



College of Urban and Public Affairs

Creating Used and Useful Community Indicator Systems:

**A Report Prepared for the
Greater Portland-Vancouver Regional Indicators Initiative**

September 2010

**Janet Hammer, PhD
Portland State University
College of Urban and Public Affairs**

Abstract

This research was conducted in support of the Greater Portland-Vancouver Indicators initiative. The purpose of this research is to help ensure that the indicator system developed is “used and useful.” Our effort involved three components: 1) an inventory of indicator systems in the region; 2) a review of literature on community indicator systems that focused on design, utilization, and impact; 3) interviews with key stakeholders associated with indicator systems in the Portland metro region in order to hear lessons learned and understand how best to design and implement a useful regional indicator system. This report provides a summary of the three indicator programs reviewed, shares findings from the literature review and interviews, and discusses implications.

This research was funded in part by the Miller Foundation, Metro, the City of Portland, and the Sidney Lezak Project.

Thank you to the interviewees who so graciously shared their time and insights.

Thank you to Dr. Bowen McBeath and Jessica Schmidt from PSU’s School of Social Work for their assistance conducting interviews and compiling background information.

Questions and comments about this report can be directed to Janet Hammer at 503-725-5203 or hammerj@pdx.edu

Contents

Overview	1
Background	1
Program Summaries	3
Clark County	3
City of Vancouver	6
City of Portland – Multnomah County	8
Creating Used and Useful Indicators: Key Themes	12
Appendix One: Interviewees	16
Appendix Two: Relevant Literature Reviewed	17

Overview

The Greater Portland-Vancouver Indicators initiative aims to provide quality information on social, environmental, and economic well-being so that communities can better understand conditions and trends and collaborate to create a better future. To help ensure that the system developed is “used and useful,” we prepared this report on community indicator lessons learned. The report synthesizes a review of the literature on community indicator systems with findings from interviews with key stakeholders involved in current and past indicator efforts in the region. The report includes background information about the research process, a summary of the four indicator programs reviewed, and discussion of key findings and implications.

Background

Community indicator systems are one tool designed to assist communities in assessing how they are doing. Community indicator (CI) systems go by different names (e.g., quality of life indicators, sustainable development indicators, benchmarks), and may have slightly different foci and characteristics; however, they are similar in that they are designed to provide a comprehensive or systemic view of a range of environmental, social, and economic aspects of well-being. While community indicator systems measure overall community conditions, performance management (PM) systems measure organizational effort and effectiveness toward mission, goals, and objectives.¹ Our focus here is on community indicators; however, given the lingering questions regarding whether and how CI and PM systems relate to each other when a jurisdiction has both, this issue is addressed as appropriate.

In the Greater Portland-Vancouver metropolitan region, an effort to develop regional indicators is underway. The initial planning team was clear that the indicator system developed must be “used and useful.” No one wants yet another report that “sits on the shelf.” To support that objective, it was determined that research would be conducted to glean lessons learned from prior community indicator efforts. The research included 1) an inventory of indicator systems in the region; 2) a review of literature on community indicator systems that focused on design, utilization, and impact; 3) interviews with key stakeholders associated with indicator systems in the Portland metro region in order to hear lessons learned and understand how best to design and implement a useful regional indicator system.

¹ For example, salmon population may be a community indicator while an organization’s performance measure may be change in water temperature after stream bank restoration; employment rate may be a community indicator while an organization’s performance measure may be the percent of its training program graduates placed in jobs.

The researchers are faculty at Portland State University and served as members of an initial planning team charged with addressing content and process issues in the development of regional indicator effort. The planning team included representatives from Metro, Portland State University, and various city and county jurisdictions in the four county region (Clackamas, Clark, Multnomah, and Washington). The planning team was briefed on the research process and their input was requested for identifying cases and interviewees and reviewing the interview protocol.

Inventory of Community Indicator Programs

The inventory of government-based and community-based indicator programs in the four county region was developed through a search of county and city websites, email and phone communication with local jurisdiction staff, and input from the planning team. We identified one city program, one county program, and one joint city-county program.² The city-county program has been retired, though the city is in the process of creating a new system. Identified CI programs include:

Current Community Indicator Program

Vancouver, Washington – government based

Clark County, Washington – community based

Prior Community Indicator Program

Portland-Multnomah – government based (new CI program being developed by City).

Literature Review

Our review of the literature focused on journal articles that address community indicator use and effectiveness. We also examined literature pertaining to the use of performance information. Our review included more than sixty articles and reports. Interestingly, we identified little empirical research examining the use of community indicators. Our review focused on themes pertaining to the purpose of CI systems, factors facilitating program success, types of impacts, and connections to performance management. The literature review was used to inform the interview process and interpret the results.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted with individuals who are or have been involved in the development and implementation of the jurisdiction's community indicator program. Thirteen interviews were conducted, with the mix of participants including community indicator project managers, elected officials or senior staff, non-elected senior administrators such as a program manager or bureau chief, civic organization leaders, and performance management leads. A list of interviewees is included in Appendix One.

