

Citizen Participation in Local Government: The Use of Incentives and Rewards

When an increase in people's needs for public services . . . occurs at the same time that governments find it necessary to reduce services due to fiscal constraints, the absolute necessity of volunteer service becomes obvious.

National Civic Review

January 1983

Alexis de Tocqueville noted that the "health of a democratic society may be measured by the quality of functions by private citizens."¹ There is an implied assumption that, in establishing a democratic government, many services or community actions must be cooperative efforts between citizen and government, i.e., that citizens are "co-producers." It is assumed, for example, that citizens will pick up their litter in the park; participate in a neighborhood watch; maintain the quality of their own property; teach children to obey laws; prevent the destruction of public property; prevent graffiti; help educate children at home; and avoid flushing damaging materials. Beyond this expected "self-duty," the "public-regarding" ethos needs addressing.

It has been estimated that in 1987, some 80 million adults gave approximately 14.9 billion hours of service at a dollar value of \$149.8 billion.² Based on a 1988 ICMA survey, volunteer participation in cities and counties ranked second only to the use of contracting in number of service deliveries and localities' reliance on them.

From ancient Greece to the present, officials have attempted to honor, recognize, or otherwise show apprecia-

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tion for services rendered by presenting some token rewards. This is done to encourage the involvement of a larger proportion than the typical 1 percent, or less, of citizens who participate. Additionally, in recent years, many local governments have begun using *incentives* to encourage attendance, committee service, and participation in specific programs and activities, and to achieve effectiveness in programs. A combination of incentives and rewards has emerged. The purpose of this article is not to provide a boiler-plate approach to volunteerism but to offer information on current, operating incentive/reward programs.

Most frequently, volunteerism has relied on the spirit of altruism. Yet, probably both intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors are involved in a decision to become engaged in volunteer activities. Because there are competing calls on a citizen's time and resources, the governmental entity may need to market some incentives for that participation.

Acknowledging the urgent need for more volunteerism to aid communities, a study has been performed to determine the extent and mix of incentives and rewards in current use across the nation. In 1992, a random, population-interval sample of some 1,200 ICMA-recognized communities was conducted. A total of 425 questionnaires (35 percent) were returned, revealing the following data on the use of incentives:

Program Areas	Percentage of Governments Using Incentives*
Volunteer services (library, other services)	31.0%
Activities (sports, programs, parades, etc.)	30.0%
Citizen surveys	13.6%
Open houses (service displays, information)	13.8%
Meetings (councils, hearings, etc.)	7.1%
Nonresponsive	4.5%

*Does not total 100 percent due to a few incomplete questionnaires.

While great confidence in the statistical precision of the responses may be unwarranted because of differing perceptions among officials of what constitutes an incentive, the general trend should not be overlooked. The results suggest that the use of incentives for citizen participation in local government is not widespread. Further, the results of the survey also show significant correlation between locality size and incentive use in only one of the categories—activities (i.e., sports, celebrations, parades). The larger the community, the greater the use of this type of incentive.

In Figure 1, incentives and rewards are presented for five participation areas. Officials can peruse the table as a menu when they are seeking potential techniques. Each check mark indicates an incentive that one or more managers has used successfully to increase and acknowledge citizen participation in that area. If a

manager wanted to increase volunteer service in his or her community, for example, the manager could peruse column 1 and select from 18 options. The nonchecked boxes represent untried but creative ideas suggested by managers. In total, Figure 1 should serve as a catalyst to generate appropriate incentives and rewards for any local government.

Volunteer Services

Volunteer efforts play a significant role in the development of a community. This concept of volunteer services actually has two facets. In the first and more obvious category, volunteer work is done in such specific agencies as libraries, hospitals, schools, recreation departments, public safety and other emergency services, and public works. The second category of volunteer services includes those areas in which the local government is attempting to accomplish specific objectives by enticing citizens through the use of incentives (see Figure 2).

Similar to the "do this and you will receive this" concept are several variations in efforts to enhance or supplement services:

- Awards of \$600 to local elementary teachers for producing major projects for their classes (Orem, Utah);
- Scholarships to entice child care providers to attend training programs (Fremont, California);
- Vouchers to encourage the purchase of smoke alarms or home security systems;
- Appointments of disabled citizens as self-monitors of handicapped parking restrictions (West Valley, Utah);
- Use of taxis as citizen safety patrol supplements (Covington, Kentucky);
- Abatements to private institutions rendering health care or day care;
- Exemptions to families providing long-term care to the disabled;
- Offsets to encourage dial-a-ride for the elderly; and

