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Benchmarking Local Government Services in Onondaga County: A Demonstration Study of the 19 Towns and City of Syracuse. Executive Summary

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Benchmarking Local Government Services in Onondaga County: A Demonstration Study of the 19 Towns and City of Syracuse September 1998

Benchmark: *An indicator that serves as a reference point to make comparisons, set goals and to measure progress.*

Introduction

This is the first in a series of reports that will provide data on several government services provided by 20 municipalities in Onondaga County: 19 towns and the city of Syracuse. This publication is part of the ongoing research activities of the Community Benchmarks Program (CBP) and is intended as a demonstration project. The purpose of this study is to illustrate the usefulness of benchmarks as a means of improving government performance.

This report begins with the display of basic demographic information, and is followed by individual demonstration studies in the areas of *responsiveness to CBP requests for information* and *local property assessment*. These studies “demonstrate” the use of benchmarking through a presentation of qualitative and quantitative indicators as well as overall municipal grades. Responsiveness and property assessment were chosen as demonstration studies because a comprehensive set of indicators were developed for each and reliable data were collected. Following the in-depth presentation of the two areas, municipal comparisons are provided in the areas of: (1) clerk, (2) code enforcement, (3) financial management, (4) highways/streets, and (5) parks and recreation. Selected indicators for each of the five areas are presented and serve as a framework for discussions on a more comprehensive list of measures.

Methods

A total of 38 qualitative and quantitative indicators were developed to measure municipal performance in the following seven areas: responsiveness to requests for information, assessment, clerk’s office, code enforcement, financial management, highways, and parks and recreation. Survey instruments were designed and field tested by CBP and were subsequently distributed to the 116 municipal departments in January 1998. Data for all but two of the indicators were collected through the survey process; data for the two others were obtained from the New York State Office of Real Property Services.

Findings

Demonstration Study: Responsiveness to CBP Requests for Information

1. 50% (10 out of 20) of the municipalities received a grade of “B-” or better in the area of responsiveness to requests for information.
2. 70% (14 out of 20) of the municipalities submitted surveys more than one week (5 business days) late.
3. 80% (16 out of 20) of the municipalities completed more than 80% of the surveys.
4. 60% (12 out of 20) of the municipalities received an average of less than one follow-up contact.

Demonstration Study: Local Property Assessment

5. 55% (11 out of 20) of the municipalities received a grade of “B-” or better in the area of assessment.
6. 80% (16 out of 20) of the municipalities reported that a reassessment has occurred in the past five years.
7. 65% (13 out of 20) of the municipalities did not have a state certified appraiser in their employ.
8. 65% (13 out of 20) of the municipalities did have and attach an acceptable set of local instructions.

9. None of the 20 assessment departments conducted customer surveys.
10. The average number of grievances per 1,000 parcels is 25.1, ranging from 5.6 in Clay to 69 in Spafford.
11. The average percent of grievances reduced by grievance boards is 64%, ranging from 40% in Clay to 82% in Marcellus.
12. The average number of court/judicial action cases per 100 grievances is 8, ranging from 1 in Lafayette to 20 in Dewitt.
13. The average number of parcels serviced per full time equivalent (FTE) employee is 3,410, ranging from 1,636 in Skaneateles to 7,686 in Clay.
14. The average budgeted expenditures per parcel is \$13.67, ranging from \$7.10 in Clay to \$21.27 in Manlius.
15. The average certification level of assessors is level two (minimum required certification).
16. 50% (10 out of 20) of the municipalities met the $\leq 10\%$ standard for adjusted assessment error.

Municipal Comparisons

Clerk

17. None of the municipalities conducted a customer satisfaction survey.
18. The average business days it takes for clerks to make town board/common council meeting minutes available to the public is nine, ranging from one in Pompey to 22 in Otisco and Spafford.
19. The average budgeted expenditures per capita for clerks is \$3.82, ranging from \$1.14 in Syracuse to \$9.32 in Skaneateles.

Code Enforcement

20. 90% (18 out of 20) of the municipalities do not clearly track building permit applications.
21. 90% (18 out of 20) of the municipalities do not clearly track code violation complaints.
22. 65% (13 out of 20) of the municipalities provide clearly written instructions for building permit applicants.
23. None of the municipalities conducted a customer satisfaction survey.
24. 89% (17 out of 19) of the municipalities were not able to provide information necessary to determine the percent of required annual fire safety inspections completed per year.
25. The average budgeted expenditures per capita for code enforcement departments is \$4.49, ranging from \$2.15 in Geddes to \$12.73 in Tully.

Financial Management

26. 80% (16 out of 20) of the municipalities have adopted written financial policies for investment.
27. None of the municipalities have adopted written policies for reserves.
28. None of the municipalities have adopted written policies for debt.
29. 95% (19 out of 20) of the municipalities have not adopted written policies for operating budget.
30. 85% (17 out of 20) of the municipalities have adopted written policies for purchasing.
31. The average debt service as a percent of total expenditures is 3.5%, ranging from 0% in Cicero, Elbridge, Fabius, Lysander, Onondaga, Pompey, Skaneateles, and Spafford, to 12.7% in Syracuse.
32. The average total expenditures per capita is \$266, ranging from \$37 in Clay to \$793 in Syracuse.

Highways

33. 85% (17 out of 20) of the municipalities do not clearly track road repair requests.
34. None of the 20 highway departments conduct customer surveys.
35. 14% (1 out of 7) of the municipalities in which employees have access to vehicle fuel have a written policy for fuel use.

Parks and Recreation

36. 87% (14 out of 16) of the municipalities do not prepare annual reports meeting CBP specifications.
37. 63% (10 out of 16) of the municipalities track park conditions through the use of written evaluations.
38. 94% (15 out of 16) of the municipalities did not conduct customer surveys.