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Why Performance Matters

by Michael Lawson

The central tenet of Thomas Friedman's 2005 best-selling book *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* is that rapidly accelerating globalization is driving fundamental change in the world's economic, political, and social systems. Throughout the 20th century—as well as the centuries preceding it—natural and political geography, the high cost and excruciatingly slow nature of communication, and the industrial/manufacturing base of most of the developed world's economies created "mountains and oceans" of barriers that made it difficult for people throughout the world to work together.

Friedman argues that a powerful cocktail of advances in telecommunications and investments in the global technological infrastructure, combined with the withering of the bipolar, democratic/communist political divide and the overall weakening in the nation-state, is dissolving these real and metaphorical "mountains and oceans." Friedman's conclusion is that the world of the 21st century is flat.

In a flat world, location or "place" doesn't matter for an ever-growing number of business and work activities. Software designers in California's Silicon Valley, for example, increasingly collaborate with software engineers in China. Call centers for a host of businesses in the United States and other developed countries increasingly are located in India. Unlike in the industrial period of the 19th and 20th centuries, locating a business activity depends far less than it used to on proximity to raw materials, ports, and physical access to consumer markets. Place doesn't matter—or matters far less—when the products of intellectual capital can move instantaneously around the globe.

But, ironically, as place becomes less important in the economic/business sphere, the value of place grows in importance for everything outside that sphere. Individuals want to live in communities that provide a high quality of life for themselves and their families. And businesses, locked in a modern-day version of trench warfare to attract and retain valuable employees, are looking to build and expand in communities that offer a high quality of life to their employees—whether this is offered in nearby communities, in communities elsewhere in states or provinces, across the country, or around the world.¹

Furthermore, the nature of the work being done, combined with advances in communications, permits many employees to work from their homes or other remote sites. These employees often can live almost anywhere. This is precisely where local governments come in and why local government performance matters in a flat world.

Some quality-of-life variables are beyond any community's control, weather and climate being the most obvious. Yet variables within the control of every community are the quality, quantity, effectiveness, and efficiency of the myriad services delivered by local government. A high-quality, service-driven local government can provide key elements of the societal infrastructure that will permit communities to thrive in the 21st century—by being places where people will want to live and places where businesses will want to expand. It is these places and communities that will prosper and grow in a flat world.

ROLE OF PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT IS GREATER IN A FLAT WORLD

Because local government performance matters more now than ever, it logically follows that measuring performance also is more important than ever. Every local government manager and other local government professionals should be able to answer these questions relating to governmental performance:

- What is the current level of performance for our work teams, departments, and our local government as a whole?
- Are our work teams, departments, and local government as a whole performing better this year than last?
- How will we know what good performance is?
- What are other localities doing to promote high performance?
- As leaders within our organizations, what can we do to ensure that every person in our employing local governments

can respond to each of the above questions?

- And, most important, how would we use this information to continuously improve performance?

Performance measurement process

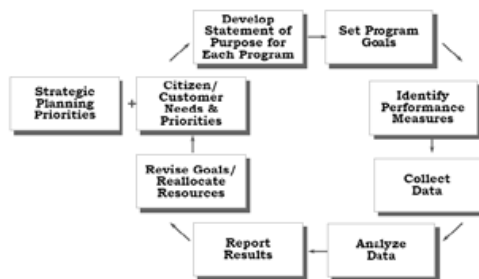


Figure 1. Steps Taken in Performance Measurement

No longer are performance measures simply a "nice to have" embellishment to the general operations of a local government. Nor do performance measures merely suffice as supplementary information, contained in budget documents or financial reports. In a flat world, detailed and thoughtful consideration of these questions, combined with well-orchestrated responses, is essential to high performance and to local governments' commitment to continuous improvement.

Local governments that go on operating in much the same way as they did in the last quarter of the 20th century—focusing primarily on process and outputs, rather than performance and outcomes—do so at their long-term peril. In a flat world, such governments risk leaving their communities at a competitive disadvantage.

Communities whose local governments do productively engage in addressing these questions are far more likely to thrive. Creating and sustaining an organization in which these questions are an integral part of everyday operations is a central and important challenge for appointed local government leaders.

PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT AND LEARNING ORGANIZATIONS

The longshoreman/philosopher Eric Hoffer stated, "In a time of drastic change, it is the learners who inherit the future. The learned usually find themselves equipped to live in a world that no longer exists."² So, too, with local governments in these times of drastic change. Measuring performance is an essential activity of any learning organization. And it is organizations with learners that will inherit the future and thrive in a flat world.

Using the full range of performance measures—input, output, efficiency, and outcome measures—is integral to organizational learning because such measures are shared starting points for analyzing operations, as well as for fostering discussions on improving performance in all aspects of service delivery and governance in general.

THE PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT PROCESS

Yogi Berra purportedly said, "You've got to be careful if you don't know where you're going, because you might not get there." Such is also the case when a local government embarks on a concerted effort to improve services. Performance measurement can help communities determine where they are and, more important, where they want to go. Figure 1 shows the key stages in the performance measurement process.

Under the most desirable circumstances, a community begins by establishing its mission and then develops a strategic plan that over a period of years—often, a decade or more—will guide the community in fulfilling that mission. Next, the council or other elected body sets goals that ultimately lead to the realization of the community's strategic plan over a number of years.

Broad outcome measures then will need to be developed and incorporated during the implementation phases of the strategic plan, so that the local government is able to determine the extent of its progress toward meeting the goals identified in the strategic plan.³

Each year, elected officials will develop annual goals and targets (with appropriate performance measures, primarily relating to outcomes) that link to the long-term goals and outcome measures identified for the strategic plan. The local government manager and department heads will, in turn, identify several measures that link to the goals named by the elected officials.

Next, department heads work with team leaders within their departments to set goals that will contribute to departmental and other objectives throughout the local government. If every team and every department meets the objectives established, the locality will successfully implement its strategic plan and contribute to the overall mission of the community.⁴

In successful performance measurement and management programs, the vast majority of goals and objectives are quantifiable. Some are hard pieces of discrete data, like the percentage of EMS vehicles arriving on the scene of an accident in less than five minutes from the time of dispatch, while others are a bit less so, including the percentage of citizens rating their community parks as excellent. As goals and objectives "pyramid up" the organization (see Figure 2), the measures tend to go from discrete, integer-scale data to qualitative and categorical-scale data.

If a city or county develops its own set of performance measures and performance targets, individual employees, department heads, administrators, and councils can observe and measure progress. Then, the organization can move as a cohesive whole toward achieving community goals and/or maintaining community standards.

When specific goals or targets are not achieved, council, management, and employees should work together to determine why such targets were not reached. They may thus redirect resources and redouble efforts to achieve the targets. Management and employees can analyze operations and work together to find ways of improving services. In sum, they can become learners who will better cope with these times of drastic change.

It is rare that any government achieves all of its goals and objectives every year, given the complex environment in which local governments operate, including changes in the local, national, and international economies; state and federal mandates; and, not least, the weather. Nevertheless, governments may take satisfaction in the fact that they are using performance measures as powerful tools for assessing progress, making improvements, and learning continuously. And often, they are applauded by others for their efforts.

EFFECTIVE USES OF PERFORMANCE INFORMATION

Jurisdictions vary considerably in the ways and the extent to which they use performance data. The overarching reason to use performance measurement, of course, is to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of local government services, making the community a better place to live and work.

In general, cities and counties use performance information to:

Encourage the use of goals and outcomes in budget deliberations. An encouraging development reported by a number of jurisdictions is the fact that performance measurement has often made a subtle but important shift in the focus of budget discussions at council meetings. Instead of focusing largely on the percentage increase or decrease in funding that a particular department is receiving relative to others (or compared with the prior year), councilmembers have been more inclined to ask questions like "If we were to increase the fire/EMS budget by x dollars, what effect might that have on response times? . . . on fires confined to the room of origin? . . . on the percentage of cardiac-arrest patients arriving at a medical facility with a pulse restored?" In short, performance measures are increasing the likelihood that budget deliberations will involve discussions of community goals and service outcomes.

