

Engaging Citizens in Strategic Planning: Rock Hill, South Carolina

ROCK HILL, SOUTH CAROLINA, IS A LONG-TIME PARTICIPANT IN ICMA'S performance measurement and performance management programs, most recently ICMA Insights™. Starting in 2011, Rock Hill has received a Certificate in Performance Management each year from the ICMA Center for Performance Analytics.

And since 2003, the city has used The National Citizen Survey™ as a tool to assess resident satisfaction with community amenities and government services. While the city has always found the survey results to be useful, in FY 2012 the city began using the survey data more deliberately so the results would be more meaningfully applied to the strategic plan.

Going beyond the survey numbers

To gain additional insights into citizen perceptions, city leadership decided supplementing the survey data with qualitative data would both complement and enhance the survey results, making them more effective in the strategic planning process.

The city's first step was to draft a timeline to align survey distribution, review, and analysis with citizen focus groups. The city manager's office led efforts in developing an appropriate implementation schedule and contracted with the local university's political science department to manage focus group recruitment. The university routinely conducts regional polls through its research center and had all the necessary resources – including trained staff and a computer-aided telephone system – to contact potential focus group participants. National Research Center, Inc. (NRC), a research firm that produces The National Citizen Survey and specializes in performance measurement and evaluation, was brought in to facilitate three citizen focus groups.

The focus groups

The goals of the focus groups were to obtain qualitative data from the opinions of residents and better understand their priorities for the community to help shape the city's strategic plan. In conjunction with city staff, NRC developed a script with questions that were asked in all three focus groups. The script focused on participants' current perspectives about Rock Hill, their visions for the community in the future, and their opinions about city goals.

The focus groups were held at a city facility, but city staff were not present. All sessions were digitally audio-recorded and transcribed to facilitate analysis. NRC identified key statements and general themes in a focus group summary report.

CASE PROFILE



Rock Hill, SC

Population:
69,103

Square miles:
43.17

Median household income:
\$42,550

Form of government:
Council-manager

Sharing and using the focus group data

Committed to transparency, city leadership shared the summary report, full survey results, and focus group transcripts with elected officials and senior management, framing the material as guiding documents for a city council strategic planning retreat. Not only was the local newspaper provided the full survey results in advance of the retreat, the media was also invited to discuss the results with the city manager and public affairs staff.

During the two-day retreat, NRC reviewed both the survey results and the focus group feedback, and a city staff representative offered highlights on department progress toward meeting established benchmarks. This format allowed for meaningful comparisons of actual performance to public satisfaction and perception.

For example, safety perception ratings were compared with actual crime data trends. The city's survey results showed that citizens' perception of being very or somewhat safe from violent crimes was at an all-time high; this perception trended with actual crime data, which showed violent crime rates at historic lows. Focus group feedback and survey results also revealed that the perception of safety in the downtown area after dark continued to receive some of the lowest marks, despite the fact that the downtown area had very low crime rates. Consequently, one of the tasks developed during the retreat was for the city to hold focus groups to delve deeper into ways the city could improve the perception of safety in the downtown area.

Lessons learned

By coupling citizen survey results with qualitative focus groups, Rock Hill found it was important to:

- *Reflect on the data:* Delve deeper into the data themselves. How do the survey results compare with actual citizen comments? What are the trends in performance? How does the city compare with its peers?
- *Discuss the data:* Create structured opportunities such as a retreat, community open house, or staff meeting to discuss the context of results, the results themselves, and next steps.
- *Share the data:* Commit to sharing the results with staff, elected officials, residents, and the media. Transparency helps promote an insightful and rich discussion that not only helps the local government respond to citizen needs, but also conveys a commitment to the community.

For a lengthier description of Rock Hill's use of performance measures in strategic planning, see the InFocus Report, *Using Performance Measurement for Effective Strategic Planning*, available through ICMA's [online store](#).

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