



EXHIBIT A

COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT TECHNIQUES

Note: The following is excerpted and adapted from “Coping with Growth: Community Needs Assessment Techniques” by Lorna Butler and Robert Howell, Washington State University, published by Western Rural Development Center, Oregon State University, 1980.

Responsiveness to citizen preferences, concerns, and needs is a basic fundamental of American democracy. This introduction to community needs assessment provides background information on the purposes for conducting a community needs assessment; guidelines for determining which techniques are most appropriate; and a brief description of different needs assessment techniques, including the advantages of each method.

A. PURPOSE

There are several reasons why citizen groups, public officials, and local government staff should secure accurate information about the needs of a community. All communities are in a continual state of change -- through births and deaths of citizens, through people moving out and new people moving in, and through the natural growth and development of the community over time. As a consequence, what once may have been an appropriate policy or program can eventually become inappropriate. The character or attitude of a community can shift as a result of the interplay of social, cultural, and economic changes.

The needs of different groups of people in a community are difficult to identify -- and frequently interrelated. In many instances, people are not inclined to express their attitudes and feelings openly; sometimes community needs and opinions are not revealed until a crisis occurs, such as the loss of a major employer. This makes priority setting and long range planning essential; however, planning and action cannot be carried out effectively without accurate and up-to-date information about citizen needs and desires.

A community needs assessment process is an excellent means of involving the public in problem solving and developing local goals. There is a tendency for people to resist change, frequently because they have inadequate information, or because they have not been involved in making decisions. A needs assessment can be viewed as a process of citizen involvement to allow people not only to learn more about the current situation, but most importantly, to feel that they have had a voice in the outcome.

A needs assessment process can help local leaders:

- Identify needs for new or expanded public facilities or services;
- Assess public opinion about community goals and priorities;
- Systematically evaluate existing programs and services and planning for improvements;
- Provide justifications or explanations for budget and grant requests;
- Increase citizen understanding of community problems and their effects on the community;

- Build an increased citizen support for local government decisions, and develop a greater "sense of ownership" through public involvement;
- Increase citizen awareness of community planning.

B. SELECTING A NEEDS ASSESSMENT TECHNIQUE

The quality of information about a community is only as good as the techniques used to gather the information. A single technique may be too narrow in the information it provides; using too many methods may be costly in terms of time and dollars. Different information-gathering techniques are appropriate for different needs. Analyze the situation and the most significant questions being asked, then weigh the advantages and disadvantages of several techniques. Sometimes a combination of several techniques will provide a reasonable picture of:

- What your community is like -- characteristics of people, types of organizations, values, attitudes, goals, concerns, and problems;
- What is unique about your community.

The following guidelines should be helpful in choosing one or a combination of several needs assessment techniques. At the outset, particular techniques such as a citizens' advisory group, a steering committee, a community forum, or a questionnaire can provide a sharper perspective on local concerns.

First we need to define our objectives:

- What do we want or need to know?
- Why do we want to know it?
- How will the information be used?
- Where can we find the information needed to answer our questions?
- How can we obtain this information?
- What useful information sources already exist at local, regional, state, or federal levels?
- How can the data we obtain be organized, analyzed, and presented?
- What people and organizations should be involved in gathering the information? Why? How?

Try to determine how much it will cost in time, dollars, and other resources to obtain the needed information. Consider what money is available, or where financial help could be obtained. Also, estimate the availability of human resources for planning, compiling, analyzing, and presenting information. If citizen volunteers are the primary means of carrying out the study, they may need to be reimbursed for their expenses, their time may be limited, and they may need guidance and support. On the other hand, highly skilled researchers can often be found in the volunteer community. Do not overlook agencies, organizations, and businesses that may be interested in community problems. The entire community is a potential resource.

Even though the needs assessment project may have a capable steering committee or the support of local officials, it needs leadership. Determine who is available to assume responsibility for the needs assessment and what their capabilities are to get the job done. Someone needs to be responsible for all the tasks associated with planning, defining the problem, monitoring the expenditure of funds, organizing a plan of operation, guiding the data collection, and serving as liaison. Leadership also includes overseeing data analysis, its presentation, and its use.

The leader does not need to have all the answers or do all of the work. However, he/she should be able to organize, know how to maximize the involvement of all community resources, and understand the research methods used in conducting a needs assessment. At no time is a leader a substitute for community participation. With the right kind of leadership, occasional help from local government staff or a consultant, and willing citizens, a community can produce a useful needs assessment for very little money.

