

Customizing Bureaucracy

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With today's rapid change, local governments are finding themselves having to deliver services in a more distinct and customized format. No longer does treating every resident the same satisfy even the once-contented customer. Why is it that the safeguards and procedures put into place to escape the historic corruption in local government no longer hold?

The whole reason for reforming the Tammany Hall model of government was to professionalize the services that local government provides through the council-manager form of government. It seems so logical, to ensure that all residents receive the same services to avoid the perception of political favoritism. So why does it not work as it does in the textbooks?

This article relates the experience that Arlington, Texas, had in addressing the natural evolution of localities that have not been master-planned communities in the first place. Because master planning has only been a trend in the latter half of this century, few local jurisdictions in the United States have a majority of neighborhoods that have been developed at the same time. Historically, localities have started with a central core and rings or pockets of neighborhoods growing around the core. The different infrastructure stages in traditional local governments are causing localities to discover that they cannot treat all segments of the community in the

same manner. Demographics, the age of the housing stock, and neighborhood conditions are dictating that cities and counties customize their services in order to remain useful to their citizens.

In Arlington's Case

In 1996, Arlington began to tailor its municipal services through two approaches, both still ongoing. The city has taken the traditional master-planning process and divided the city into sectors. Arlington's sector planning distinguishes six sectors in the city that have many common characteristics, including the age of the housing stock, commercial development, and identifiable geographic boundaries. Seven years after the start of sector planning, Arlington will have a master plan that will be customized and that will reflect the needs of a diverse community through its distinct sectors.

The community partner team concept was originally developed and adopted as part of the work of the city council's Comprehensive Plan Implementation Committee in January 1997. The community partner division forms teams composed of citizen stakeholders, service providers, and city staff members. The goal is to deploy community assets and resources through a team approach.

The first example of this approach uses the community partner team concept to carry out the sector plan once it is adopted by city council. There currently are three community partner teams overseeing the implementation of sector strategies. The second approach has the team working in a task force format. The task force is convened to work in a specific neighborhood concentrating on short-term strategies.

The task force format's basic premise is that the city already is dedicating a finite amount of resources to certain neighborhoods; if these resources could be shifted or reallocated to address neighborhood concerns directly, new dollars would not be needed to resolve

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specific neighborhood issues. Existing resources would be able to address specific neighborhood concerns.

Team Description

A pilot project for the community partner team concept was conducted in 1997. Two neighborhoods in the eastern part of Arlington, designated as the control group and the pilot group (the latter being the Valley View neighborhood), were chosen for the pilot project. The project began with a randomly mailed survey (a pre-test) sent to residents in both of the neighborhoods in January 1997. Armed with the survey results, the Valley View Community Partner Team was formed. The team included:

- Three neighborhood residents.
- A church pastor from the neighborhood.
- A mail carrier for the neighborhood.
- The principal of the elementary school.
- A code enforcement inspector.
- A police sergeant and one patrol officer.
- The assistant to the city manager.
- The health department director.
- The local library branch manager.

Community partner team meetings were held between March and September, and the project concluded with the same survey (the post-test) being mailed again in September. The effectiveness of the pilot project was to be measured through the changes in the number of the city's service delivery calls and through citizen satisfaction. Ideally, the number of reactive service calls necessary in the pilot area would be reduced, citizen satisfaction would increase, and city staff could raise their levels of productivity and effectiveness.

Citizen Survey and Perceptions

To develop a list of objectives and baseline indicators, a citizen survey was randomly mailed, as mentioned, to residents of the two selected neighborhoods. The survey, designed to gauge citizen satisfaction both before and after the pilot project, contained 14 controlled-response questions similar to those posed in a previous citywide survey for the ICMA benchmarking project. The answers were assigned point values, and an aggregate score was calculated so that changes could be more easily identified. Two open-response questions also were included to allow residents to comment freely. The questions and potential responses were:

1. How satisfied are you with the quality of life in your city? (Very satisfied, satisfied, dissatisfied, very dissatisfied, no opinion)
2. Rate police service. (Questions 2–13: excellent, good, fair, poor, no opinion)
3. Rate fire service.
4. Rate park service.
5. Rate library service.
6. Rate street service
7. Rate code enforcement service.
8. Rate park appearances.
9. Rate park access.
10. Rate availability of materials at the libraries.
11. Rate customer service at the libraries.