The interview protocol addressed five main themes: history and structure of the program, indicator development, data collection and analysis, indicator use and impact, and connection to regional indicator effort. The protocol was developed based on the

² In the course of our interviews we learned the Multnomah County had a parallel indicator system to the joint Portland-Multnomah Progress Board system.

literature review and was circulated to the planning team for review and comment. The interviews were approximately one to two hours in duration. Confidentiality was offered to participants. Twelve of the thirteen interviewees consented to have the interview recorded for research purposes. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed. Our analysis was also informed by documents publicly available on the web as well as materials made available by interviewees.³ All interviewees were provided an opportunity to share feedback on the draft report.

Program Summaries

As noted above, four existing or former community indicator programs were identified in the region. The following is a summary of these efforts based on a review of program documents and identification of themes that emerged from the interviews.

Clark County

Clark County's indicator program is led by Community Choices – a non-profit organization. The effort began in 1993 in response to a national report on the future of public health. Under the leadership of the County's Director of Public Health at that time, a group of individuals from public, private, and nonprofit sectors decided to work together to release a report card with the goal of fostering more "upstream" thinking about community health issues.

The Community Report Card is issued every three years; its tag line reads "A Report of Clark County's Progress Toward Creating a Healthy, Livable Community." Community Choices applies a social determinants of health framework to focus attention on the conditions that support or inhibit the ability to be healthy. The Community Choices 2009 report card is organized by six determinants of health: economic vitality, employment and income; education; transportation options; environment; accessibility of food; and connectedness and exclusion.

³ Portland-Multnomah Progress Board documents can be accessed at:

http://web.archive.org/web/*/http://www.p-m-benchmarks.org

Community Choices indicator documents can be found at:

http://www.clarkcommunitychoices.org/report_card.htm.

Vancouver's indicator documents can be found at:

<http://www.cityofvancouver.us/StrategicPlan.asp?year=2008&itemID=52317>

<http://www.cityofvancouver.us/performance.asp?menuid=10462&submenuid=17767>

<http://www.cityofvancouver.us/commitments.asp?comm=52308> (additional links for other five commitments).

The essential purpose of this community indicator initiative is to facilitate conversation and change through the use of good data. The 2009 Report Card goes beyond reporting data and trends to include commentary on causes and consequences and suggestions about what should be done. The report is designed to help readers understand what is happening and connect to specific recommendations at individual, organizational, and government levels.

A Benchmark Committee is responsible for producing the report card every three years. The update is a year-long effort. Each update begins with the Benchmark Committee asking who is the audience, what do we want to report to that audience, and how do we gather the data. Historically, the Benchmark Committee has been a relatively small team (~10 people) representing different sectors of the community (e.g., environment, economy, education). The number of people participating via sub-committees and outreach is larger. While various city and County staff participate in the effort, there is little if any direct connection to jurisdictional efforts (with the exception of the County Health Department). The County auditor contacted for an interview expressed unfamiliarity with the Community Choices indicator effort.

Extensive communication and outreach is associated with the release of the Report Card. There is a large public forum as well as numerous presentations to community groups and leaders. Although resources have not been available for measuring the direct and indirect impacts of the indicator initiative there is a sense of key outcomes. The community indicator program has increased awareness and understanding about issues and opened the door to conversations. It is used to help frame what the community should be paying attention to and has helped to move the discussion. It has been used to inform policies and programming, provide documentation in support of grant requests, and has led to increased collaboration including MOUs for partnerships to address specific issues.

Lessons Learned include the following:

- Have clarity of purpose and audience, and reasonable expectations. The purpose of this community indicator system is to change thinking and conversation and, eventually, the way policies and programs are designed. They expect that the movement of an indicator is long term (e.g., 15 -20 years).
- Implement a robust outreach strategy. This includes in-person presentations, a web presence, and appropriate dissemination to and engagement with non-traditional communities. Board members, partners, and staff should all participate in this outreach. Consider creating a shorter (few page) document, a website with links to data updated frequently, and translation for diverse audiences. Remember that “translation” includes using words that resonate for a particular audience. Appropriate framing can make or break a conversation.

