

THE CITY SCAN PROJECT
Connecticut Policy and Economic Council (CPEC)
Hartford, CT

Background

Connecticut Policy and Economic Council (CPEC) is an independent, nonpartisan, and not-for-profit organization providing information and communication resources to citizens, community leaders, civic organizations, and local governments to set priorities and improve government performance. CPEC's initiatives increase the capacity if citizens are 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 project called City Scan, 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 was completed during the summer of 2000, with Stamford scheduled for early 2001. City Scan includes the following:

- Citizen surveys in Hartford, Norwich, and New Haven
- Community-specific Parents Guide to Local Schools including Hartford, Bristol, and others under discussion to include Stamford, New Haven, and Manchester
- 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.

The Alfred P. Sloan Foundation provided a \$435,000 Trustee Grant for Assessment of Government Performance to CPEC in support of the City Scan project. The grant funds the current Hartford project and a similar project, which began in Stamford during latter part of 2000.

Microsoft Corporation has also provided invaluable support and assistance to CPEC and the City Scan project by donating Casio Pocket PCs powered by the Windows Operating System.

Finally, the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund, based in Hamden, Connecticut, has supported CPEC and the City Scan project through a \$4,000 grant for the purchase of a video camcorder, computer, and video editing software. The equipment played a vital role in the development of the Hartford parks survey and creation of the City Scan website.

Other supporters included technology companies such as ESRI and River Run Software, the State of Connecticut, United Way, and a wide variety of local community groups, including the Bridgeport Child Advocacy Coalition, Connecticut Voices for Children, Hartford Parents Network, and We-Can of Stamford, to name a few.

It is difficult to say as to what the citizens' perception of local government is since there is no specific mention of it in the literature. However, seems fair to infer that, given the CPEC's direction under its current President and Vice President, local government is perceived to be, at the least, active. CPEC's President, Michael Meotti, has served in government at the federal, state, and local levels. He was elected to four terms in the Connecticut State Senate where he served as Assistant Majority Leader, chair of the Transportation and Environment committees, and as a member of the Department of Economic and Community Development. Before his election to the Senate, Meotti was active in local government in Glastonbury, Connecticut. He has also served on the Board of Education and the Town Council.

The City Scan project began when CPEC saw a need to improve the 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 like potholes or drug paraphernalia in parks so that the City would take action. With this, no single service was the focus. Rather, 35 street-level, visible conditions such as graffiti, abandoned houses, condition of playing fields in public parks, and others were of concern.

The 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 in their neighborhoods. Conditions had to be visible enough to the naked eye from the street, sidewalk, or within public parks. Based on the Onsite mobile inspection created by River Run Software Group, City Scan provides an efficient, cost-effective means for activists to take an inventory of the grassroots problems, thereby enabling government to act quickly and improve community life.

Armed with hand held 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 to document conditions and provide the City with a first-of-its-kind resource for municipal government.

“The Hartford City Scan project is a groundbreaking initiative that demonstrates how citizens can make a difference in their communities,” said Michael Meotti, CPEC’s President. “Through the power of citizen involvement and high technology, we will obtain a detailed look at physical conditions and help create a blueprint to assist the City in maintaining its public spaces.”

High school students under the direction of an instructor from Hartford Public High School (HPHS) Technology Academy and the CPEC research analyst and City Scan director, conducted surveys of Bushnell, Colt, Goodwin, Keney, and Pope Parks. Students were divided into groups consisting of an observer, recorder, data collector, and photographer. The observer visually scanned the park, noting problem areas and positive conditions (such as litter or defaced property as well as properly maintained greenery, walks, plays capes, etc.). The recorder documented these elements on park maps. The data collector entered the information into Pocket PCs, while the photographer recorded a visual image of the condition using a digital camera. Both still and video images were created.

The use of River Run's Onsite field inspection application provided for the comprehensive management of field-based questionnaires and surveys, offered features such as multiple versions of checklists, analysis-based reporting, and support for all open standards-based ODBC-compliant databases. Easy to use checklists, dropdown menus, and text boxes enabled City Scan volunteers to efficiently enter information and make decisions about prioritizing conditions that were observed. For example, racially charged graffiti can be given high priority, so that City workers can act quickly to have it cleaned. A screen-based keyboard enabled users to enter additional comments and information; in the graffiti example, they might note the surface in which the graffiti is painted. The Windows-based environment allowed CPEC to maximize the development of teams and productivity, enabling them to draw upon existing Windows expertise. It also made it

much easier for users to pick up because most people have at least a basic knowledge of navigating Windows-based computers.

Following the fieldwork, the students sorted, categorized, and analyzed the data and the corresponding images at the HPHS Technology Academy computer lab. The information was then converted into Hyper Markup Language (HTML) using Frontpage 2000 for inclusion on a City Scan website for posting in the fall. When completed, anyone with a computer and Internet access can go to the City Scan website, choose the particular park, and not only view a map detailing existing conditions throughout all areas of the park, but also view corresponding still images and video, complete with a running narrative analyzing the scene with a simple click of the mouse.

CPEC is also working in cooperation with the Parkville Revitalization Association and a variety of Parkville community and business interests for a similar assessment of conditions throughout Hartford. Residents and interested citizens of all ages are volunteering to conduct the survey.

The City Scan project's findings were formally presented to City officials in the fall of 2000 with the goal of providing a resource and blueprint for maintenance and future improvements.

CPEC's supporters and partners included the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, Graustein Memorial Fund, technology companies such as Microsoft, ESRI and River Run Software,

the State of Connecticut, United Way, and a variety of local community groups, including the Bridgeport Child Advocacy Coalition, Connecticut Voices for Children, Hartford Parents Network, We-Can of Stamford, and many more.

CPEC's project team included Michael Meotti, its President; Michele Doucette Cunningham, Project Director; Richard Walker, Research Analyst; Michael McCausland, an instructor from HPHS Technology Academy; seven high school students who served as data analysts; and many community volunteers, including chairpersons for the neighborhood revitalization zone housing and problem solving committees and local "friends of parks" associations.

Obstacles encountered throughout the project included the following:

- Local government's disinterest in participating, although this 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 leveraged 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, it is thus recommended to work around them, utilizing the resources of the community by conducting the data collection with the community instead, and sharing the information with anyone who is interested, i.e., park maintenance supervisors, appointed commissions. Then mail the collected information to officials with whom you are unable to meet. A third lesson learned, as was implemented in this project, is to use the resources of local academic institutions by using students for data collection. Finally, it is recommended that you build local level champions who can get the project on the agenda of their regular meetings.

What one thing should be recommended to a community that is considering this process?

Same as lessons learned.

If given the opportunity to conduct a similar project, what one thing could be accomplished differently?

One recommendation that resonates throughout the report of the project is to build coalitions or partnerships/relationships with local academic institutions.