Help set targets of performance. Many jurisdictions use comparative performance information to determine targets of performance for specific departments and agencies. Working with their city manager or county administrator, department directors may use measures from comparable jurisdictions and combine them with the priorities established by their councils to set performance targets for future years. These targets then serve to focus the efforts of each department in achieving its goals and, in so doing, helping the city or county achieve the broader goals set by the governing body.

Learn from others. Regardless of whether specific performance measures are used in the budgeting process, comparative performance information can be used to identify high performers in certain areas. Individuals reviewing and analyzing data can contact individuals in other cities and counties with high performance on specific measures to discuss factors contributing to high performance (equipment, training, organizational processes and structure, resources).

Terminology for Performance Measurement

Inputs. The amount of resources used to produce a program or to provide a service, generally expressed in expenditure or labor units.

Outputs. The amount of a service or program provided, representing completed work activity or effort, as expressed in units of service delivered.

Efficiency measures. Indicators of how well the organization is using its resources, expressed as a ratio between the amount of input and the amount of output or outcome.

Outcome measures. Indicators of how well a program or service is accomplishing its mission, including quality, cycle time, and customer satisfaction measures.

Communicate results to citizens. Traditionally, most cities and counties report financial information to citizens. They may use a pie graph to show the percentage of expenditures devoted to specific service areas. They may show how much is spent per capita on various services. Or some may use property-tax bills to show the dollar amount that each individual homeowner pays for certain services.

Yet, all of these approaches focus on the cost of government-making government appear primarily to be a burden on citizens-rather than on the benefits afforded to citizens by their local government. In contrast, an increasing number of cities and counties prepare special reports and/or community newspapers that report performance for their government (response times for fire and EMS, participation rates in recreational programs, patronage of public libraries).

These reports focus largely on what the local government does, rather than just on what the local government spends or taxes. Reports, flyers, and community newspapers give citizens a more complete picture of the activities and

performance of their local government.



Figure 2. Reporting Performance

If performance measurement is simply viewed as a data-collection-and-reporting exercise, it will serve little purpose to a community. It is only through the analysis of data that performance measurement can really become a tool for continuous service improvement. And it is through good, thoughtful questions that this analysis begins.

WHY PERFORMANCE MATTERS: PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT AND THE PROFESSION

This article has attempted to set forth why the performance of local government matters, especially in a world getting flatter by the day. But governmental performance is also of central importance to professional local government managers.

Implicit in the mission statement and core beliefs incorporated into ICMA's current strategic plan⁵ is the view that there is a performance dividend that accrues to professional local government managers and leaders. More than ever in this increasingly skeptical world, it is critically important that professional local government executives demonstrate this performance dividend. Measuring governmental performance is an excellent way to do so.

Comments made by ICMA regional vice presidents during the regional meetings at the ICMA 2005 Annual Conference in Minneapolis emphasized the importance of performance measurement to the profession. ICMA Executive Director Bob O'Neill sounded a similar theme in his comments at the 2005 conference and elsewhere.⁶ And the literature on the high-performance organization (HPO) model also identifies performance measurement as a key component.⁷

In the end, the actions of and services provided by local government can be the determining factors in whether a community will be or remain vibrant and prosper, or whether it will lose its vitality and gradually decline. Most of the attributes of modern living are within the purview of local government—from protecting our homes, families, and environment to the means by which we move about, to how we spend portions of our leisure time, to our telecommunication systems.

Local governments play integral roles in the extent to which a community is an attractive one in which to live and work. The stakes are high. Thus, in this increasingly flat world, local government performance really does matter.

¹This theme, for example, also is reflected in the work of Richard Florida. See "The World in Numbers: The World is Spiky" in *The Atlantic Monthly*, Volume 296, Number 3, October 2005.

²Eric Hoffer, *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951).

³It is not essential that a local government have a formal strategic plan in order to integrate performance measures into its operations. However, a shared understanding of the broad objectives of the local government and various departments is important in identifying appropriate outcome (result) measures.

⁴This brief description of the performance measurement/management process is admittedly an ideal type. Most likely, officials of each local government will need to adjust it to meet the specific needs and expectations of their community, elected officials, and employees of the jurisdiction.