- Build commitment from community systems, including the business sector. Help folks see why they need to be involved in this work and how it is of benefit to them.
- Pay attention to process. Ensure roles, responsibilities, benefits, and expectations are clear. Foster a sense of group, facilitate seeing the whole and getting past agendas, create a safe place to ask hard questions, challenge data not people.
- Recognize that diversity of participation is necessary and challenging. With a larger and more diverse group there are more interests to reconcile, shared vocabulary and understanding to build, and skill is required to learn how to work with partners whose worldview or way of operating may be different than those you're accustomed to.
- Don't silo workgroups. Small workgroups are important but make sure to convene everybody together and provide a way to discuss and interpret among different groups. Good communication between technical and executive committees is important for buy-in and effectiveness.
- Manage Data. You need to know how the data will be used day-to-day: what questions you are being asked, what is the information that people want for their real practical or policy use. If you try to do it all, no one will read the report and you won't have impact. You have to figure out how you are going to limit yourself.
- As the saying goes, "garbage in garbage out." Establish a system to collect the data you need and ensure that you have quality data. Often the data you want is not collected or easy to get at. You'll find that there is not data at a level you can impact or expect to see change. This is particularly the case with respect to disparities. "The story is not at 30,000 feet." You may need get to the neighborhood level or disaggregate by race/ethnicity to see what's happening. If you don't go there, you won't raise the overall bar. Note where data is weak and try to change that over time.
- Learn and adapt. Be able and willing to change over time, but recognize that tracking progress can be confounded when indicators change.
- Remember that data does not equal meaning. Educate about why a trend is happening, why it is relevant, and what responses may be appropriate.
- Be a neutral convener. The success of the program hinges upon being respected, trusted, neutral, and autonomous.
- Aim for a stable funding base. Core partners' contributions of staff time, printing, etc. are valuable, though not enough to keep the program alive.
- A regional effort could be of benefit. There's been a proliferation of state and local indicator efforts. It would be good to consolidate and collaborate. We exist as a

region and there are benefits to having a regional indicator system. Build upon the Regional Equity Atlas effort. If the focus is the whole region, then include Clark County intentionally and thoroughly.

City of Vancouver

In 2000 the City of Vancouver began incorporating business planning into government. As the City departments began to develop their business plans they were prompted to examine how outcomes and success could be measured. What evolved over time is an integrated community indicator and performance management system. At the center of the CI effort are the six strategic commitments of the City's Strategic Plan,⁴ with eight indicators for each strategic commitment (48 total). The indicators are designed to reveal how the City is doing with respect to the commitments (goals), as well as to inform programming, budgets and personnel evaluations.

The indicators were developed by the City's performance analyst with input by staff and community members. Input by community members was gathered in focus groups with end users/customers and in real and virtual forums, including with ESL populations. The set of indicators is not as comprehensive as some community indicator systems (e.g., education is not included), because the driver here was management of areas the City controls or significantly influences. In contrast to community indicator systems that play a convening role to understand community conditions and collectively respond, this system is primarily designed as a tool for government management.

The indicators are reported in an accessible format that uses green, yellow, and red to indicate whether the goal has been met. The frequency of indicator update varies from annually to every five years, with most being annual or biannual. The indicator report provides information on overall City performance and information is not disaggregated by geographic or demographic diversity. Dissemination to the public occurs primarily through the Web.

The indicator system is perceived as having a number of important outcomes. The indicators are seen as useful for communicating in general terms "how we're doing," and helping to frame issues and questions. They are used to help prioritize decisions and budget. They have served to educate decision-makers, staff, and the public. They have helped to improve understanding of interconnections and linkages; for example, cutting parks and recreation is likely to mean "the cops are going to be busy because the kids are not busy." They provide accountability and legitimacy, demonstrating that government is efficient and effective and spending money wisely. They also can be viewed as a marketing tool, communicating the community's quality of life priorities.

⁴ A Healthy, Livable, and Sustainable Vancouver; Transportation Mobility and Connectivity; Financial Health and Economic Vitality; A Safe and Prepared Community; Accountable, Responsive City Government; An Active Involved Community.

The indicator system is inextricably intertwined with performance management. Performance management reports (“snapshots”) identify which strategic commitments the unit (department) contributes to, define outcomes and performance measures, and report on achievement of goals. The performance management system is seen as very valuable, though resource intensive.

A regional indicator initiative is seen as potentially valuable, provided the appropriate leadership and organizational support are in place. One interviewee observed, that while it is important to recognize that each community is different, it is important to understand and appreciate the value of the region. Noting that we are separate jurisdictions but part of a region where issues and well-being are connected, this person suggested, “it doesn’t do us good not to collaborate.” Another interviewee was more cautious, suggesting that the program clearly communicate what the value of a regional system is and why a jurisdiction should invest in it (e.g., compare areas, identify trends, see connections).

Lessons Learned include the following:

- Make it accessible. Aim for the “sweet spot” where indicators do not go so deep that people glaze over but are not so general that you can’t take action. Make the presentation visually interesting, without a lot of numbers.
- Expect and plan for the indicator system to evolve. For example, as you reflect on what is working or not, identify new information, or people move up the learning curve the indicator system may need to be modified. Start with something achievable, something of value that isn’t expensive.
- Clearly communicate what the indicator system does and why it is important. Be prepared to explain how the indicator program adds value (e.g., identify trends and issues, compare areas, see connections, provide input on strategic direction). Expect that you may have to bring some people along and be prepared for concerns about impacts on “turf” or “agendas.”
- Make it a collective, quality, sustainable effort. Various parties need to contribute data and feel ownership of the system. Data collection should be built into the system. The system should also be designed in a way that it is integrated with setting priorities and making decisions. Remember that the indicators “don’t mean anything unless you are getting good data.” Also, a change may represent a blip or a trend; it is essential that the difference be clarified.
- Engage and partner. Resources have not been allocated to document the impact of outreach efforts, however, there is a sense that they have been useful to increase awareness of issues, and possibly confidence in government and civic engagement. Said one interviewee, “it makes you wonder how we can not be doing this kind of

stuff.” Beyond outreach, partnership with public, private and nonprofit organizations should be considered.

