

Understanding the AIM Impact Tool

I. General Concepts.

a. The AIM Tool.

AIM stands for Activity Impacts Measurement. The AIM Tool is a set of benchmarks which are developed by an entity, organization, or board to help it evaluate (1) which projects, events, or issues are worthy of its scrutiny; (2) if the activity deserves their scrutiny, the level of their attention needed for it; and (3) whether the project is “good” for the entity.

For purposes of discussion, the remainder of this discussion will assume the entity is a hypothetical city with a population of 100,000, governed by a city board or council, with a city administrator and appropriate staff.

b. Benchmarks.

AIM assumes an entity develops benchmarks consistent with its construction, goals, or forces guiding it. AIM suggests using four categories of benchmarks, with individual benchmarks developed within them. This discussion will assume four categories: Nature, Economy, Society, and Well Being:

	Nature Impacts to Environment	
Well Being Impacts to individual persons and smaller social groups		Economy Monetary/Fiscal Impacts
	Society Impacts implicating governmental bodies, schools, infrastructure, other bodies	

A typical economic impact might be “Creation or loss of jobs.” Note that benchmarks should be neutral, not positive or negative. For example, “More high-paying jobs” would be an inappropriate benchmark, “Job Salary” would.

A team of persons including the governing board should build the AIM benchmarks after considering the four categories and their relation to the jurisdiction or entity.

c. The AIM Worksheet.

The AIM Worksheet is a table of all the generated benchmarks, and areas for a use to score each benchmark numerically with a positive or negative number. The Worksheet adds up all the positive and negative values of the benchmarks to produce an Activity Score, and the absolute values of those numbers to produce an overall Impact Level.

d. Impacts vs. Scores.

AIM delivers an Impact Level, which, as noted above, is the absolute value of the positive and negative impacts determined by a project, event, or activity. By adding all the project positive and negative impacts, AIM delivers an Activity Score. For example, a project that provides a -5 in Nature impacts, +10 in Economy impacts, +10 in Society impacts, and a -10 in Well Being impacts would deliver the following AIM products:

	Nature -5	
Well Being -10	Project X	Economy +10
	Society +10	

AIM Impact Level: 35 (absolute values of -10 and -5 are 15, plus 20, equals 35)

AIM Score: +5

This indicates a project that has a relatively high impact, and a fairly low, but positive, score.

e. AIM Impact Level.

The AIM Impact Level must be a number from 0 to 100. A score of 0 indicates a project or activity that has absolutely no impact, good or bad, on the community. Except for the fact that the AIM Activity Score (below) cannot be greater than this number, it has no or little

relation to whether the project ought to be undertaken (the Score), only to what extent there are in fact impacts based on the benchmarks provided. The higher the impact level:

- The more staff time may be necessary to analyze the project for issues.
- The more change, good or bad, the project will inject into the community.
- The more complicated the project will tend to be.
- The more supervision the project will require.
- The more political decisions that might have to be made with respect to the project.
- The more governing body oversight that will be required as the project moves forward.
- The higher the level of infrastructure needs.

- as well as many other impacts. AIM sets as a default an impact level of 20 or above for it to be worthy of the high governing board's direct attention; however, each board should determine what level is appropriate for its jurisdiction.

An impact level of 20-50 suggests a moderate impact on the entity or community, either affecting up to half of the jurisdiction's inhabitants in a significant way, or affecting all of the inhabitants in a lesser way. An example might be a major regional shopping center or corporate campus moving into the community.

An impact level of 50 or greater indicates a high impact event or project, requiring significant mobilization of governmental and community forces to accomplish or deal with it. An example might be a significant environmental catastrophe or major upheaval in the jurisdiction's transportation system.

Using a maximum AIM impact level of 100, then, by default, using four general categories, no one category should exceed 25 in impact level, in a typical situation.

f. AIM Activity Score.