Figure 1. Ratings Given in "Before" and "After" Surveys

Questions	Control Neighborhood		Valley View Neighborhood	
	Pre-Test Score	Post-Test Score (n=7) ¹	Pre-Test Score	Post-Test Score (n=8) ¹
Quality of Life	1.89	2.14	1.88	2.25
Police Service	1.33	1.29	1.67	2.00
Fire Service	1.25	1.33	1.38	1.20
Park Service	1.71	1.25	2.00	2.67
Library Service	2.00	2.00	1.63	2.17
Street Service	2.38	2.17	2.73	2.67
Code Enforcement	1.71	1.80	2.71	2.20
Park Appearance	1.75	1.80	1.70	2.33
Park Access	1.71	1.80	1.70	2.33
Library Materials	1.75	2.60	1.71	2.29
Library Access	1.63	1.80	1.43	2.17
Neighborhood Appearance	2.67	2.29	2.73	3.00
Rapport with Neighbors	2.00	2.57	2.55	2.43
Police Visibility	1.67	1.29	1.70	1.14

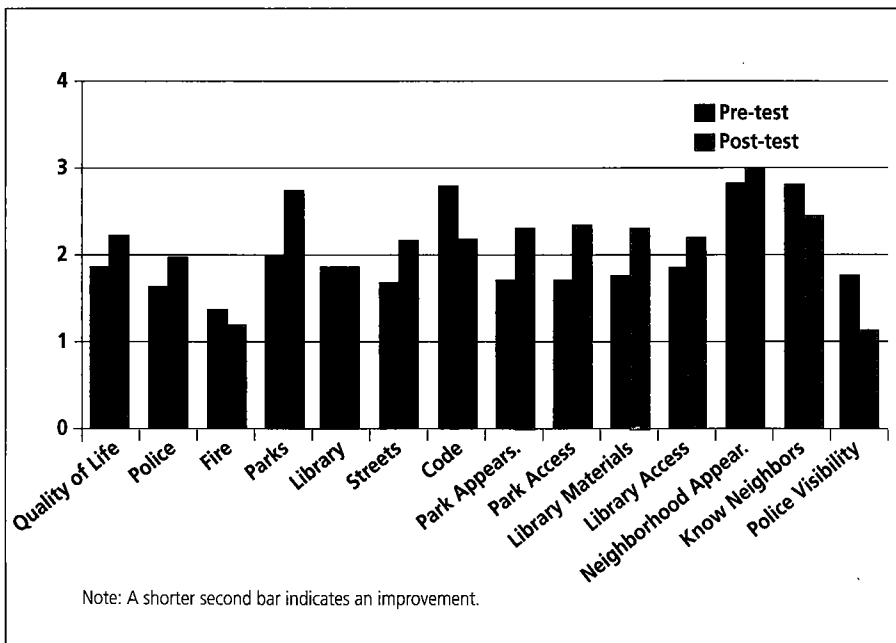
¹The meaning of "n" is number of responses.

- 12. Rate the appearance of your neighborhood.
- 13. How well do you know your neighbors?
- 14. How long has it been since you have seen a police officer in your neigh-

borhood? (1 week, 1 month, 6 months, >1 year)

Controlled-response answers were assigned point values from 1 to 4. If the respondent marked no opinion or did

Figure 2. Valley View Neighborhood's Overall Pre- and Post-Test Results



not answer the question, no value was assigned. The results of the citizen surveys are shown in Figure 1, with 1 being a favorable score and 4 being the least positive rating.