- Don’t be penny wise and pound foolish. When budget cuts are looming, resources are often allocated to direct service while data collection, analysis, and administration are scaled back. The indicator system, if designed and implemented well, can help set priorities and budgets.

City of Portland – Multnomah County

Bev Stein, Chair of Multnomah County, and Vera Katz, Mayor of the City of Portland, gained familiarity with the Oregon Benchmarks system⁵ during their tenures as elected officials in the State legislature. They were elected to local government positions at a similar time and decided to work together to establish a joint city-county benchmarks program informed by the State program. The Portland Multnomah Progress Board (PMPB) was established in 1993 and operated until approximately 2009.

The mission of the PMPB was to identify, monitor, and report on indicators for community-wide goals. The intention was that the indicators would be used to identify trends and catalyze public, private, and community-based organizations to work to improve benchmark performance. The City Mayor and County Chair served as Co-Chairs of the PMPB. The Board was appointed by the Co-Chairs and was conceptualized as a small group of community leaders representing a spectrum of sectors and issues (e.g., education, social services, business, and environment) who would maintain and refine the Benchmarks and advocate for outcome oriented collaboration.

The Portland Multnomah Benchmarks (indicators) were informed by the Oregon Benchmarks, as well as by the citizen generated vision and goals for each jurisdiction: Portland’s Future Focus and Multnomah County’s Values and Vision. Citizen task forces assisted with the development of benchmarks aligned with the community visions and goals. Over time, the Board refined the indicators and determined where to focus research. The number of indicator clusters or categories varied between six and seven over the years.⁶ The number of indicators was about seventy-six with the number varying over time, including the number tracked and the number under consideration. PMPB staff was responsible for identifying measures and compiling data. For the most part, staff

⁵ The Oregon Benchmarks is a state government initiative designed to measure progress toward Oregon’s three-point strategic vision (quality jobs for all Oregonian’s; safe, caring, and engaged communities; healthy sustainable surroundings). The benchmarks are organized into seven categories (economy, education, civic engagement, social support, public safety, community development, and environment). Funding for the Oregon Progress Board was eliminated in 2009, though data is maintained on the website (<http://www.oregon.gov/DAS/OPB/index.shtml>).

⁶ For example in 1999 the clusters were economy, education, children and families, quality of life, governance, and public safety and in 2002 they were economy, education, environment, governance and civic participation, health and families, public safety, and urban vitality.

worked with data collected by other agencies. Engagement of target audiences in owning and using the indicators was identified as a weakness of the effort.

Three Benchmark Audits were conducted to explore “the story behind the number” – what are the trends and why, what is being done, what should we be doing. The three audits addressed readiness to learn, educational success for youth, and salmon restoration in Johnson Creek. The Benchmark Audits are viewed as having provided a useful platform for seeing system issues. For example, education was examined not just in terms of graduation rates but influences on educational achievement such as affordable housing shaping student mobility which in turn impacts performance, or long commute times impinging upon parental involvement.

The initial Board leadership was dynamic and invested. Meetings were regularly held and well attended, data was frequently updated, and robust discussions of issues took place. The monthly Board meetings were seen as valuable for building a common understanding of issues and for providing a “segue into deeper discussions of what we needed to change policy wise.” With a turnover in leadership, that faded. Interviewees noted that the Co-Chairs that followed Chair Stein and Mayor Katz did not seem to possess the same interest in, and commitment to, the Benchmarks.

Progress Board staff frequently made presentations to groups in the community; a strategy that was time-intensive but effective. This outreach and communication effort is viewed as having been useful for educating policy leaders about key issues. One interviewee commented that the presentations and discussions were effective for making data meaningful, relevant, and practical for policy. At the same time, it appears that there was little effort to bring larger groups together to discuss findings and implications. Large group forums to discuss the Benchmarks seem to have been “missing, isolated, or sporadic.” There was also a lack of engagement with bureau staff, at least at the City.

The extent to which the Portland Multnomah Benchmarks were used to inform management at the City and County varied greatly depending upon the leadership, as well as the structure of the jurisdiction. At the County, there was authority and, initially, interest in integrating strategic planning, benchmarks, budgeting, and management. At the City, the benchmarks were not integrated with the City’s Service Effort and Accomplishments (SEA) system. There is a sense that, for the most part, Bureau heads were not using the benchmarks to directly inform decisions. Further, the City’s unique structure is seen to have presented a barrier to integrating the benchmarks into management. Bureau heads at the time seemed more focused on the programs and dollars of their individual bureaus and did not embrace the “notion of sitting together as a board of directors steering a public corporate entity responsible for public welfare.”

The domain where Benchmarks are seen as having been particularly used and useful is education. This is likely attributable to the strong connection made between the PMPB and the Leaders Roundtable (a coalition of educational, elected, and private sector leaders

working on the issue of student success). In the education domain, the program is seen to have helped people understand issues and become “much better end users of data.” It also facilitated mobilization and collaboration. The Benchmarks were useful to some non-profits and bureaus that benefited from having data in one place and used the information for grant writing or program efforts. The benchmarks are also seen as potentially providing a legitimization and accounting function – showing that government is paying attention and tracking.