When deciding which assessment technique is best, it is critical to take into account the people who will be involved. People are unique in the way they will respond to an interviewer, a group discussion, or a questionnaire. This consideration alone may justify the use of more than one needs assessment technique.

C. TECHNIQUES USING EXISTING INFORMATION

In every community there is a wide variety of information available if you know where to find it. Before new data is collected, a thorough check should be made of what is already available. This may not only add to your early understanding of the problem, but it could save time and money later. Existing studies or plans often provide insights into the community that most citizens are not aware of.

The U.S. Bureau of the Census conducts a population census every 10 years. With the 2000 Census now complete, the new Census data will provide an excellent source of information on current conditions in the community. Volumes are published about each community's population, including statistics about the structure of a population (size, distribution, and composition) and on demographic processes (fertility, mortality, and migration). General social, economic, and other descriptive information is also presented. Census information is available for public use in a variety of forms. These combine manageable data from the censuses of population, housing, governments, and manufacturing.

Census records can provide an accurate description of how much the local population has grown or declined during a certain period and whether population growth is due to natural increase or due to people moving into or out of the community. These records can also be used to determine whether there has been a change in the number of households or in household composition. Census and vital statistics can also be used to form a detailed breakdown of community residents according to such characteristics as ethnic background, age, sex, marital status, income, education, etc. These records can also be used to make comparisons between your community and other communities undergoing similar patterns of growth or decline, or to determine whether your community is unique or follows regional or state trends.

+ Advantages and Disadvantages of the Census Records for Community Needs Assessment

Advantages

- Readily available at minimal cost
- Data available on a wide variety of characteristics: population, housing, agriculture, social, economic, health, business, manufacturing, governments, and transportation

Disadvantages

- Great quantity of data may overwhelm the user

- Local community data is frequently limited (especially for small communities), and becomes less current and reliable over time

For information on current Census records, please view the following website: <http://ceic.mt.gov/index.asp>

Also see the Natural Research Information System (NRIS): <http://nris.mt.gov/>

D. SURVEY

The survey technique is unique in that it is the only needs assessment method -- other than talking to every citizen -- that has the potential of representing all people in the community. In this respect, it is a relatively inexpensive way to gather information from a large number of people. If a survey is well designed and implemented, the results can be generalized to a larger population.

The survey is based on information collected from a sample of the total community population. On the other hand, a survey can be administered to all people in a community or organization to provide everyone with an equal opportunity to express themselves. The most commonly used survey methods are person-to-person interviews, drop-off and pickup questionnaires, mail questionnaires, and telephone interviews. While each approach is somewhat different, the format is similar. Each asks an individual to supply attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, and attributes in response to specific questions.

Survey design offers flexibility in the types of questions that may be asked -- ranging from structured yes-no-undecided responses to unstructured, open-ended responses. Therefore, the survey must be sensitive to psychological barriers, such as length of survey, wording, type of person administering it, and confidentiality, that might affect response.

In some situations, there may be opposition to the use of surveys as a result of recent and continuous misuse of the method. People may not be interested in participating in surveys because they have been polled too many times for too many reasons. Another reason for resistance to door-to-door surveys is that people don't want to talk to interviewers because they are afraid to open their door to a stranger; or that people do not want their privacy invaded. People are increasingly uncooperative with telephone surveys because they receive many more calls from telephone surveys and solicitations.

The focus of the survey must be kept in mind, and questions limited to specific and clearly defined needs. For example, a community needs assessment survey could be used to:

- Solicit for alternative solutions to community problems;
- Solicit citizen reactions to specific solutions to community problems and proposals for action;
- Solicit citizen opinions concerning proposed goals for community development;
- Gather information on citizens' knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and opinions in order to identify and prioritize community problems;
- Measure changes in attitudes about an attempted solution to a community problem;
- Attempt to make citizens more aware of community problems and their ramifications;
- Assess citizen attitudes about spending public funds on specific projects.

+ Advantages and Disadvantages of the Survey for Community Needs Assessment

Advantages

- Can be inexpensive, especially if volunteers are available to conduct the survey
- A small, randomly selected sample can provide much information about a population
- Techniques -- mail survey, telephone survey, personal interview, drop-off and pick-up survey -- may be selected in relation to desired cost or response rate
- Can be used to survey an entire population and provide an opportunity for many persons to feel involved in decision-making process
- Can be used to record behaviors as well as opinions; attitudes, knowledge, beliefs, and attributes
- Useful if combined with another method -- such as participant observation or case study -- that will provide an interactive perspective or detail

Disadvantages

- To assure statistical validity, random samples must be carefully selected
- Results may not be valid if survey or individual questions are not designed correctly
- May require time and expertise to develop the survey, train interviewers, conduct interviews, and analyze results
- Subject to misinterpretation depending on how questions and response categories are designed
- Tendency for scope of data to be limited -- omission of underlying reasons, and actual behavioral patterns
- One way dialogue: does not allow for exchange of ideas or communication among participants to clarify issues or refine priorities

E. KEY INFORMANT

The "key informant" method is based on obtaining information, over time, from community residents who are in a position to know the community well. The persons selected to be key informants must, therefore, have an in depth knowledge of the community, its services, and its people. It is an excellent way to gather information about past events or ways of life that are no longer observable.