A graphic representation of the changes in scores between the pre- and the post-test (see Figure 2) reveals that citizen perception of many city services worsened. However, the figure, which documents the changes in results specifically in the Valley View neighborhood, shows improvements in the areas of fire, streets, code enforcement, knowledge of neighbors, and police visibility. It is important to note that the service areas that did not receive a better rating in the post-test response were the areas that were not stressed during the pilot project for the community partner team concept.

Figure 3 depicts the majority of post-test responses on the two open-ended questions regarding the pilot neighborhood. The open-ended question yielded a dominant response that neighbors were the best thing in their neighborhood. It appears from these responses that many neighbors do know one another and thus have probably lived in the area for more than the seven years traditional for an average Arlington resident.

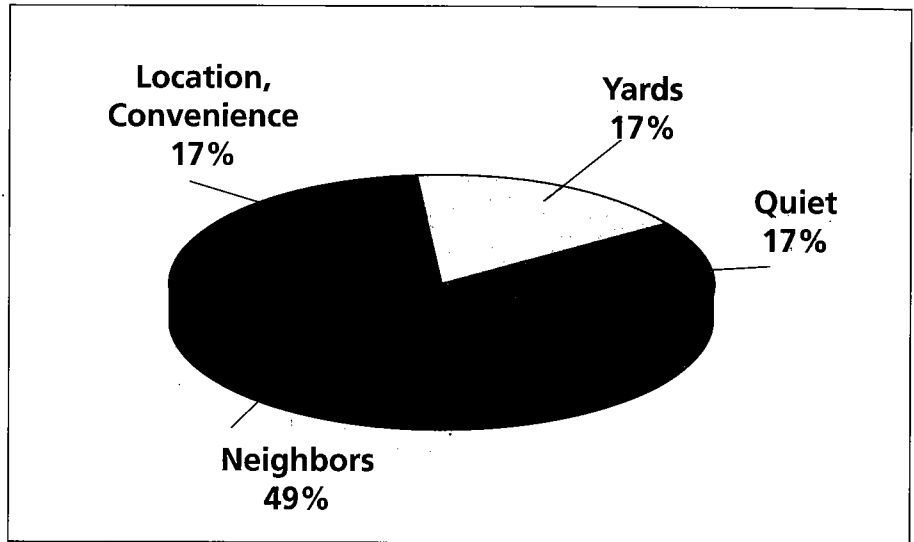
Community Indicators

One of the major indicators of the effectiveness of the community partner team concept would be a reduction in calls for service. Such a reduction would allow city departments to refocus their energy and resources into the more positive aspects of delivering services. Instead of responding reactively to calls, police and code enforcement officials could work to address the root causes of neighborhood issues.

Police Calls

Over the course of the project, the three types of calls for police service that were tracked were for domestic disturbances,

Figure 3. Best Things About the Neighborhood: Valley View Post-Test Results



loud noise/disturbances, and suspicious-persons complaints.

As seen in Figure 4, the numbers of police calls for the two neighborhoods were similar, even though the pilot Valley View neighborhood is almost twice as large as the control neighborhood and has a larger concentration of residential properties. The calls in Valley View peaked in May, when the greatest involvement from neighborhood residents occurred, and toward the end of the year, after the pilot project ended. Although this fact is not shown on Figure 4, during the last three months of 1997, calls for domestic disturbances and loud noise actually decreased, and a sharp rise occurred in suspicious-persons calls.

Code Enforcement Calls

Another measure to be used in evaluating the project would be two types of code enforcement calls: parking in a private yard, and keeping unclean premises. Through cross-training of city staff members and empowering neighborhood residents, the city hoped that some ongoing problems would be resolved and that code enforcement calls in the neighborhood would be reduced. Results are shown in Figure 5.

Unlike with the data on police calls, the disparity in the sizes of the two neighborhoods becomes apparent upon review of the code enforcement data. The Valley View neighborhood generated five to seven times as many calls as the control neighborhood during 1997. Data used for this measure were compiled from reactive calls, in which the code enforcement division has responded to calls received.