Discussions about the PMPB indicator effort are somewhat clouded by the fact that the County developed a parallel benchmark system that included some Portland-Multnomah and Oregon Benchmarks and some indicators unique to the County. Under the leadership of Chair Stein, three headline goals and sub-indicators were defined: reducing poverty, increasing school success, and reducing crime. These three higher order goals or benchmarks were used to focus effort and drive budgeting. An evaluation person worked with the department heads to define outcome measures for their program, asking what is an outcome and what does the program do. The system included the three high level goals, intermediate outcome measures, and program level measures. Each of the three high level goals was aligned with an existing citizen commission, which provided a home for the goal and an “engine for making things happen.”

A regional approach is seen as valuable, but concerns were expressed. A compelling reason as to why this makes sense needs to be made, especially at this time of extreme budgetary restriction. Also, there needs to be a way to scale up and down so that the indicators provide meaningful insight. Suggested benefits of a regional effort include economies of scale (don’t duplicate efforts) and efficiencies of resource alignment (the issues are bigger than any one sector or organization). Institutionalization in a cross-jurisdiction charter was suggested as one way to help the initiative outlive the tenures of individual politicians.

Lessons Learned include the following:

- Know your purpose and audience. Start by asking, “why are we doing this?”
- Help folks see the value. Champions can be useful for helping to get the message out, particularly among peers. Invest in effectively communicating the why of indicators and training people to understand logic models and how measurement systems can be used to help solve problems. Proactively attend to concerns such as turf, funding, or loss of control.

- Keep your indicators simple, accurate, and accessible. Too many indicators will overwhelm your audience. Have a few “headline” indicators and build those out (e.g., sub-indicators or a framework of indicators that impact the headline indicator). Indicators that are not accompanied by high quality data are irrelevant. Indicators need to be labeled in language that resonates and the story behind the indicator needs to tell conditions and causes, and be told in an interesting and meaningful way.
- Connect indicators to visions and goals. The indicators’ relevance may be increased if they convey how the community is doing with respect to the vision and goals it has articulated. Think about using the indicators for a progress report or “state of” report. In some cases, it may be more effective to talk about what direction the community is heading in without setting precise targets. When a potential target is contested (e.g., information is ambiguous, values conflict) it may be more productive to agree on general directions and begin working toward them rather than getting bogged down on setting numbers that may be unsupported or likely to shift with new information.
- Disseminate the indicators widely and creatively, including interactive web based content and new social media. Think of the indicators as an annual or regular “state of” report, with media outreach. Use it as a communication tool to provide feedback to the community on how it is doing and what is being done about it. Let it serve educate about what is going on and make it valuable to public debate.
- Governance and hosting matter. The indicator initiative is best served if hosted by an organization that is perceived to be neutral and legitimate. It is also important to differentiate the hosting of the organization from the governance of the organization. The effort needs to be bigger than any one organization. The host must not be perceived as the “owner” of the indicators and the structures of governance must be such that roles and responsibilities are clear and designed for effectiveness and accountability. There needs to be multiple partners, with resources being contributed from a variety of sources. This ensures broader buy-in and resiliency and continuity in the face of changes in leadership and funding.
- Engage to make a difference. Involving those who are responsible for improving indicators over time in a meaningful and sustained way is essential for creating a sense of ownership and commitment. This includes convening the range of players together to review and discuss the indicators. Draw on existing commissions, councils, and citizen groups as they have a vested interest in forward movement. Don’t expect to see a lot of collaboration if you do not facilitate it happening. And don’t expect diverse or traditionally under-represented populations to participate if you have not thoughtfully planned for that.
- Engage data generators and users in the process. There is often a tension between too much data and not the right data. Engaging with the folks that collect and/or use information is important for getting clarity about what the information will be used for

(and, thus, better understanding what information you really need), helping to sift through the options and identify what data is of the best fit and highest quality, and considering where there are data gaps and how those may be remedied.

- Understand the distinction and connection between community indicators and performance management. It is helpful to link indicators with management, but is not easy to do so and should not occur in a punitive way. The indicators are there to inform, not to blame. They should shed light on a situation, conveying not just outcomes but determinants of outcomes. They can be used to track progress toward goals and inform the budgeting process.
- Have the right folks for the job. Indicator initiatives require distinct skills in data analysis as well as in outreach and communication. Ensure that you've got the right fit for the job and adequate resources for the job.
- Facilitate the process. Generating shared understandings and agreements among a large and diverse group requires skillful facilitation. There are points where program staff should be participants and not facilitators of the process.
- Expect the indicator system to evolve over time. Approach the initiative as a learning system that responds to new issues and changes in data sources and technologies. Revisiting the purpose or indicators may be seen as a sign of effective feedback, not failure.

Creating Used and Useful Community Indicator Programs: Key Themes

The following key themes regarding what makes community indicator systems used and useful emerged in the synthesis of our literature review and interview findings.⁷

What is Your Purpose?