The objectives of the needs assessment can help determine the most appropriate kind of persons to act as key informants. These might include longtime residents, business owners, the newspaper editor, community leaders, church leaders, and persons representing a variety of life styles, ages, viewpoints, or ethnic backgrounds. Few people in a community will be able to speak about everything; therefore, the problem should be in focus before the informant is selected.

The key informant method requires sufficient time to build a good relationship between interviewer and the informant. The value of the method is the type of data that can be elicited as a result of the communication and trust that develops between the two. The quality of information obtained is dependent on the ability of the investigator to draw out the key informant's capabilities in perceiving and communicating the information needed.

A variety of methods can be derived for working with a key informant. Questions can be developed in advance, as on a questionnaire or outline, or the approach can be totally unstructured and spontaneous. Several methods applied in combination may produce the best results, including survey, partici-

part observation, and citizen advisory group discussion. Because of its intensive and personal nature, the key informant method is especially useful for:

- Obtaining a deeper knowledge of minority viewpoints, of “silent majority” opinions or of long-term community issues or problems;
- Involving citizens in public problem-solving who would be less inclined to answer a questionnaire;
- Raising citizen consciousness about a community problem;
- Showing community leaders that you are interested in obtaining their viewpoints.

+ Advantages and Disadvantages of the Key Informant Method for Community Needs Assessment

Advantages

- Opportunity to obtain the insiders' view
- Depth of information concerning causes or reasons
- Permits continual clarification of ideas and information
- Can be combined effectively with other techniques
- Permits input from many different individuals
- Can be implemented by community volunteers, thereby building citizen involvement and awareness
- Does not involve high cost

Disadvantages

- Time required to select the best informants and to build trust
- Personal relationship between researcher and informants may influence type of data obtained
- Informants or interviewers may interject their own impressions and biases
- Data may be difficult to quantify
- Should be combined with other methods, because representativeness of total community is difficult to achieve
- Few people can sense all the needs and concerns of all people in a community the perspectives of those who are less visible may be overlooked

F. NOMINAL GROUP PROCESS

Nominal group process is a structured problem solving or idea-generating strategy in which individuals' ideas are gathered and combined in a face-to-face, non-threatening group situation. The process is used in health, social service, and education fields, as well as in industry and government to maximize creative participation in group problem-solving. It assures a balanced input from all participants and takes advantage of each person's knowledge and experience. In a needs assessment, it is very useful for generating and clarifying ideas, reaching consensus, prioritizing, and making decisions on proposed alternative actions.

Step One:

The process typically begins by seating participants at tables in groups of no more than eight. This is usually accomplished by having participants count off by number (1 to whatever number will accomplish dividing the attendees into small groups of eight or less.) Having participants count off also accomplishes separating people that might have arrived together (and might be like-minded) into different groups.

Step Two:

Depending upon the approach the community has decided to take for their needs assessment process, each participant is then asked to write their own thoughts on a sheet of paper without additional discussion. The question posed could be to describe the three major problems the town faces. Or, as in the "20 Clues" exercise in EXHIBIT I, participants might be asked to list "three things that are the best about our town; and then three areas where our town needs work."

Step Three:

Next, the participants in each group share their thoughts with their group. Each person, in turn, describes one item or issue they have listed. (One group member should be asked to serve as a group recorder and write the responses on a flip chart tablet.) The group should proceed around the table, one person at a time, listing one issue at a time, until all of the issues or ideas have been listed. As issues are listed, each one can be discussed for clarification and evaluation. If some are similar, they can be consolidated or restated.

Step Four:

After all members of the small group have presented their ideas, talk as a group and agree on the group's top three issues or items. Each table should then report to the entire group. When reporting, each table should be asked for one and only one item at a time, then the next table takes a turn at reporting only one item. In this way, duplication can be avoided and each table will have the chance to contribute rather than just confirming the previous report. A master list of issues can be recorded on a flip chart tablet in full view of the group by the discussion leader or facilitator or a volunteer recorder. Some of the issues may require restatement for clarification or may be consolidated with others to create overall understanding by the whole group.