Figure 1
Incentives and Rewards by Participation Areas

Incentives	Participation Areas				
	Volunteer Services	Community Activities	Citizen Surveys	Attendance at Open Houses	Attendance at Meetings
Financial					
Stipends for "volunteers"	✓				
Token pay for emergency workers	✓				
Token cash rewards					
Discounts on taxes, utilities					
Discounts on fees, park reservations, garbage bills, wellness programs; free pets; etc.	✓	✓			
Payments to people who vote					
Food and Entertainment					
Dinners, banquets, luncheons, breakfasts, dinner dances	✓	✓			✓
Picnics/barbecues	✓	✓			✓
Refreshments, snack breaks, ice cream socials	✓	✓		✓	✓
Parties (cocktail, holiday, pizza, block)	✓			✓	
Gifts					
Logo merchandise (paperweights, keychains, pencils, pins, etc.)	✓	✓		✓	✓
Clothing (t-shirts, ties, hats, uniforms)	✓	✓	✓		✓
Prints of city hall or county courthouse, calendars, buttons/badges, balloons, coupons	✓	✓	✓		✓
Movie tickets, bus passes, concert tickets	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Giveaway prizes, turkeys		✓	✓		
Free admissions (golf, recreation, swimming)	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Return postage			✓		
Recognition					
Plaques, certificates	✓	✓		✓	✓
Resolutions, proclamations	✓	✓			✓
Press coverage	✓	✓			✓
Medals, ribbons, trophies, awards	✓	✓			
Letters of appreciation, mentions in newsletters, official-for-a-day programs	✓	✓	✓		✓
Dinners/ceremonies	✓				
Miscellaneous					
Free parking				✓	✓

- Credits to organizations providing uncompensated services to the public.

Incentives for volunteer services may also range from banquets, dances, certificates, letters of appreciation, and press recognition, to dinners served by the mayor or county commissioner. Typically, such small gifts as flowers, t-shirts, coupons from local merchants, and admission to local government facilities, accompany the recognition.

Community Activities

Local governments conduct a wide range of activities to promote the

welfare and livability of their communities. Many activities are neighborhood- or age-specific, while others involve the entire community. The Little League, community education classes, book clubs, beautification efforts, festivals, locality birthday celebrations, breakfasts, tournaments, carnivals, and community cleanups are typical examples of neighborhood, citywide, or countywide activities found across the nation. Additionally, some local governments rely on senior days, kid's days (Seattle), cake sales, fundraising activities for community projects, or the sale of bricks for public plazas (Manhattan, Kansas). As incentives and rewards, some governments offer free admis-

sion to municipal golf courses and recreational centers, food and entertainment, and small tokens, including t-shirts, movie tickets, giveaway prizes, and recreational passes. The data suggest that most local governments couple these token gifts with some form of recognition: certificates, medals, or trophies.

Citizen Surveys

Many communities use citizen surveys to gauge public opinion on broad policy questions, as well as on more specific issues. Most frequently, these surveys are sent out with utility bills and may include an incentive for their return. While the type of incentive provided may affect the statistical viability of the survey results, many cities and counties find that incentive use is the only way to guarantee a sufficient number of responses. While one might expect the government to pay return postage, several other, more substantial incentives also are common: a discount or a free pass to such services or activities as community education programs, recreation centers, and bus transportation. One city creatively generated survey responses by sending each responding citizen a certificate for a free turkey. Return notes of appreciation for completed surveys seem to be a frequent practice. Occasionally, cities and counties will obtain permission from respondents to cite written comments in the newspaper.

Open Houses

Officials frequently find that, as citizens gain positive firsthand experience with government operations, citizen support for government itself increases. Typically, open houses are conducted at the police and fire stations, public works departments, libraries, and so on. Also, holding selected councilmembers' meetings in neighborhoods is a useful option. Obvious incentives include free parking and refreshments; however, many

Figure 2

Discounted and Free Rewards for Participation Efforts

Citizens Receive Discounts and/or Free:	If They:
Swimming pool admissions	Ride public bus
Recreational center lessons, dances	Recycle
Garbage pickup	Install fire sprinklers
Library cards	Implement weed abatement
Video rentals	License all pets
Wellness-program services	Contribute to library, art programs
Pets	Assist in animal shelter
	Supervise youth sports
	Host neighborhood watch open house
	Tour through police, fire, public works, or other departments
	Participate in public safety seminars
	Attend child safety programs
	Support public school reading and grade enhancement programs
	Invite fire inspection
	Initiate fundraising for library
	Participate in crime prevention week
	Conserve water
	Contribute to major cleanup of park
	Serve as crossing guard
	Maintain median strip
	Receive "yard-of-month" reward
	Adopt a highway
	Maintain a park
	Contribute toward park equipment

cities and counties offer such freebies as movie tickets, logo merchandise, or pictures of youth on police motorcycles.

Attendance at Meetings

Officials most frequently complain of the failure of the public to attend council and other public meetings. Some local governments extend written invitations to randomly selected citizens to boost attendance, interest, and involvement. Incentives range from ties, certificates, and prints of city hall to photo sessions with the county executive. Some governing bodies use a "councilmember-for-the-day" program to bring citizens to meetings.

As the public demands more and more from government but pays less and less tax, and as the citizenry moves further away from government, the very foundation of our system—the office of citizen—has eroded. Efforts to reencourage citizen participation in the system must take new and creative directions. It is genuinely feasible for government to reenthronize the role of civic virtue and to ensure meaningful participation in local government; the use of incentives and rewards can be a factor in that participation. ■■

¹Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), p. 183.

²V. A. Hodgkinson and M. S. Weitzman, *Giving and Volunteering in the United States: Findings from a National Survey* (Washington, D.C.: Independent Sector, 1988), p. 8.

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