A used and useful community indicator system is founded upon clarity of intention. Is the purpose of the CI system to educate (e.g., build awareness or understanding of issues), prioritize and catalyze (e.g., inform policy or program design or decisions), monitor (e.g., track performance), or engage (e.g., new or better collaboration to address an issue)? A used and useful CI system is designed to support its intended use(s). Further, the purpose needs to be clearly communicated so that the value of the initiative is understood and stakeholders' expectations are aligned with the intentions of the effort.

⁷ The primary sources for this summary are: Alberti, 1996; American Planning Association, Aristigueta, Cooksy, & Nelson 2001; Astleithner & Haedinger 2003; Bell & Morse, 2001; Cobb & Rixford 1998; Dluhy & Swartz 2006; Gahin, R. & Paterson, C., 2001; Gahin, R., Veleva, V., & Hart, M., 2003; Holden, 2009; Innes & Booher, 2000; USGAO, 2004. The full bibliography of relevant literature reviewed can be found at the conclusion of this report.

Remember, Data Does Not Equal Meaning

It is not uncommon for community indicator reports to prompt a sensation of “eyes glazing over” or a feeling that one is “drowning in a sea of data.” Beyond reporting an indicator’s status, communications need to contextualize the numbers. The audience needs to know the story associated with the data – why we may be getting these results, why this is relevant, and what we might do about it. Meaning-making also implies thinking about how indicators relate to each other and a desired end state. For example, the traditional list of indicators clustered by topic might be complemented or replaced by a logic model or framework that organizes factors in a way that shows their relation to a goal or outcome.

Go Small to Get Big

While community indicators need to convey the multiple and complex dimensions of community well-being, this information must be communicated in a way that helps people make sense of the situation and appropriately focus their attention. Think of it as helping folks see the forest for the trees. Related to the issue of data overload and meaning-making, it may be helpful to highlight a few key themes and smaller number of indicators and use those as an entre to conversations about the system issues that are shaping the outcome (go small and manageable in order to get to the big picture). Indicators should focus attention on big, societal goals and get people looking beyond their own organizations and sectors. They become a platform for collaboration, cooperation, and alignment.

Are you on Track to Your Vision and Goals?

Indicators are basically an accounting technology. Connecting them to an articulated vision and goals may make it easier for community members to contextualize the information and motivate action. Building onto strategic planning efforts, the indicator system can supply data to assess how a jurisdiction is meeting its goals.

Put the Community in Community Indicators

By definition, community issues are in the realm of the collective. There are two key implications here. First, a useful report will reveal how individual outcomes are shaped by collective actions – policies, programs, and structures. For example, not just reporting obesity rates but including factors that shape that outcome (e.g., walkability, food access). Second, community problems are not created in isolation, nor will they be solved in isolation. If we want the community to do better, then the range of community stakeholders needs to be appropriately engaged in the process. If indicators are to serve as beacons of collaboration the space for that needs to be created. Someone needs to play the convening and bridging role to bring diverse groups together to think about the system and connections and how they can work together to shift outcomes. And the process needs to be skillfully facilitated.

Who's at the Table and How?

There are a number of ways that stakeholders may be engaged in an indicator process; for example, identifying and selecting indicators, assisting with data collection and analysis, communicating results, or collaborating on a response. How this involvement happens is key. Care must be given to getting the right folks to the table at the right time, and structuring the process so that they want to remain engaged. This requires addressing the question of “WIFME” (what’s in it for me?) as well as potential concerns (e.g., turf, autonomy). It also requires making sure that purpose and roles are clear, and that outreach, facilitation, and decision-making processes are skillful and culturally appropriate. Keen attention must be given to the processes for reconciling perspectives and building shared understandings and agreements. Attention also must be given to issues of exclusivity: while it is important to have a core steering group, it is also important that others who are important to the project’s success not be intentionally or unintentionally alienated or excluded.

Who's Leading the Effort?

Given that an indicator effort serves the community at large, the convener of the effort must be viewed as neutral and credible. They also should not be viewed as the sole “owners” of the effort. The program needs to be stewarded by leaders who represent the diversity of community stakeholders and who can help to raise visibility and buy-in. The stewardship effort includes ensuring adequate and stable resources to support program effectiveness and continuity. Buy-in and support from elected officials is critical, but the viability of the program must not hinge on a singular presence. The program needs to be institutionalized in a way that does not leave it vulnerable when an elected moves on and an administration changes.

Do You Have Numbers or Do You Have Good Indicators?

Having a number doesn’t necessarily mean having a good indicator. The development of good indicators requires both analytic and process skills. On the process side, it is important to appropriately engage end-users in defining what indicators are relevant and what data is useful. You need to be clear about what you are trying to measure, why it is important, and what possible avenues for addressing data gaps. On the analytic side, it is important to have a strong understanding of data availability, quality, and meaning. Good indicators are defined by engaging both “data experts” and community stakeholders and end users.

