WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Even though the first phase of the benchmark review process is nearing completion, the work of the Stewardship committee has just begun. During the first five years of benchmarking, the "overall" usefulness and value of the process has only been touched upon. The process has already assisted in the policy making process of the city, established planning practices for both the present and future, and has also assisted the various governing bodies to keep in mind the issues and concerns that are most relevant to the citizens of Noblesville. Despite these significant achievements, the potential practical uses of benchmarking still remain mostly un-utilized. Along with these current and potential benefits of benchmarking, a few administrative pitfalls have been realized as well. These problems can be addressed in four main areas: Using the data, data collection, dispersing the data and updating the benchmarks.

USING THE DATA

The problem most inherent to processes such as benchmarking is that the data might be collected and then forgotten until it is time to re-collect the data at the next five year interval. While this still provides a useful tracking mechanism on those five year intervals, it does not begin to tap the true potential of benchmarking. The real goal of benchmarking is to provide a learning tool for better evaluation of the policy decisions and operational practices of the city. With this in mind, some consideration should be given to collecting some of the benchmark data on an annual basis. This will not only make for a more frequent evaluation, but will also allow for policy decisions to be made more quickly. This would allow benchmarking to be linked more closely to the day to day operations of the City. In order to achieve this updated review, some redesign of the current benchmarking process will be necessary. "Key indicator" benchmarks should be selected in order to assess more quickly the relative effectiveness of goal achievement. Consistent data should then be collected annually to allow for more frequent review. These indicators will allow for priority goals to be more closely monitored and policy changes to be made more quickly in order to ensure compliance with the existing benchmarks.

DATA COLLECTION

One of the largest problems encountered during this first evaluation phase was that collecting data in a manner similar to the original collection process was somewhat difficult. Only by using similar methods can data be collected in a manner to make comparison useful, or in some cases even possible. It was determined that some of the benchmark data was collected on a one time basis only for the purpose of specifically providing a snapshot of the needed data. Since some to the original sources are no longer in place, and the collection of data was not performed on a regular basis, recollection of relevant data is virtually impossible. Other data were based on reports that were prepared at the time and have not been updated since. This means that, unless a similar report is completed, recollection of similar data may never be possible. Other data relied on

accurate census information to allow for the tracking of the benchmark. This means that complete census data would again be required to allow for effective trend comparison. All of these factors made accurate data collection somewhat difficult in many cases. There are ways to help alleviate this problem in the future. The first is to relate as many benchmarks as possible to data sources that are updated in a consistent manner, by a consistent agency, on an annual basis. This allows for contacts to be established for future reference and should make future, more scientific, trend analysis possible. Another step is to track, and make available, the sources and contacts that were used during the collection process. This process has been started as part of this interim review and should allow for closer and deeper analysis of data in the future.

UPDATING THE BENCHMARKS

The final step is probably the most crucial. This step requires that the substantive nature of the benchmarks themselves be evaluated to ensure that they are effectively tracking the goals and subgoals from which they are derived. These goals and subgoals must also be revisited to ensure that they still accurately reflect the concerns and attitudes of the community. This may require the reprioritization of the existing benchmarks, goals and subgoals, the elimination of some of them, and the addition of new ones. It may also require that existing benchmarks be redesigned in such a way as to allow them to not only be tracked, but also to ensure that the data ultimately collected will have some relevance to the concerns expressed by the overarching goal or subgoal.

DISPERSING THE DATA

Another potential problems of benchmarking is that the data may be collected, but never used in a relevant manner. This can be avoided by ensuring that the data collected is dispersed and made readily available to the citizens of Noblesville, as well as any other interested parties. This will allow for individuals to make use of the data collected in the operations of their agency of group, to find possible contacts for other related information of interest, and to begin to cooperate in a data sharing structure that would help facilitate cooperation among various groups. Through education of the public to the availability of data and the types of data collected, the goal of effective use of the data should be attained.

CONCLUSION

The ultimate goal of benchmarking is to create a process that is not stand alone, but rather one that is an intregal part of the day to day operation of the city. This allows the benchmarks to become a living, breathing voice of the people of Noblesville. This will ultimately allow for better decision making in today's city operations, as well as tomorrow's. Through these benchmarks city leaders have entered into a contract with the residents of the city. Doing so has created a tool for the measurement of the city's relative performance in accomplishing the goals which are of the highest priority to the citizens of Noblesville.