⁵Formally adopted by the ICMA membership at the annual business meeting in September 2000.

⁶Including the December 2003 issue of ICMA's *Public Management* magazine, as well as state management association meetings.

⁷Visit the Web site of the Weldon Cooper Center for Government Service at the University of Virginia; see especially the information provided as part of the Senior Executive Institute (SEI) and the Leading, Educating, and Developing (LEAD) programs. This site may be found at www.coopercenter.org.

Michael Lawson is director, ICMA Center for Performance Measurement (CPM), Washington, D.C. (mlawson@icma.org). This article is adapted from Chapter 1 of the 2001 edition of the CPM's annual report, entitled *Comparative Performance Measurement: FY 2001 Data Report*.

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Ethics

THE IMPORTANCE OF ETHICS REVISITED: YOUR FUTURE MAY DEPEND ON IT

The time was September 2004, and campaign fever raged in America as television and computer screens, newspapers, neighborhood lawns, and radio broadcasts were all crowded with more or less artfully crafted messages designed to arouse the party faithful and recruit the undecided.

The presidential campaigns as well as campaigns for all parties and on all issues at local, state, and national levels were increasingly described as "divisive," "vitriolic," "hostile," and "embattled" as left and right, liberal and conservative, for and against railed against each other. As citizens of a democracy and as professionals who have chosen public sector management, we held to the vision of excellence in governance and wanted only what we believed to be the best for our communities and our country.

ICMA's Tenet 7 was drafted and approved specifically to address how professional public managers, as exemplary citizens of our democracy, can walk the fine line during political campaign seasons: How can we support what we believe is best for our communities and our country and still hold to the ethical guidelines that have been the birthright and foundation of the profession of public management since the turn of the twentieth century.

How many of us know, without research, what Tenet 7 says? As the saying goes, "What we don't know CAN hurt us." As we approach the 2006 campaign season, it is crucial for us to be extremely certain about what is and is not permitted by our profession and to recommit ourselves to the highest standards of integrity and objectivity. It's also critical to commit ourselves to asking ICMA for ethical guidance before we take any action that could lead to censure and in some cases expulsion from ICMA.

MY STORY

In the spring of 2004, a local marketing consultant generously and capably served our local government as the volunteer chair of a committee appointed by our board of county commissioners to help us prioritize scarce resources during budget shortfalls such as those that had occurred during the previous two years. This committee chair was deeply impressed by the management of our local government—the professionalism of our team, the commitment to efficiency and continuous improvement, and the integrity and objectivity of our decision processes.

As a result, the chairman came to the county management team later because of his belief in our favorable standing in the community and our credibility and confidence with the public, and he asked that team members appear on camera in a nonpartisan television spot to affirm the good work done on behalf of our local government by the longest-serving state senate majority leader.

Staff checked with legal counsel and with the employing governing body (elected from all party affiliations) and found no prohibition against such an appearance. In fact, all those consulted saw the appearance as being in the best interest of our local government. Team members then appeared in the television spot.

Had we consulted ICMA and the ethics advising staff first, however, we would have known that regardless of how positive, how legal, how nonpartisan, or how lacking in opposition such an appearance may have seemed, Tenet 7 of the ICMA Code of Ethics and the related guidelines specifically prohibit such an appearance as a violation of absolute political neutrality.

Tenet 7 also, for example, specifically prohibits any and all contributions of any size to campaigns for political candidacy at any level of government—local, state, or national—as well as any and all activities that could be construed as political fundraising, such as simply attending a community event that might have political overtones.

Specifically, Tenet 7 states: "Refrain from all political activities which undermine public confidence in professional administrators. Refrain from participation in the election of the member of the employing legislative body."

One of the guidelines for the ICMA code goes on to state: Members share with their fellow citizens the right and responsibility to vote and to voice their opinion on public issues. However, in order not to impair their effectiveness on behalf of the local governments they serve, they shall not participate in political activities to support the candidacy of individuals running for any city, county, special district, school, state, or federal offices. Specifically, they shall not endorse candidates, make financial contributions, sign or circulate petitions, or participate in fund-raising activities for individuals seeking or holding elected office.

