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Run Your Jurisdiction Like Your Favorite Restaurant

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In Sweet City, street repair gets ratings of “excellent” or “good” from 30% of the public but residents of other cities give meaningfully higher ratings than that to the quality of their street repair. After examining their survey results, performance data about pot hole repair, personnel costs for maintenance and revenue sources, council and senior management have two distinct choices: 1) devote resources – money, staff, time or some combination – to improving streets or 2) focus efforts elsewhere leaving street programs as they always have been.

Taking the first path means that a change in street quality is expected and if change really is intended, then – like a restaurant that hopes to get more repeat customers by remodeling the dining room – measures of success must be taken to verify or challenge the value of the investment. Taking the second path, means that, for now, improvements in how, where and how fast streets are repaired are not to be a primary focus.

Let’s say you decide to walk the improvement path. Neither the restaurant owners nor Sweet City managers and council can afford to make a meaningful commitment to improvement without assessing the success or failure of the effort. The restaurant owner can count receipts and ask customers if they are new to the establishment or have been there before and what they think of the new decor. Sweet City staff can ask “customers” if the streets seem to be maintained better and staff can calculate if the costs of repair remain reasonable. The restaurateurs can

How to Sign Up for The National Citizen Survey™

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1) You can get all the details including an enrollment form and a sample timeline by visiting icma.org/ncs. 2) Once you complete the enrollment form, send it to National Research Center, Inc along with a check for \$5,900, which is a portion of the Basic Service fee (\$9,900). Your check initiates The NCS process. 3) NRC will email a packet of information containing FAQ sheets, background information on The NCS, your timeline, and a Worksheet Packet. The Worksheet Packet will guide you through the steps to customize your survey, write policy questions, and choose add-on options where needed.

For more information contact The NCS Director, Damema Mann, at damema@n-r-c.com or call her at 303-226-6983.

Click [here](#) to learn more about enrolling in The NCS.

The National Citizen Survey™ (The NCS) is a cost-effective system for conducting comprehensive surveys of local residents and an important benchmarking tool that allows

go out of business if their “sweet” investment turns sour. Elected officials can lose their jobs – though it’s also likely that city officials merely lose the faith and support of the public for future investments – if plans to improve streets hit road bumps. No restaurant owner would check her books or her customers’ opinions 24 months after investing in new lighting, table cloths or menu. Our restaurant owner will be tapping into customer opinion and receipts the night of the new opening and every month thereafter.

Local government managers need to demonstrate the enthusiasm and, yes, feel the fear that inspires small business owners and CEOs of big corporations to get it right and to get it right now. Indeed, these days, fear is in the air. Solid information from citizen surveys and credible comparative performance measures should not be building blocks for eventual plans -- they should be sparks that ignite the kind of motivation that drives business owners regularly to do better. Like business owners, local government managers need to monitor the success of the changes and not dally in the effort.

Once you conclude that something needs to be done, you cannot meander into change. Asking and listening are necessary initial steps to improving customer service but these two activities are insufficient to create value for customers or community residents. When government acts, it should not act smug – asking for opinions without a drive to make them better. Good government listens; better government acts on what it hears – not in a year or two, but with deliberate speed, speed born of a strong desire to make things noticeably, measurably, better as soon as possible. So watchful waiting is ok, but don’t wait too long or on too many improvement opportunities and be sure to retest the opinion waters to learn if it’s time to act.

Serious efforts to improve cities or counties require frequent soundings of the customers whose lives are to benefit. Citizen surveys are required to track success but even these broad surveys – whether done annually or every other year - may be augmented with assessments that bring deeper understanding of resident opinion.

comparison among communities. The NCS begins with a customizable survey with core questions relevant to your community. It comes to you from the National Research Center, Inc. (NRC) and ICMA.

National Research Center, Inc.

(NRC) is one of the leading survey research and performance measurement teams in the United States, focusing on the information needs of the public sector.

The principals of NRC have authored several articles about citizen survey research methods as well as a book on the methods of citizen surveying *Citizen Surveys for Local Government: A Comprehensive Guide to Making Them Matter* published by the International City/County Management Association in 2009.

Click [here](#) to learn more about the NCS team.

Deeper understanding comes from surveys that explore policies, uncover reasons for opinion change or look more closely at one or two specific services. Focus group discussions and interviews with service providers or community leaders are excellent ways to build on knowledge gleaned from annual or biennial citizen surveys and those can occur as needed, without waiting for a specific calendar lag. The information you gather from your “customers” and staff must be thoughtful and directed at action. Pressing that action and testing its

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