



The National Citizen Survey™ Panel Report from the Annual ICMA Conference in San Diego, October 17, 2004

Four jurisdictions spanning the west coast, east coast, Gulf of Mexico and the Rocky Mountains were represented in a panel discussion of their uses of The National Citizen Survey™ (The NCS). Tom Miller, president of National Research Center, Inc., the firm that conceived and conducts The NCS with ICMA, introduced the session by saying, “the weak link in citizen surveys is our understanding about how jurisdictions use them.” The panel showed how strong the link can be. Each presenter explained how The NCS was being used. Each saw the value of a regular sounding of their residents so that changes in public opinion could be monitored.

***The NCS as a measure of performance:* Richard (Dick) Kelton, City Manager of Palm Coast Florida:**

There are lots of ways a government attempts to understand if it is on the right track. In Palm Coast a population boom changed the community from a sleepy retirement spot into a city. The manager and council need to keep their hand on the pulse of resident opinion at the same time that they track the objective measures of performance that are assessed through ICMA’s Center for Performance Measurement (CPM). “We use quarterly and sometimes monthly reports to council” that integrate information from the NCS and CPM as council deliberates budget options. “With The NCS results,” said Kelton, “we can focus council on the big picture, like improving traffic and infrastructure.” This is where council is most effective. The comparative data that The NCS provides lets Mr. Kelton know “where we are weak and where we need to put our limited resources,” because it offers resident evaluation from other communities and gives a sense of what heights are reasonable to shoot for in any given service.

***The NCS as banner:* Dave Benson, Executive Assistant to the Mayor of Pasadena, Texas**

Pasadena, Texas operates with a mayor-council form of government. For professional managers, the strong mayor is always a little suspect, because mayors tend not to study the science of public administration. However in Pasadena, Texas, a suburb of Houston, the mayor and his executive assistant understand no less than city managers the advantages of listening to residents and communicating back to residents what has been heard. In Pasadena, where The NCS has been conducted every year since 2002, the process of listening has been formalized though there is still plenty of opportunity for residents to have *ad hoc* gripe sessions with city hall. Benson explained that just the process of conducting The NCS has helped residents to understand that their elected officials care about their perspective. Too often, the only communication to city hall had been complaints to elected officials, but The NCS permits council to understand those complaints in the broader context of citizen opinion. What the council hears is a more reasoned perspective and “some really good news”: public works ratings have climbed 31% over 2 years and code enforcement has started to inch up after initial low ratings. Along with the good news in the survey, the areas targeted for improvement are communicated to residents so that they are clear that their feedback has become part of the city’s improvement plan. In Benson’s



words, “what get measured gets done well,” and it also “needs to be communicated well.” Elections are inefficient ways to get citizen feedback, because if we wait for elections to know if things are on the right track, it’s too late.

The NCS as gateway: Gustavo Cordova, Town Manager of Taos, New Mexico

Cordova runs a “tiny town with a big ego.” It takes a lot of self confidence to talk up a citizen survey when the responses to the survey are not off-the-charts wonderful. Cordova himself rated his results as “C-”. Taos is one of the smallest jurisdictions using The NCS but it had one of the biggest plans to use the results. When the middling results came back, Cordova, his staff and the mayor had no thought to hide the findings. Instead they mounted a campaign to bring in many residents to help decide how to improve their ratings. They started by meeting with the editorial board of the *Taos News*. They purposefully invited some of the town’s best known critics to join them in the improvement process. Their “community round table” was a model of government transparency. The doors of city hall were flung open for all the residents to walk through and to join together to solve the community problems identified in the survey. Elected officials at the federal level could learn from Taos. The town will do a new iteration of The NCS to see what progress they have made.

The NCS in the ledger domain: Sharon Erikson, City Auditor of Palo Alto, California

The city councilors of Palo Alto look to Sharon Erikson to give them the unbridled truth. Some of the truth finds its way into Sharon’s Service Efforts and Accomplishments (SEA) budget reports. Sharon is clear that measuring performance entails more than simply the counts of road miles paved, trash hauled and emergencies responded to. Sharon has conducted The NCS twice now and reports not only the relative quality of services from the perspective of Palo Alto’s residents compared to residents in other communities, but also how residents’ opinions about service delivery are changing over the years. “These are impartial data,” Sharon explains, “and that is important to council and department heads.” The norms are particularly useful for giving council a perspective on the meaning of the quality ratings from Palo Alto. Sharon predicts that “surveys will soon be the norm” because independent assessment of the successes of service delivery is what all councils need to have and what all good budget analyses need to include. In fact, the Government Accounting Standards Board (GASB), Erikson predicts, will be requiring citizen opinions as part of standard budget reporting.

Each of these jurisdictions plans on completing The NCS again, on an annual or biannual basis, so that they can closely monitor changes in their communities.