I've learned that lesson the hard way, and I wanted to share my experience in the hope of preventing others from making similar mistakes.

RULES ARE IMPORTANT

In the interest of educating our membership and addressing the consequences of my failure to observe Tenet 7, I am offering a public discussion of why ICMA's rules of ethics are so important as a guide to ethical behavior and what public managers should consider doing to strengthen ethics in their organizations.

Why is absolute political neutrality so critical? First and foremost, complete political neutrality protects you, the manager, from choosing selectively among the many opportunities for political participation you are invited to join, thereby preventing you in every case from endearing yourself to some while enraging others. You cannot manage effectively, professionally, objectively, and with complete independence if you are not completely neutral and free of any support, however private it may seem, to any candidate at any level.

Willa M. Bruce, in *Classics of Administrative Ethics* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2001), states that ethics in public service is "the study of the nature of morals and moral choices and the rules governing a profession that define professional conduct" (p. xiii). The core of what defines our work as a profession is the very existence of these rules of conduct in the face of moral choices.

In his online *Complete Guide to Ethics Management: An Ethics Toolkit for Managers* (<http://www.managementhelp.org/ethics/ethxgde.htm>), Carter McNamara notes several of the major benefits of managing ethics in the workplace that are crucial to public managers. He states that ethics programs

- Improve society by causing the establishment of laws that have advanced the goals of democratic society—fair process and equal opportunity among them.
- Help maintain a moral course in turbulent times, especially during times of rapid change when clear moral choices can become significantly more gray. Continuing attention to questions of ethical choice forces us to re-evaluate norms as society changes.
- Cultivate strong teamwork and productivity by aligning employees with the ethical values of the leaders of the organization. When employees are clear about the expectations of leaders and are clear that leaders hold themselves accountable as well for the highest standards of integrity, the organization can work more effectively together for common values.
- Support employee ethical growth when employees collectively analyze and discuss the solutions to case studies of ethical dilemmas. Employees are called to recommit themselves to the democratic principles of public service.
- Promote a strong public image among citizens who have deservedly high expectations of honor and integrity for their local governments. Consistent, open attention to ethical practices and decisions builds confidence in government among the public we serve.

In an article entitled "Ethics in Government: From a Winter of Despair to a Spring of Hope" in *Public Administration Review* (vol. 57, no. 6 [1997]: 517-526), James B. Bowman and Russell L. Williams state, "The findings emphasize the key role of leadership—both by its presence and absence—in encouraging honorable public service" (p. 525). It falls, therefore, to the manager to set the standard for ethical behavior if such behavior is to be fully integrated throughout our organizations, which is why ICMA takes such a rigorous stand on these matters.

Without our strict adherence to a clearly defined code of ethical behavior, there is little hope that public sector organizations in general will consistently and systematically demonstrate the most objective, independent, and ethical decisions in the face of difficult matters of integrity and moral choice.

GUIDANCE ADVICE

So what guidance can my experience offer? First, contact the ICMA professional ethics advisory staff before you make a decision that does not seem to be an absolutely clear moral and ethical choice. Also, sharing your decision with others in your profession will help you set your moral compass.

Second, establish in your organization a formal ethics effort, led by the most senior manager, and incorporate ethics and values training from top to bottom, from new employee orientation through supervisory and management development programs. ICMA has a variety of ethics training programs to assist you in developing ethics training with your staff.

Third, consider establishing a code of ethics and code of conduct in your organization, incorporating input from legal counsel as well as employee associations, because the ultimate goal of an ethics program is achieving desired conduct in the workplace; in addition, include ethics references in reward and performance evaluation systems.

Finally, as I learned from the ICMA board, and as Carter McNamara recommends in his online *Complete Guide to*

Ethics Management, value forgiveness. As you increase the emphasis on ethics in your organization and as awareness grows, you may find yourself dealing with more ethical issues than you dealt with in the past. These incidents create new opportunities for leaders to demonstrate ethical behavior. An effort to help people recognize, atone for, and learn from their mistakes makes them and their organization stronger than ever.