Seek Indicator Stability and Expect Indicator Fluidity

Stable and consistent indicators are necessary in order to see trends over time. At the same time, it is reasonable to expect that indicators and/or the program purpose may evolve as new information, questions, priorities, or relationships emerge. It is helpful to view this dynamism as part of the process and plan for it. In particular, it is quite common that information needs are not matched by data availability. In some cases, the indicator program can identify data needs and work to change data collection processes. One important contextual issue is the development of the STAR Community Index. This

sustainable community indicator system is being developed by ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability, US Green Building Council, and the Center for American Progress. It is a national consensus-based framework that aims transform the way local governments measure their sustainability performance akin to the way LEED certification transformed building practices.

Get the Report Off the Shelf

Merely issuing reports reflects a poor understanding of how knowledge gets utilized. End-users need to be engaged in the indicator process, and an effective strategy to bring visibility to the indicators must be in place. This may include inserting indicators into policy discussions and media stories, making presentations to key interest groups, maintaining an effective web presence, and creating venues for dialogue about the data, implications, and opportunities for action. Well-designed dialogic spaces in particular can be helpful for building shared understandings and agreements. Further, the system may flourish best when it is integrated into priority-setting and decision-making processes.

Link to Performance Management

While community indicator and performance management systems are both designed to measure achievement of community objectives the former provides information about overall community conditions and speaks to a scale beyond the control of a specific organization, while the latter provides information about effort and effectiveness of specific organizational entities. Given their complementary purposes, the question is raised as to whether and how community indicator and performance management systems relate to each other in a jurisdiction. Ideally, the two are linked – with organizational efforts designed to support community goals and indicators. At the same time, while performance measures should align with community indicators, they should not assign accountability for conditions that are beyond the organizational entity's control. It is also important to recognize the limits of what indicators can do: while they can tell whether conditions are improving or not they generally cannot tell whether the change in status is directly attributable to a specific program or policy intervention. Although it is useful to align community indicators with performance management, that should not be the focus. Community indicators are not an agency report card: they are used to inform agencies but not to hold them accountable for the indicator outcomes.

Cross the Lines

Community indicators address system issues. Whether the scale is city, county, or region, the indicator program must be able to cross lines to address system issues. This means bridging public, private, and non-profit sectors, and bridging disciplines, departments, and bureaus. Such silo busting often goes against the grain, but is increasingly accepted as essential for addressing system issues. Effectively crossing those lines requires the cultivation of trust, shared language and understanding. It also means helping stakeholders see the benefits of collaborating on the indicator system – benefits such as efficiencies, effectiveness, or cost savings.

Have Reasonable Expectations

Community indicators tell us how we are doing: are we where we want to be? They create a space for understanding the system and developing ideas and relations that may better our community. Their value lies in fostering a learning community – tracking whether you are moving toward or away from your goals and asking why – not to blame or suggest someone is ‘bad,’ but to understand what is happening and what can be done about it.

Well-designed and implemented indicator programs can have significant impacts. They can be used to identify important issues, inform program or policy design, prioritize investments, provide documentation for funding requests, facilitate collaborative problem-solving, and leverage resources. These outcomes are valuable but very difficult to document. When budget cuts are looming it is important that the value of these programs to supporting community goals not be forgotten.

Beyond having reasonable expectations about what an indicator program can accomplish, it is important to understand how long it may take for a system to be used and useful. These are long term efforts and the potential lag between start up and impact needs to be acknowledged up front.

In an interconnected, resource constrained environment, community indicator systems are an important tool for helping communities achieve their goals. Indicators can be used and useful, though there are clearly steps to facilitate or inhibit that outcome. We hope that these findings and lessons learned contribute to a successful, used and useful Greater Portland-Vancouver Regional Indicators Initiative.

Appendix One: Interviewees

We would like to thank the following interviewees for sharing their valuable time and insights. Their inclusion here does not imply an endorsement of the report, and the author of this report is solely responsible for its content.

Gary Blackmer, Former Auditor, City of Portland and Multnomah County

Gil Kelley, Former Director Bureau of Planning, City of Portland

Karyne Kieta, Budget Director, Multnomah County

Sharon Meross, Former Research Associate, Portland Multnomah Progress Board

Kathryn Nichols, Former Research Director, Portland Multnomah Progress Board

Tom Nosack, Performance Analyst, City of Vancouver

Sharon Pesut, Current Executive Director, Community Choices (Clark County)

Larry Smith, City Councilor, City of Vancouver

Bev Stein, Former Chair, Multnomah County

Scott Stewart, Former Research Director and Director, Portland Multnomah Progress Board

Maxine Thompson, Coordinator, Leaders Roundtable

Barbe West, Former Executive Director and current Advisory Council, Community Choices (Clark County)

John Wiesman, Director Public Health Department Clark County, Former Community Choices Board Member and Chair of the Benchmarks Committee