Step Five:

At this point, participants can "vote" by placing self-adhesive dots next to the items they consider most significant. This ranking process works best if participants are asked to pick their top three or five items. The votes or check marks can be tabulated to establish a rank order for the identified issues. Ranking in this way offers an active and visual method of participant involvement. A feeling of consensus usually results, reducing the sense of "winning or losing" that sometimes is involved with a simple majority voting procedure.

Step Six:

The list of items that received the most "votes" can be treated as possible priorities for community action. The ranked items can be used to create a citizen task forces or action teams. Participants can self-select relative to the ranked items depending on their area of interest. Another variation on recruiting for these task forces or action teams might be to post a large sheet of paper for each of the top five items and ask individuals to sign up on the sheet if they are interested in working on that issue. Passing around a tablet or clipboard can also be effective. Sometimes having one individual who will act as a temporary chair for a group will work well, especially if the group then gathers in one section of the room to talk about next steps.

A community advisory group or task force might consider using a nominal group process technique under these circumstances:

- To determine what community problems are of greatest immediate concern;
- To decide on a needs assessment strategy for dealing with the identified problems;
- To design improved community services or programs;
- At a community forum or town meeting where broad citizen input is needed on a proposed plan for land use, transportation, public services or facilities, or school expansion.

Exhibit M is a newspaper article from the *Billings Gazette* that describes how the largest city in Montana successfully used the “nominal group process” to involve the public in developing a capital improvements plan for Billings.

† Advantages and Disadvantages of Nominal Group Process for Community Needs Assessment

Advantages

- If well-organized in advance, a heterogeneous group can move toward definite group conclusions
- Can be used to expand or refine the information obtained from surveys or existing documents, or can be used to generate a more specific list of community assets and liabilities
- Motivates all participants to get involved because they sense they are personally affected
- Generates many ideas in a short period of time; allows for a full range of individual thoughts and concerns
- A good way to obtain input from people of different backgrounds and experiences
- Gives all participants an equal opportunity to express opinions and ideas in a non-threatening setting
- Allows individual generation of ideas without suppression by any dominant group member
- Stimulates creative thinking and effective dialogue
- Allows for clarification of ideas

Disadvantages

- Requires a skilled facilitator
- May be extremely difficult to implement with large audiences unless advance preparation has taken place to train group facilitators and divide participants into groups of 6-10 members
- Process may appear rigid if small group leader does not show flexibility -- encourage agenda building, and show respect for all ideas and concerns
- May be some overlap of ideas due to unclear wording or inadequate group discussion
- "Knowledgeable" individuals selected to participate may not represent all community subgroups
- Assertive personalities may dominate unless leadership skills are exercised
- May not be a sufficient source of data in itself; may require follow-up survey, observations, or documentary analysis
- Inappropriate technique for routine meetings, bargaining, negotiation, or coordination

G. COMMUNITY FORUM

A community forum is based on one or more public meetings to which residents are invited to express their opinions about community problems and needs. With advance planning and the assistance of a steering committee, an enormous amount of information can be obtained in a short time at minimal cost. Skilled leadership and advance organization is needed to motivate a representative public turnout, to assure maximum participation, to collect information, and to know what to do with the information once it is collected. Usually, the format can incorporate a number of needs assessment techniques, such as nominal group process, key informant, advisory committee, public hearing, and possibly a follow-up survey. It has the potential to narrow the problem on which a later technique may elaborate; to build public awareness of the complexity of an issue; to legitimize the need for further study; to design improved programs and services; or to test public views of proposed solutions to community problems.

Open Houses

A common problem with the conventional public hearing format is the citizens that are most agitated about an issue or proposal will be very vocal and dominate the public comment period. Frequently, persons with more moderate views or who just have questions will be less inclined to speak up in an emotionally charged environment. "Open houses" are a more "low key" public involvement technique which is being used more often, particularly by natural resource agencies such as the U.S. Forest Service or the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks. This approach can be adapted by communities for their needs assessment and citizen participation processes and used in conjunction with a community forum.

Typically, an open house involves providing a meeting area where visual displays related to an issue can be put up for public viewing. Staff or members of a needs assessment task force or planning board can be posted by the displays to explain the information. For example, in the context of a needs assessment or community planning effort, displays can be provided relating to various community issues such as housing conditions, land use, public facilities, parks and recreation and so on. This could also include plans for improvements to local water or sewer facilities or a new public building. Forms can be provided for people to make written comments or the persons stationed at the displays can take down people's comments for them. Open houses can be scheduled at times when it would be convenient for people to stop by after work, if they have other commitments. Open houses can also be held just prior to a public hearing or a facilitated community forum using a group process so that people can get more information before any public discussion begins.