These figures show that there were peaks in the numbers of calls received in February, May, September, and October. February and September were right after the surveys were mailed, and May was the period of the most concentrated effort by the community partner team among the neighborhood residents. It was important to consider only reactive

call data because the code enforcement division was simultaneously testing a comprehensive proactive program.

Calls tapered off toward the end of the year, after the project had ended. This diminution correlates with the results of the survey, which show an improvement in the satisfaction level of residents about code enforcement.

"Attention Mentions"

During the first of nine meetings of the Valley View Community Partner Team,

members were given a chance to get to know one another and to learn more about each community resource organization's activities and investments in the neighborhood. It became clear during the second meeting that the group needed to focus and to determine a goal in order to generate additional enthusiasm and resources. At the second meeting, the team took a map of the neighborhood, mapped out the assets available within it, and then identified areas that needed some of the team's attention.

Figure 4. Selected Police Calls for Service, 1997 (Domestic disturbance, loud noise, suspicious persons)

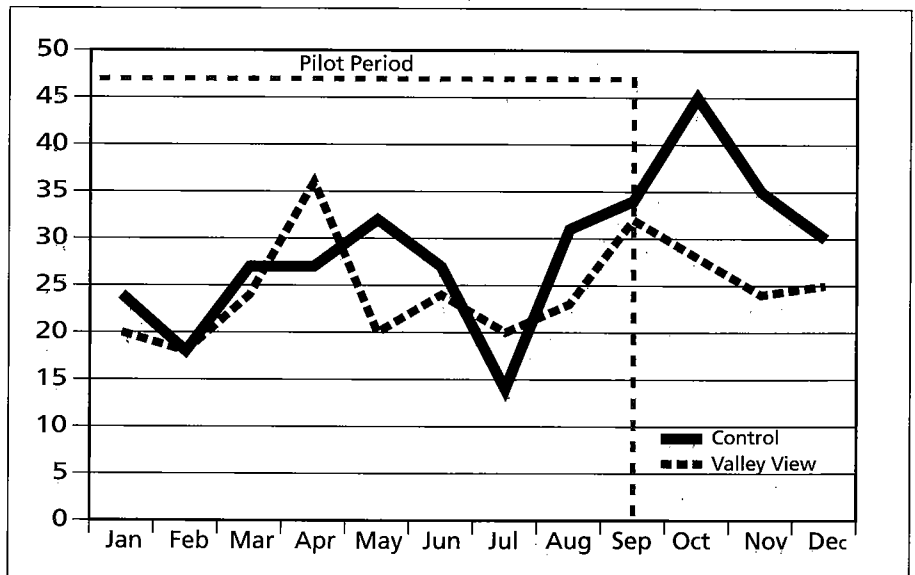


Figure 5. Code Enforcement Calls, 1997

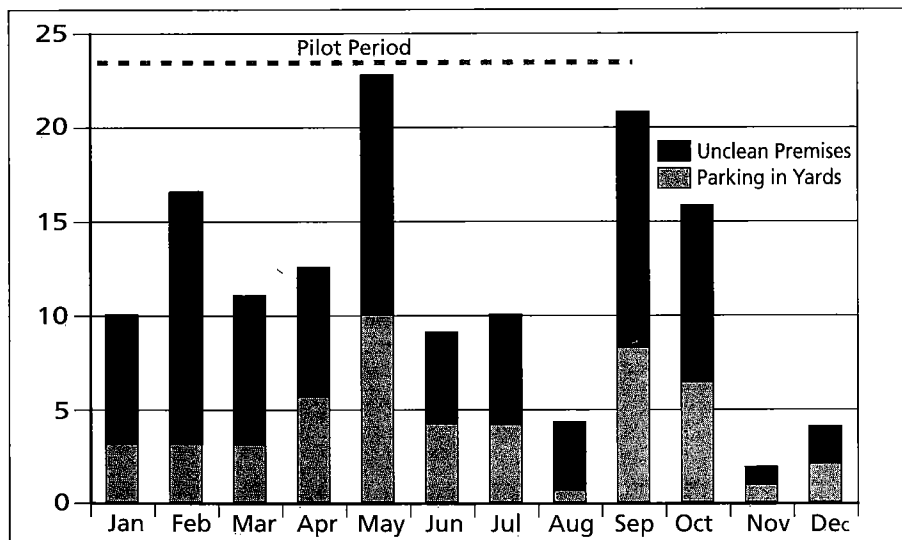
Month	Parking in Yard		Unclean Premises	
	Control	Valley View	Control	Valley View
January	4	3	0	7
February	0	3	1	14
March	2	3	0	8
April	0	6	2	7
May	2	10	0	13
June	1	4	0	5
July	0	4	1	6
August	0	1	3	3
September	3	8	1	13
October	0	7	4	9
November	0	1	0	1
December	0	2	1	2
Total	12	52	13	88