Appendix Two: Relevant Literature Reviewed

- Alberti, M. (1996). Measuring urban sustainability. *Environmental Impact Assessment Review*, 16(4-6), 381.
- American Planning Association Planning Advisory Service. (2003). *Community Indicators*. Washington, DC: Rhonda Phillips.
- Aristigueta, M. P., Cooksy, L.J., & Nelson, C.W. (2001). The role of social indicators in developing a managing for results system. *Public Performance & Management Review*, 24(3), 254-269.
- Astleithner, F., Hamedinger, A., Holman, N. & Rydin, Y. (2004). Institutions and indicators: The discourse about indicators in the context of sustainability. *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment*, 19, 7-24.
- Balsas, C. J. L. (2004). Measuring the livability of an urban centre: an exploratory study of key performance indicators. *Planning Practice and Research*, 19(1), 101-110.
- Bell, S. & Morse, S. (2001). Breaking through the class ceiling: Who really cares about sustainability indicators? *Local Environment*, 6(3), 291-309.
- Besleme, K., & Mullin, M. (1997). Community indicators and healthy communities. *National Civic Review*, 86(1), 43.
- Blair, J. M. (2005). Community indicator programs: Their construction, logic and consistency based on a program evaluation of the Santa Monica CIP, California. *Journal of Environmental Assessment Policy & Management*, 7(4), 597-617.
- Cobb, C. W. & Rixford, C. (1998). *Lessons learned from the history of social indicators*. San Francisco: Redefining Progress.
- Community Indicators Consortium. (2007). *Creating Stronger Linkages between Community Indicator Projects and Government Performance Measurement Efforts*. NY, NY: Alfred P. Sloan Foundation.
- Dluhy, M., & Swartz, N. (2006). Connecting knowledge and policy: the promise of community indicators in the United States. *Social Indicators Research*, 79(1), 1-23.
- Eckerberg, K., & Mineur, E. (2003). The use of local sustainability indicators: case studies in two Swedish municipalities. *Local Environment*, 8(6), 591-614.
- Flynn, P., Berry, D., & Heintz, T. (2002). Sustainability and quality of life indicators: Toward the integration of economic, social and environmental measures. *Indicators: The Journal of Social Health*, 1(4), 19-39.
- Gahin, R., & Paterson, C. (2001). Community indicators: past, present, and future. *National Civic Review*, 90(4), 347-361.
- Gahin, R., Veleva, V., Hart, M. (2003). Do indicators help create sustainable communities? *Local Environment*, 8(6), 661-666.
- Greenwood, T. (2008). Bridging the divide between community indicators and government performance measurement. *National Civic Review*, 97(1), 55-59.
- Gudmundsson, H. (2003). The policy use of environmental indicators- learning from evaluation research. *The Journal of Transdisciplinary Environmental Studies*, 2(2), 1-12.
- Halachmi, A. (2002). Performance Measurement, Accountability, and Improved Performance. *Public Performance & Management Review*, 25(4), 370-374.

- Holden, M. (2006). Urban indicators and the integrative ideals of cities. *Cities*, 23(3), 170-183.
- Holden, M. (2009). Community interests and indicator system success. *Social Indicators Research*, 92(3), 429-448.
- Hunt, D. V., Lombardi, D. R., Rogers, C. D., & Jefferson, I. (2008). Application of sustainability indicators in decision-making processes for urban regeneration projects. *Engineering Sustainability*, 161(1), 77-91.
- Innes, J. E. (1989). Disappointments and legacies of social indicators. *Journal of Public Policy*, 9(4), 429-432.
- Innes, J. E., & Booher, D. E. (2000). Indicators for sustainable communities: a strategy building on complexity theory and distributed intelligence. *Planning Theory & Practice*, 1(2), 173-186.
- Maclaren, V. W. (1996). Urban sustainability reporting. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 62(2), 184.
- Ramos, O. T., & Jones, K. (2005). Comprehensive community indicators systems. *National Civic Review*, 94(2), 74-77.
- Ramos, T. B., & Caeiro, S. (2010). Meta-performance evaluation of sustainability indicators. *Ecological Indicators*, 10(2), 157-166.
- Reed, M., Fraser, E.D.G., Morse, S. and Dougill, A.J. (2005). Integrating methods for developing sustainability indicators to facilitate learning and action. *Ecology and Society*, 10(1).
- Rosenström, U., & Kyllönen, S. (2007). Impacts of a participatory approach to developing national level sustainable development indicators in Finland. *Journal of Environmental Management*, 84(3), 282-298.
- Scerri, A., & James, P. (2010). Accounting for sustainability: combining qualitative and quantitative research in developing 'indicators' of sustainability. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 13(1), 41-53.
- Shields, D. J., Solar, S.V., & Martin, W.E. (2002). The role of values and objectives in communicating indicators of sustainability. *Ecological Indicators*, 2.
- Tanguay, G. A., Rajaonson, J., Lefebvre, J.-F., & Lanoie, P. (2010). Measuring the sustainability of cities: An analysis of the use of local indicators. *Ecological Indicators*, 10(2), 407-418.
- US GAO. (2004). Informing our nation: Improving how to understand and assess the USA's position and progress. Report to the Chairman, Subcommittee on Science, Technology, and Space, Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, US Senate. Washington, DC.: US Government Printing Office.