Working Together to Compare and Improve Local Government Performance: One Region’s Story

Regan Jepson, Megan Lynn, George Pettit, Christian Williams

• Why Benchmark and VBC Origins
• Report History and Iteration
• Staffing the Report
• Examples of Use and Key Takeaways
• Q and A
Why Benchmark and VBC Origins

George Pettit – ASU Professor of Practice and VBC founding member

Benchmarking

- The art of evaluating by comparison with a standard for learning, improvement
The key question should be:

“Compared to what?”

Monthly residential utility bill

$64  $71  $79  $111
Without comparisons

- You don’t know what you don’t know
- Have no explanation for variation
- Reasons why you got the results
- Reliability / validity of data

Ways to gain comparative insight

- ICMA and professional associations
- Budget Comparisons
- Media sources
- County/State/Federal Data Sources
How networks can help

- Discussions to gain understanding
- Identify best practices and improve the services we provide
- Track progress and trends
- Improve accuracy

“Evidence suggests that improved performance occurs at a much greater rate when performance measures are compared.”
Smith and Cheng, 2004
Why did we do this?

- We didn’t have concrete answers to the question from elected officials: How does this compare to…?
- Couldn’t get the information we needed from existing sources
- City manager committed to council to join a performance consortium
Report History and Iteration

Megan Lynn – Senior Management Associate to the City Manager, City of Scottsdale

Valley Benchmark Cities
Stay resident-focused!
1. Keep crime low
2. Response time if my home catches fire
3. Make sure my garbage gets picked up
4. Make sure my water is clean
5. Make sure the streets are fixed

What have we measured?
- Permit/ Development Fees
- Demographics
- Public Safety
- Libraries
- Streets and Utilities
- Administration/ Finance
- FTE Comparisons
- Police/Fire Response Times
- Parks/Recreation Measures
- Economic Development
In 2020, we published our FY2018/19 Trend Report, our sixth trend report to date.
Do your background work

Identify similar size and scope jurisdictions within your region/state

NOTE: National comparisons are more complex due to differences in climate, geography, demand levels, political environment, funding differences, etc.

Build support for the idea

- Talk to staff who would be involved (assistant city managers, assistant tos, budget directors, ICMA primary coordinator) AND
- Talk to key managers directly (ICMA Conference, TLG state association conferences, regional meetings, etc.)
- “Do elected officials ever ask, what do others do?”
Key steps in forming a network

- Identify and invite key leaders
- Identify potential partners
- Build rapport by learning from others
- Dialogue about efforts already underway
- Begin collecting and sharing information

Agree on a common purpose

Identify common financial and performance information that we agree to share and discuss with each other for the purpose of better understanding the similarities and differences between our operations, with the ultimate aim of improving local government performance.
Current process

• ASU fellow serves as project lead
• Meet monthly (September–June)
• Create a workplan
• Data collection and review
• Assign deep dive collections
• City Managers have final report approval

Staffing the Report

Administrative Role
• Oversight of data
  • Accuracy key to comparability
• Building the Report
  • Accessibility/Readability

Things to Keep in Mind
• Involving more cities = more coordination
• Data is not straightforward
• Expect continuous improvement
Examples of Use and Key Takeaways

Christian Williams – City Planner, City of Goodyear

Annual Calls for Service per Sworn Police Officer

- Source: City of Phoenix, Analysis of Cities
- Dispatched calls for service includes officer-generated calls along with calls from citizens.
“VBC provides an effective and accurate way for our departments to see how their performance stacks up against their peers. For example, the FY15-16 report showed that Gilbert’s Fire response times were below average. We were then in the process of adding an additional fire station, so when council expressed concern over the low performance, we were able to explain that measures were already being taken to improve our performance.” – VBC Member

“Aside from the formal benchmarking report and analysis, a great degree of value is derived from the informal information sharing that takes place. Because we have a built-in network of peer communities, we can effortlessly poll for research on various policies and practices that may be of interest to our respective organizations.” – VBC Member
Key Takeaways pt. 1

- Make sure it’s City Manager supported
- Get support from local college/national benchmarking group
- Trust is key and not everything needs to be published
- Know what you are trying to measure
- Use your subject-matter experts
- Pace yourself — start with several key measures and build on that over time

Key Takeaways pt. 2

- Comparisons help us understand how well we are doing, and provide context to improve services
- It helps to have jurisdictional commitment, mutual trust, willingness to share data and resources and a neutral facilitator
- Patience and perseverance
Q and A