well as internally for priority setting.
- Other non-profit groups have been co-opted to assume the responsibility for some of the conditions, i.e., graffiti clean-up is now done by the Hartford Proud and Beautiful group.
- Working relationships have been forged between hardware and software vendors and the Hartford Public High School Technology Academy.

One lesson learned is that prior to creating the prototype software, it is important to invest more time in devising database architecture. A second lesson learned is that given local government's disinterest in participating in such projects, citizens must work around them. They can utilize the resources of the community by conducting the data collection with the community instead of with local government and then sharing the information with anyone who is interested, i.e., park maintenance supervisors and appointed commissions. Then, they can transmit tabulated information to officials with whom they are unable to meet. A third lesson learned, as implemented in this project, is to employ the resources of local academic institutions as partners by involving students in data collection. Finally, it is recommended that citizen groups build local-level champions who can get the project on their regular meeting agendas.

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