By adding all the positive and negative benchmark scores, AIM delivers an Activity Score. AIM scores must be between -100 and +100. A positive score indicates a project that should be considered for undertaking. Projects or activities scoring +20 or above would appear, according to the benchmarks, very much in line with the vision of the board or entity. As in the last example:

	Nature -5	
Well Being -10	Project X	Economy +10
	Society +10	

AIM Impact Level: 35

AIM Score: +5

Because the project scores a +5, it should be considered for undertaking. But since the score is a low-positive, the high impact score indicates the project might not be worth the amount of effort it might require to undertake, or that significant policy decisions need to be made to determine if the project should go forward. In this particular case, the data indicates the Board should be asked the question: “Do the benefits to economy and society really outweigh the negative impacts to our environment and well being?”

II. AIM Usage

a. When Should an AIM Worksheet be completed?

An AIM worksheet should be completed when a project, activity, or event is sufficiently defined so as to enable a user or team of users to evaluate the AIM benchmarks. As the project unfolds, the worksheet should be revised to take into account new facts that might alter the benchmarks. Changes might indicate a needed change to a project.

b. Who Should Complete an AIM Worksheet?

Generally, staff to a Board should complete the AIM Worksheet, with a summary report to the Board. Individuals, however, might complete worksheets to assess perceptions or data needs with respect to the project or activity (see examples).

c. Can an individual category exceed the default of 25?

A significant event, such as a large-scale environmental catastrophe, would generate an AIM impact level of 100:

	Nature -25	
Well Being -25	Extreme Event	Economy -25
	Society -25	

AIM Impact Level: 100

AIM Score: -100

It is possible, however, to have an extreme economic event, for example, such as a major global corporation leaving a region, which would have little impact on Nature, but would be devastating to the Economy:

	Nature -5	
Well Being -20	Extreme Event	Economy -60
	Society -15	

AIM Impact Level: 100

AIM Score: -100

In this case, the impacts to Economy are so overwhelming as to justify a number well in excess of the default.

Additionally, a jurisdiction might value, for example, its environment and well being more than its economy or level of government services, based on its geographical location or political sentiments. In such a case, its defaults might be, by default, set to different levels to apply its benchmarks:

	Nature Default Max 30	
Well Being Default Max 30	Defaults for Jurisdiction A	Economy Default Max 20
	Society Default Max 20	

Shaping the defaults allows the AIM Worksheet user more latitude in assigning benchmark points in certain areas. In the above example, the user has more points to assign in the Nature and Well Being areas, by default, and would need to justify a higher ranking in one of the other categories. But in the end, the scores for each area would be dictated by the individual benchmarks.

d. AIM Benchmark Granularity as Affecting Impact Level.

The more granular the benchmarks, the greater the resulting Impact Level. This concept can be illustrated as follows. Consider two AIM Worksheets, both with Economy areas that have similar benchmarks, but where one breaks out the individual elements, the other does not:

Aim Worksheet Subpart – Project X			
Worksheet A Economy		Worksheet B Economy	
Benchmark	Score	Benchmark	Score
Job creation or loss, job quality, job salary	+5	Job creation or loss	-5
		Job quality	+5
		Job salary	+5
Impact Level: 5 Score: +5		Impact Level: 15 Score: +5	

In Worksheet A, the user has looked at the entire “Jobs” category and has determined that a +5 has occurred or will occur as a result of the realization of Project X. This results in an Impact Level of 5,

and a Score of +5. On Worksheet B, the same score emerged, but because the user was forced to itemize each sub-benchmark, a higher impact level of 15 resulted. Worksheet B shows that, in Project X, jobs were lost, but those remaining were of higher quality and salary, which resulted in a net positive score. Worksheet A did not “tell the story” as specifically, but the end result was the same.

What is significant about this difference is that the level of detail, or granularity, in the AIM Worksheet will directly impact the level of scrutiny of the Project X by the governing board. The higher the level of interest the Board has in the individual impacts of Project X, the more granular the worksheet should be. If the Board is more interested in “big picture” impacts, it should adopt less granular benchmarks. In this case, Project X, completed in Worksheet A, might not make it to the Board’s radar. But with Worksheet B, there would be a greater likelihood the project would go beyond the minimum Impact Level to trigger greater attention. The governing body should determine what level of granularity it wants in each of its benchmark categories so as to be comfortable with the AIM Impact Level results.

