SAY YES TO DATA:

Using Resident Feedback Data to Get Your Council on Board

A stable and **positive relationship** between a local government manager and his or her council is crucial to the success of any city, town, county, or village. As you are likely aware, any friction or problems that develop can easily trickle down and harm the efficiency of local government services, thereby impacting the quality of life for your residents.

One common friction point is around your residents' feedback, needs, and concerns. While each council member is tasked with representing her or his constituents to the best of her or his ability, your task as a local leader, among many others, is to ensure all of your residents are equally represented and that resources are prioritized and used in a well thought out manner.

But there is one thing that anybody will have a hard time arguing with and that's good data.

Oftentimes, councilmembers hear biased views and concerns from the loud minority of their residents, known as the STPs–the same ten/twenty/thirty people. Those STPs, who despite being highly engaged residents, **don't always reflect the beliefs of the majority**. Relying constantly on their voices can result in misdirected fund allocations and policy decisions.

While there are several means to extract resident feedback data, a singular or anecdotal data source may not always provide a good enough account in order to make an informed decision. In this brief, we will explore which resident feedback data sources are readily available to local leaders, what inherent challenges managers face when incorporating feedback data into policy-making, and, finally, how you can use this data to guide council in a more data-driven direction.

"If You Can't Measure it, You Can't Manage it"— What Data is Out There?

To limit friction and assist the council, the administration needs to be able to effectively overcome the vocal minority or STPs. To get a broader and more ongoing representation of residents' needs, many local leaders are turning to resident feedback tools. With the amount of new data created every day estimated to be **2.5 quintillion bytes**, big data has the ability to generate life-changing insights, but also to be overwhelming.

Big data is not bound by opinions and biases and is an objective source that helps to paint the 'big picture' for those who view it–a necessity at council meetings. It can also provide needed 'ammunition' for the council if they are handling a difficult or controversial topic.

Data helps to provide clear-cut numbers that can help councilmembers feel secure about a difficult decision when presenting it to the public.

Feedback and Sentiment Data

Resident feedback is the lifeblood of a community when it comes to identifying what works and what doesn't, and it provides potential avenues for a city to take action. Councils usually tap into this type of information when trying to understand what is important for their constituents. Local governments try to gather data from several sources to further complement the information provided to the council. It oftentimes requires more than one type of tool/ initiative to get relevant information. Traditional forms of market research tools like town hall meetings and in-person surveys enable local governments to get direct feedback by creating an open dialogue with active members in the community.

A wholesome approach to resident feedback data combines specific and direct feedback with organic and ongoing feedback. Data sources and technologies that are readily available, paired with topic-specific surveys, provide unprecedented opportunities for managers to truly understand their communities' needs and address them efficiently.

Social media and other digital forums can help communities tap into their silent majority. Residents who may not have the time, ability, or volition to participate in face-to-face communication with you and your colleagues will still likely have something to say about trending topics and concerns on other channels. Local governments that monitor and listen to these channels will be able to enhance their performance management, improve community engagement, and help build public trust. Of course, these methods should not replace traditional measurement tools, rather they should be thought of as complementary.

Below is a list of resident feedback/sentiment tools and digital platforms available to local governments:

1. **Social media and forums, especially those of non-city-owned channels**, can provide a city with a wealth of information. Residents will often discuss topics related to their neighborhood or city on non-city-owned channels like local news sites, rather than on city-owned channels, such

as a local government's official Facebook page or Twitter account. **Bettendorf, Iowa, leveraged this type of data by utilizing AI** to proceed with changes to the city's waste removal schedules and procedures in response to the coronavirus crisis. With the ability to quantify and compare online support for the new policy, the city was confident that it did not need to invest time and effort in intervening or changing course.

Bettendorf Social Media Sentiment
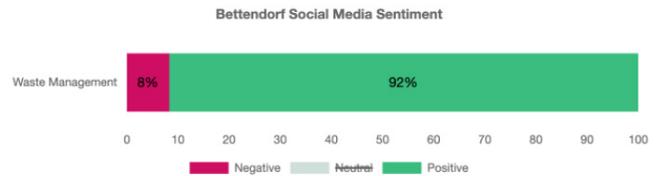
2. **Surveys** are a tried-and-true approach to getting resident feedback. Whether it's door-to-door, through phone calls, or online, surveys allow communities to ask questions that are intended to help officials improve services or other activities provided to citizens. The city of Dublin, Ohio, for example recently conducted an **online survey to gauge residents' opinions on the effectiveness of the support services** the city has been offering in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

How concerned are you about the following potential consequences of the current situation?

Residents' concerns regarding the following
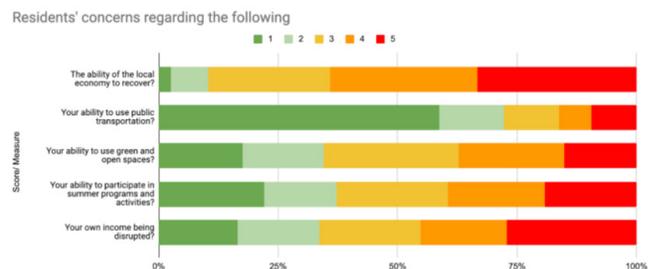
3. **Town halls** can be great open forums that allow residents to directly communicate with their representatives on the council and in the local government. City representatives can bring up an issue or project that it would like to focus on, and citizens can share their concerns on any community-related topic. Some cities, such as **Frisco, Texas**, have tried to make these meetings even more accessible by allowing citizens to call in or to connect online to the discussion.