+ Advantages and Disadvantages of the Community Forum for Community Needs Assessment

Advantages

- Provides an opportunity for people of diverse back grounds to share ideas and experiences
- Can provide a quick, intensive picture of community concerns
- Can effectively involve local citizens in planning, publicizing, moderating, evaluating, etc.
- Gives community issues broad visibility
- Local citizens feel as though they have been heard
- Inexpensive

- Useful to identify problems, assess needs, or to suggest questions requiring further study
- Design is flexible --a variety of techniques can be incorporated

Disadvantages

- Requires good leadership and advance organization
- Opinions obtained are limited to those who attend - all viewpoints may not be heard
- Poor advance planning and advertising may result in limited participation
- If not well-facilitated, only the vocal minorities will be heard
- A large turnout may prevent everyone from speaking and may limit time allowed for each speaker
- May generate more questions than answers
- May raise citizens' expectations and frustrations if objectives are unclear, or if expectations are not met

H. ADVISORY GROUPS AND TASK FORCES

Advisory groups and task forces are called together for a variety of purposes -- to represent the ideas and attitudes of a community, group, or organization; to make suggestions; to generate new ideas; to advise and to recommend; or to carry out a specific task. Members of such a group may be specially selected or invited to participate because of their unique skills or backgrounds; they may volunteer; they may be nominated or elected; or the group may be formed by a combination of these processes.

Because advisory groups and task forces are formed in a variety of ways, a number of issues should be considered in advance:

- **Composition and selection.** Will it be made up of experts, lay persons, or a combination of both? How will membership be determined? What are advantages and disadvantages of each person to the function of the group?
- **Purpose.** Will the group be formed for the purpose of information dissemination, information collection, planning, advising, problem resolution, decision-making, policy-making, technical assistance, legitimizing or building support, or creating public awareness?
- **Duration.** Will there be a beginning and an end to the group's responsibilities? How will length of members' service be determined?
- **Method of operation.** Will there be regular and frequent meetings, occasional meetings, communication by mail, conference telephone calls, or a combination of these? Who will assume leadership? How will agreement be reached on issues; by majority vote or a consensus process? How will recommended actions or plans be implemented?
- **Motivation and reward.** How will participants be rewarded for their input? How will their interest in the group's task be developed and retained?

Advisory groups and task forces, especially those of a short-term or specific task orientation, can be invaluable to a community needs assessment. Their functions include:

- Identifying methods for conducting a needs assessment;

- Building community awareness of specific problems;
- Identifying various population and organization groups that should be involved in a community needs assessment;
- Building support for a new public service program;
- Assessing potential impacts of a development;
- Collecting information; evaluating a community program or policy; giving technical assistance or advice.

+ Advantages and Disadvantages of Advisory Groups and Task Forces for Community Needs Assessment

Advantages

- Opportunity to involve a variety of professional and lay people from diverse backgrounds
- Lay people may see alternatives that are overlooked by experts
- Local residents may have technical expertise or knowledge, particularly about the community in which they live, that professionals do not have
- Increasing numbers of people are demanding to be involved in planning; they cannot be ignored
- When programs encounter difficulties, people who have been involved in planning them have less reason to blame officials for the problems
- Can be an antidote for feelings of alienation, futility, and powerlessness
- Involvement in the planning process often assures acceptance in the implementation phase
- Takes the pressure off the experts; they do not need to have all the answers
- Usually results in more creative problem solving
- May help solidify relationships between interest groups - communication barriers are broken down and mutual trust increases

Disadvantages

- Maximizing the skills of group members may take considerable and time consuming organization, planning, and training
- Requires a skilled facilitator or leader
- May result in frustration if participants' advice is never taken or if they have no justifiable reason for participation
- Members may become disillusioned if they have not had clear instructions for the reason for participation in the group
- Depending upon selection, members may not necessarily represent all points of view or critical interest groups in the community
- May threaten the authority of decision makers, local officials, and others in formal organizational roles
- Sometimes there is a tendency to overload advisory committees with work, or to give them insufficient time or resources to complete their tasks
- Viewed from perspective of a citizen advisory committee, there may be a tendency to regard it as the only means for obtaining citizen input. Should be considered as one of several methods to obtain public participation