By way of example, consider a change to an existing enterprise that will alter its job structure as noted above. Some people will lose jobs. Others will have more rewarding, better paying jobs. Let’s assume our board has some say in whether the change will take place. Staff has, under each worksheet, determined a positive AIM Score: the change should go forward. Is the Board, in this kind of situation, interested in the end result, that we will have more highly-paid jobs in our community and a favorable economic impact? If so, less granularity is appropriate. Is the Board on the other hand more concerned with the individual impacts, good or bad, and the intermediate changes that will result? If so, the benchmarks should have more granularity.

AIM accommodates either approach, but the reader should not equate “less granularity” with “less concern about people.” In the above scenario, people are losing jobs. Everyone should be concerned about that. The point is not to ignore that concern, but instead to reflect the overall level of scrutiny the governing board should apply in making its myriad decisions on projects and activities within its jurisdictions.

Another way to address this issue is to increase the granularity when individual elements of a category are opposed, as in the above case, but not increase if they do not.

e. AIM Benchmark Equality and Calculation.

Those constructing benchmarks should be careful to make sure that individual benchmarks are roughly equivalent to each other. In completely different places of a Worksheet, a user might be confronted with:

AIM Worksheet - Project X	
Benchmark	Score
Pond water clarity	
....	
Benchmark	Score
Gain or loss of 10-25 jobs	

If the user placed “1” in each of the above areas, the overall result would mean that whatever the benefit to “pond water clarity” was exactly the same as a gain of 10-25 jobs. Although the user might be savvy enough to put “5” in the second benchmark to reflect a 5 times more significant impact, for example, a better solution might be to change the Worksheet (illustrative only, the author makes no claim these ought or ought not to be equivalent):

AIM Worksheet - Project X	
Benchmark	Score
Pond water clarity – high impact to 80 or more bodies	
....	
Benchmark	Score
Gain or loss of 2 jobs	

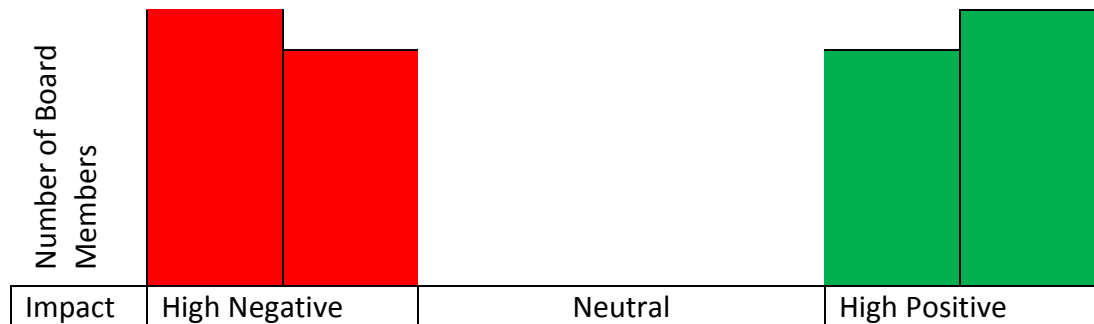
Now if the project impacted, say, 160 ponds, the score for “Pond water clarity” would be “2”; ten jobs impacted would get a “5.”

Likewise, rough calculation of each general area should produce results that reflect the kind of project or activity involved. For example, if this is an “economic” project, one would expect the Economy area to garner the bulk of the impacts. In general, the more benchmarks that are present in a given area, the more likely that area will generate higher impacts.

f. Individual and Average Impact and Score Analysis.

As noted above, staff would generally prepare an AIM Worksheet for the governing board regarding any project, initiative, or activity, which will provide meaningful information as to the kind and quality of impacts, and whether the project meets the goals of the board, as expressed by the benchmarks. When this is done, there is at least initial agreement as to the numbers. If a team cannot agree on the appropriate number for a benchmark, it should usually resolve the agreement using research tools before presenting its findings to the governing board.