—Katy Singlaub
County Manager
Washoe County, Nevada
ksinglaub@washoecounty.us

For advice on the ICMA Code of Ethics, or to find out more on ethics training and technical assistance available to local governments, call the Ethics Center at ICMA at 202/962-3521, or visit the Web site at <http://icma.org/ethics>. Calls or e-mails can also be directed to ICMA's ethics advisers Martha Perego, 202/962-3668, mperego@icma.org, and Elizabeth Kellar, 202/962-3611, ekellar@icma.org.

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On Retirement

LEADERSHIP IS ESSENTIAL IN ADVANCING RETIREMENT SECURITY FOR PUBLIC SECTOR EMPLOYEES

According to recent news accounts, American workers are paying greater attention to the security of their pensions. And for good reason.

We've all heard on the news how private sector corporations—most recently airlines and automakers—are drastically slashing retirement and health benefits and forcing at least some retirees to go back to work or to dramatically alter their retirement lifestyles.

On the public sector side, the news stories are fortunately not as dramatic, but there is growing recognition that changes are likely for defined benefit plans and post-retirement health coverage.

There are, of course, a host of reasons for the changing climate, including rising health care costs, variable investment returns, skyrocketing employer expenses, and actions by accounting rules boards.

While solutions to these larger issues are being worked out, the fact remains that public employers are still looking for ways to help their employees build retirement security without busting municipal budgets. Given the restraints, what can a plan sponsor do?

Plan sponsors now have an opportunity to move beyond the status quo and surpass their employee expectations by taking a leadership position when it comes to retirement issues. Specifically, public managers can demonstrate leadership by advancing innovative ideas related to retirement:

- Retirement and investment planning.
- Participant education on retirement.
- Retirement services, including post-retirement health savings plans.

Only when public employees are armed with solutions will they have a greater opportunity to meet their retirement goals. But success can be achieved only when plan sponsors, in concert with plan providers, address areas in which significant progress can be made.

At ICMA-RC, we have a long-standing relationship with ICMA and other organizations to provide retirement planning, investment, and educational services to public employees. This includes taking the lead on critical issues such as enhanced education services and supporting federal legislation that benefits public employers and innovations in plan administration. We will continue to do our part to lead the way in meeting retirement savings challenges.

This is a critical time; employees are looking to their employers for guidance in preparing for the future. Plan sponsors can be proactive in meeting these expectations by taking the next steps to serving their employees' needs.

Clearly, plan sponsors have a good track record of helping plan participants prepare and invest for the future, but more can be done. The opportunity now exists for government managers to lead participants to the next level in building retirement security.

—Joan McCallen
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DEPARTMENTS

Profile

The Quiet Man of Portsmouth: City Manager James Oliver



James B. Oliver, Jr., is city manager of Portsmouth, Virginia.

[Late June 2005], the city council started working on the budget for 2006-2007. It is nearly a year before that budget must be passed. But, with limited funds and many projects pending, Portsmouth (Virginia) City Manager James B. Oliver, Jr., wanted to get the council to start prioritizing and whittling down the to-do list.

In Portsmouth, where last year's budget shifted and stalled until the last possible moment, it was a major change in how things are usually done. Out with the last-minute crisis mentality, officials said, and in with study, organization, and anticipation of upcoming problems.

And that is one of the reasons the city council, a day later, offered Oliver a two-year contract as the city's top administrator. Officials said that, in just 12 months at the helm, Oliver, 62, has brought a new sense of calm and preparation to Portsmouth. The results have yet to be seen, but many said he's finally turned the city onto the right course.

"He's taken our attention off the moment," Councilman Stephen Heretick said. "And that's what Portsmouth has been lacking for entirely too long—a collective vision of what comes next. For the first time in a long time, the city is proactive instead of reactive."

The job is not new to Oliver, who until 1999 served for 12 years as Norfolk's manager, overseeing many of that city's downtown changes. When he became Portsmouth's interim manager in June 2004—the fourth person to occupy the city's top seat in as many years—Oliver immediately began a series of changes that mimicked his experience in Norfolk.