The majority of “attention mentions” concerned one particular address in the neighborhood. Local government managers will be able to identify with the problem of one property owner who stays just on the conforming side of every law and ordinance in the city. This neighborhood was dealing with such a house where the front door was never closed and an animal was chained outside the front but could run throughout the house. The house had no air conditioning, so during the hot Texas summer, the windows remained open all the time. To complete this pic-

ture, the property owner used to repair vacuum cleaners and had thrown a blue plastic tarp over a vacuum “sculpture” in the front yard.

Motivated by some outstanding warrants and by the loan of a dump truck from the streets department, the property owner eventually cleaned up the property and began to close his front door. Several neighbors gave him oscillating fans to keep the air in his house circulating. Unfortunately, at about the same time, the owner’s animal (which he had told the neighbors was a wolf) bit a child from the neighborhood.

Figure 6. Code Enforcement Calls in the Pilot Neighborhood, 1997



The community partner team quickly involved the city’s animal control department and the dangerous dog ordinance to work out a solution. The flexibility and creativity of the community partner team led to some nontraditional solutions that would not normally have been used. With all of the resources available, police officers were able to write loose dog citations based on eyewitness reports; the animal control officers were given special dispatch orders in case the animal was ever sighted loose again; and code enforcement officers were able to clean up an unsightly property by using a street-department dump truck. In the past, these departments would have worked separately, with the result taking four to five months instead of one-and-a-half months.

Results

Efforts to customize services to the needs of a neighborhood through the community partner team concept were effective particularly involving the workload of the city’s code enforcement division. The results of police calls for service, however, were mixed: calls about domestic disturbances and loud noise declined, but suspicious-persons calls increased. Several staff members noted that the residents’ heightened awareness of strange persons in the neighborhood may have caused more suspicious-persons calls to be turned in.

Quantitatively, as the figures in this report show, the pilot program had minimal success. Qualitatively, the opportunity for departments to work cooperatively on a project increased their communications and their sharing of resources. When the team worked alongside residents and other community institutions, relationships and resources were shared, and some connections were established that will benefit that neighborhood for a longer time than the life of the pilot project.

In conclusion, a community partner team works best when common goals



can be determined at the outset and when concrete results can be achieved. The pilot community partner team was particularly successful because of the effort it concentrated on one residential property that was an eyesore and a nuisance. This nuisance had been tolerated by the residents and not effectively addressed by city departments for many years before the Valley View Community Partner Team project. Visible results bolstered the team's conviction that shared resources go much further in addressing neighborhood issues than a lone city staff member's efforts or those of one neighbor. Future projects using a community partner team will be initiated when an issue becomes too complex for one city department. These issues are the types that truly benefit from shared efforts and resources.

In the end, customizing services and

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approaches really may be the most effective use of taxpayer resources. Instead of spreading resources and staff evenly across the city to address issues on a reactive basis, it is invigorating from the city employee's and the resident's perspective to tackle and resolve an issue actively. Customizing may do more than eliminate a problem; it may energize employees and citizens to look differently at the issues they deal with on a day-to-day basis. **PM**

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