But, particularly in situations where perception is important on a pending matter, or direction is needed on options, it might be appropriate for individuals to complete AIM Worksheets to determine where more data is needed for the governing body to come to an informed consensus. For example, consider a project where Company X, a manufacturing plant, is considering coming to town, but needs infrastructure improvements. “Job creation or loss” is an important benchmark. Staff tests the waters on the project by asking the governing board to complete an AIM Worksheet on the project, and is surprised to find the individual data shows a wide disparity among the board in whether that benchmark is positive or negative:



Many members gave a high negative score, many gave a high positive score. This clued staff in to poll the board, and they found a perception from some that Company X brings in jobs to communities, but that others had heard that, although that is true, what happens is the company gets established, then transfers all those jobs back to its corporate headquarters in another state, leaving behind low-skilled staff to maintain the plant.

Although this is perhaps a trivial situation, in the sense that staff would probably know of the difficulties with Company X in

advance, this scenario does illustrate that the AIM tool can alert staff to research an issue before presenting a proposal to the governing board. It is highly unlikely the board can at least agree on the facts provided by the AIM Worksheet.

III. Examples. The following simple examples will illustrate some of the concepts stated above.

a. Neighborhood Commercial Development: Just Above the Radar.

The typical neighborhood commercial development is normally just over the limit where many city boards and councils will get actively involved in scrutinizing the project. AIM would suggest an Impact Level of 20-25. Economic impacts are fairly minor, although jobs are created and most communities perceive these developments as an asset to residential property values. Nature impacts should be at a minimum. Society impacts are possible, with increased crime and supervision, but again, minimal. The largest positive impacts are to residents' well being in the community:

	Nature 0	
Well Being +15	Typical Neighborhood Commercial Development	Economy +8
	Society -2	

AIM Impact Level: 25
 AIM Score: +23

This is a great project for the community. It has a relatively low impact level, requires little ongoing societal maintenance, yet generates a nice positive score.

b. Neighborhood Commercial Development Gone Awry.

Take that same development, however, and add a bar/restaurant, which might require a conditional use permit, and all-night drug store with drive-thru, and put it next to a watershed. The results might be quite a bit different:

	Nature -10	
Well Being +5	Typical Neighborhood Commercial Development	Economy +8
	Society -10	

AIM Impact Level: 33

AIM Score: -7

In this case, the AIM Worksheet scored negatives for runoff, reduced well being positive benchmarks because of late-night noise and light spillage, and put more perceived stress on police and fire societal constructs. Now we have a significantly more impactful project, which will trigger more Board scrutiny, and the AIM score indicates we should not go forward. Although this is rather a trivial example, it illustrates that the Worksheet clues in staff to fix these issues before moving on. With many more benchmarks to evaluate, the Worksheet can help pinpoint problems that might otherwise escape notice.

c. Which Way Do We Go with Our Vacant Land?

AIM can help discover which of several competing options might be appropriate in a given situations. City owns a parcel of land and has two potential buyers. Company A wants to create a high-tech construction facility, which will have some negative environmental impacts but create some good jobs. Company B wants to build the City’s first community recreational center, completing the task for minimal costs to the City, but retaining the ability to provide for profit its own recreational amenities on the site as well. Both projects are in keeping with the City’s goals and visions. But after applying the benchmarks, one choice seems clear:

	Nature -10	
Well Being +5	Company A High-Tech Construction Facility	Economy +20
	Society 0	

AIM Impact Level: 35
AIM Score: +15

	Nature +5	
Well Being +15	Company B Community Recreational Center	Economy +5
	Society +15	

AIM Impact Level: 40
AIM Score: +40

In this case, mitigation of the environmental issues could help out Company A, but at least in this hypothetical, Company B’s proposal seems to advance the governing body’s AIM benchmarks the best.

d. What is your Hot Political Decision?

Sometimes projects carry with them necessary evils, but might be good for the community. A political decision might be necessary:

	Nature +30	
Well Being +20	Wonderful Recreational Opportunity Eats Up Prime Commercial Land	Economy -30
	Society -15	

AIM Impact Level: 95

AIM Score: +5

In this conundrum, a spectacular recreational, environmentally sensitive development will provide great opportunities for residents and visitors, but it will create few front-end jobs, have severe up-front economic impacts, and place more burdens on the infrastructure. Does the long-term vision for growth outweigh the short-term loss of jobs and tax on our societal structures?

e.

These examples are fairly simplistic, but they do illustrate how AIM can be used to examine projects and activities from a number of different perspectives, and how to apply specific benchmarks as determined by your board or council to those activities in a meaningful way.