Myers-Briggs personality tests were administered to councilmembers and top city officials. Consultants were brought in to mediate everything from economic development summits to employee training sessions to the city council retreat. New systems for organizing the council agenda and handling citizen complaints were created.

"This year was kind of a sorting-out," Oliver said the day after accepting the council's new contract. He likened the experience to trying to chew gum, walk, and juggle at the same time. "There was a desire for clear direction," he continued. "But we've gotten a lot of the basics shaped up."

Councilmembers have said Oliver has helped guide them in defining a vision for where Portsmouth should be in 20 or 25 years. "He's definitely proven to be the man for such a time as this," Councilwoman Marlene Randall said. "He's

focused on the major things we need to look at if we're going to move the Portsmouth we have now toward the next point we're going to achieve. He's charted that course."

And he insisted that, despite taking many of the same steps he took in Norfolk, he realizes Portsmouth is a very different city. Still, "Portsmouth people want to be better," he said. "There's not a lot of resistance to big ideas. There's a readiness-even an eagerness-to want to change."

Most of the changes so far, however, have been nearly invisible to residents. Oliver has stayed far out of the public eye, preferring instead to stay in city hall in meetings with staff members and outside consultants.

He doesn't attend civic league meetings. He shies away from press interviews. A conversation with an average citizen is uncommon. Apart from lunchtime visits to Portsmouth restaurants, he is rarely seen about town. And that's the way he likes it.

"I don't think it would be a particularly good use of my time," he said of becoming a more public figure. He's focused on creating organizational routines and nurturing employees to carry them out after he retires-work best done at city hall, he said.

"I'm not going to be here 20 years," he said. "I think I'll better serve the city if I can grow good leadership that can connect with the community. Because the stuff we're trying to do is long-term."

Several people, however, would like to see him out a little more. "He needs to become more visible," Councilwoman Randall said. "He's not a very outgoing person until you get to know him. It's almost as if there's a certain reserve there. He has probably neglected meeting with the general public. Now that certain things are falling into place, people will find they'll probably get to know him better."

Inside city hall, the endless meetings-day-long leadership training, executive management gatherings, weekly economic development sessions-also have tried some city officials' patience. "It can be frustrating," Finance Director Lance Wolff said. While he lauded Oliver's ability to bring bright people together, he said the process could get in the way of getting day-to-day work accomplished.

"You can get more done with extra heads at the table, but you can also end up wasting some time," Wolff said. "And they have in some instances unearthed some things that made it maybe temporarily a little more chaotic."

In meetings, Oliver routinely asks the same questions: "What are we trying to say?" "What's the real issue here?" He rarely assigns tasks. At times, he will be reading or typing e-mails on his BlackBerry while listening. He's usually not the most outspoken person at the table, breaking in only to offer a thought or insight to redirect the conversation.

"He somehow identifies the strengths that each of us brings to the table, and he finds a way to bring those out in us," Councilman Heretick said. "It is an amazing thing to watch."

Heretick called Oliver "the professor," in reference to Oliver's encyclopedic knowledge base. Oliver can elaborate on the weaknesses of his fantasy baseball team as well as he can about organizational theory. He hands out scholarly readings to his staff, but his mood rises and falls with the fate of Notre Dame's football season.

His next challenge in Portsmouth, Oliver said, is putting meat on the bones of projects like downtown waterfront redevelopment and the creation of a large business park, the Tidewater Community College campus, and the New Port neighborhood around Victory Boulevard.

He said he expects it to take nearly a year more before actual work starts, which is a long time, he acknowledged, now that expectations have been raised. "Patience is probably not something people want to hear," said Wolff, the finance director, who worked for Oliver in Norfolk as well. "But I'm hoping citizens see things materializing. At some point, you have to believe that some sort of pattern is developing."

Oliver said he's not sure what will happen at the end of his two-year contract with the city. He'll be close to 65 then, but he has no sure retirement point in mind. "I'm enjoying what I'm doing, and I'm doing it because I think it's important," he said. "One of the things about this job is, nothing stays the same."

—Meghan Hoyer
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