The Challenges with Using Data

Data can help provide a fantastic overview and understanding of what is happening within a local government's borders. That being said, it can also have its limitations.

1. Like with any public institution, local governments try to balance the resources they have with those they don't. That means that even if a local government administration has access to all the data sources in the world, without human interaction providing an analysis and breakdown, the information is moot.

2. Privacy is another major concern. Whether it is in regard to the **upcoming national census** or issues related to **securing data collected via smart city technology**, local governments will have to be able to provide answers to alleviate concerns of citizens and councilmembers. Some larger cities are trying to tackle this issue by **creating privacy policies** to outline what can be done with data gathered directly by the city or contractors that work for the city.

3. Incorporating data into everyday use also requires a major mentality shift within an organization, as people don't generally like change. Getting colleagues on board to either collect data with different tools or technologies, or to reconsider how data should be processed can be a challenge, but not impossible. The city of Renton began a **data refresh** process when it realized the data it was collecting was often irrelevant. They set a goal for themselves to only collect data that's either meaningful or actionable for the needs of the city. The city is currently under the process of doing just that by reviewing its current data points and identifying which data sets they want to make more actionable.

Leveraging the Data and Bridging the Gap

As mentioned above, there's an extensive selection of data sources and resources available. How can local government managers leverage this multitude of information to provide relevant recommendations to their council? By using the right tools to help monitor, aggregate, and analyze the data sources.

Supporting tools and technologies, such as **AI, can help lean teams sort through overwhelming amounts of data** within a short period of time. AI driven platforms, like **Zencity**, can easily filter and process through millions of data points within minutes, which otherwise would have taken hours or days. The result is that local governments have easily understandable data-based insights that can be taken to their council and assist the city in upcoming projects. We've seen many cities and counties successfully incorporate AI and big data into their policy-making strategy. Below are some examples:

- The town of Cary, North Carolina, for example, decided to use Zencity's AI solution to identify **how citizens felt about e-scooters in their town** before proposing to the town council what should be done with the new micro-mode of transportation. Cary's local government used the platform to track resident sentiment and discussions across local news sites, social media posts, and more. The city administration analyzed the results, which showed that the sentiment was overall neutral, despite a vocal minority stating otherwise. The council took that information and decided it was best to implement a 'wait and see' approach before making any significant changes to local policy, unlike what was done in other cities. It was also understood that this would be an ongoing discussion between the administration, citizens, and the council to ensure that the city took the best actions that would suit the residents' needs.

SENTIMENT OVERVIEW

43% Positive
43% Neutral
14% Negative
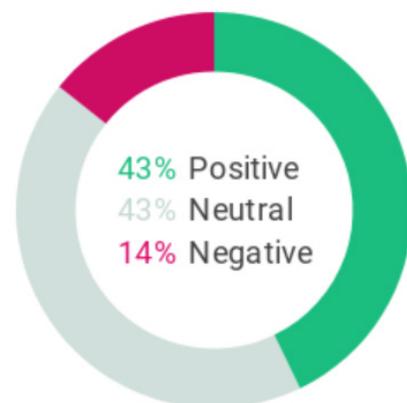
- When the city of Mankato, Minnesota, was debating how to approach mask mandates in response to COVID-19, they turned to Zencity.

A data insight reviewed by the city's PIO showed that this was an important topic of discussion among residents, accounting for 45% of the city's total discourse during a specific period of time. The data revealed that support for wearing masks was higher than for not wearing masks. Mankato's PIO shared this finding with the city manager, who brought the data to his briefing with councilmembers. As a result of this data-backed insight, city council passed the **emergency declaration ordinance #2020-4** requiring face coverings to be worn by all residents over the age of 12. According to **Mankato city manager Pat Hentges**, the mask mandate was well received.

- Another approach is to combine software and digital platforms to present the right recommendation. The city of Charlotte, North Carolina, was interested in providing more **affordable housing options** as gentrification started to become an issue within the community. The city decided it wanted to take a data-driven approach to choose the most relevant locations for affordable housing development. To do this, the city created a GIS mapping tool that was specifically designed for the needs of the Housing Services division. It then used open-source data and created a scoring system based on a defined set of criteria that helped to identify whether a location was suitable or not. The city then sat with affected

communities and presented the information and the software, and provided answers to resident questions and concerns. The process was well-received by the majority of residents, since all the data sources were publicly available and all authorities involved remained transparent. The council decided to integrate this process into its decision-making strategy, thus enabling them to 'backstop gentrification' and improve the city equality planning process moving forward.

Quantity Meets Quality with Big Data and AI

One of the major issues facing councils today is the lack of engagement with the silent majority. Meanwhile, cities have access to a plethora of data resources that can help provide insights into any number of topics both for themselves and their local city councils. Data enables local governments and their managers to hear the voices of their entire community, creating equal representation among residents. The combination of traditional market research tools with big data and AI removes guesswork from the equation when providing relevant recommendations to councils. The result is that both local government leaders and their councils are able to make data-driven decisions to help improve the lives and well-being of the community as a whole.