



The Government Performance Project is a joint venture between *Governing* and the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University, and funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts. It scrutinizes 40 of the nation's largest counties, and builds upon two similar efforts dedicated to states, and one to cities. In many ways, the evaluations of counties were the most complex of all.

While counties differ greatly in operations and responsibilities, there is enormous value in evaluating counties in the five areas the GPP has covered for the past four years — financial management, capital management, human resources, managing for results and information technology. Even if the counties differ greatly, virtually all of them must handle all five of these tasks, and their skill at doing so is a matter of crucial consequence.

The survey is hinged, as much as possible, to a series of criteria in each of the categories that has been established over years of discussion with experts in the area of efficient and effective government operations. The task of developing the survey instrument fell largely to academics at Maxwell and partners they have brought in from the University of Connecticut, the University of Nebraska in Omaha, and Lynchburg University in Virginia. A separate survey was sent out to all counties for each area covered.

Surveys were filled out by the counties and supporting documentation was provided. In addition, interviews were conducted with a variety of county officials to gain additional information to help in the scoring. Counties were finally given a letter grade in each of the 5 areas, as well as an overall grade.

The following are the high-level criteria that were used in grading each of the five areas:

Financial Management

1. Does the government have a multi-year perspective on budgeting including meaningful revenue and expenditure estimates; long-term revenue and expenditure estimates; measures to gauge future fiscal impact of financial decisions?
2. Does the government have mechanisms that preserve stability and fiscal health including: structural balance between revenues and expenditure; use of contingency planning devices, such as rainy day funds; appropriate management of long-term liabilities; appropriate use and management of debt and rational investment and cash-management policies?
3. Does the government provide sufficient financial information to policy makers managers and citizens including: accurate and thorough financial reports; useful financial data; a means for communicating budgetary and financial data to citizens; timely financial reporting; the capacity to gauge the cost of delivering programs or services; a budget that is delivered on time?
4. Does the government have appropriate control over financial operations including: sufficient control over expenditures; appropriate managerial flexibility; solid management of procurement including contracts?

Capital Management

1. Does the government conduct a thorough analysis of future needs including: a formal capital plan that coordinates and prioritizes capital activities; a multi-year linkage between operating and capital budgeting; a multi-year linkage between strategic planning and capital budgeting; sufficient data to support analysis?
2. Does the government adequately monitor and evaluate projects through their implementation at both the entity-wide and agency levels?
3. Does the government conduct appropriate maintenance of capital assets with sufficient data to plan maintenance adequately and sufficient funding?

Human Resources

1. Does the government conduct strategic analysis of present and future human resource needs (workforce planning)?
2. Can the government obtain the employees it needs by hiring in a timely manner and giving managers appropriate discretion in hiring and recruiting?
3. Is the government able to maintain an appropriately skilled workforce by training, retaining skilled employees, and disciplining or terminating employees without undue constraints?
4. Can the government motivate employees to performance effectively by: rewarding superior performance through cash or non-cash incentives; evaluating the performance of its employees effectively; providing sufficient opportunity for employee feedback; maintaining productive labor-management relations?
5. Does the government have a civil service structure that supports its ability to achieve workforce goals including: a classification system that is coherent and of appropriate size; personnel policies that permit flexibility in civil service and pay structure; and good communications of human resources policies and goals to employees?

Managing for Results

1. Does the government engage in results-oriented strategic planning in which: strategic objectives are identified and provide a clear purpose; government leadership effectively communicates objectives to employees; government plans are responsive to input from citizens and other stakeholders including employees; agency plans are coordinated with central government plans?
2. Does the government develop indicators and evaluative data that can measure progress toward results and accomplishments and does it take steps to ensure that these data are valid and accurate?
3. Do leaders and managers use results data for policy making, budgeting, management and evaluation of progress?
4. Are there organizations within the government whose responsibility it is to evaluate programs or agencies, and are their conclusions utilized?
5. Does government communicate the results of its activities to stakeholders?

Information Technology

1. Do government-wide and agency-level information technology systems provide information that adequately supports managers' needs and strategic goals?
2. Do government information technology systems form a coherent architecture and are strategies in place to support present and future coherence in architecture?
3. Does the government conduct meaningful multi-year technology planning including: an information technology planning process that is sufficiently centralized; providing managers appropriate input into the planning process; creating government-wide and agency IT plans?
4. Is IT training adequate for end-users and technology specialists?
5. Can the government evaluate and validate the extent to which information technology system benefits justify investment?
6. Can the government procure the IT systems needed in a timely manner with appropriate financial controls?
7. Do IT systems support the government's ability to communicate with and provide services to its citizens?

The highest scoring counties in the nation were Maricopa, AZ and Fairfax, VA, both receiving an overall A-. The highest Cities in the nation were Pheonix, AZ with an overall A, and Austin, TX, with an overall A-.

How well do you think your city or county would score in each of the five areas above?

If you would like to learn more about how your local government can increase its efficiency and effectiveness, please contact us at

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