

THINK IT CAN'T BE MEASURED? THINK AGAIN.

International City/County Management Association

Quality of life, environmental sustainability, and some other community goals can seem hard to measure—but it's not impossible.

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Measurement—of dollars spent, hours worked, potholes filled, new businesses attracted—is the foundation for performance management and improvement. Consequently, most local governments have some kind of system in place for tracking key indicators of performance and progress.

Some things are easy to quantify. In police services, indicators might be number of 911 calls, response time, number of arrests. In public works, they might be tons of residential refuse collected, number of lane miles swept, vehicle expenditures by category.

Metrics like these provide the basis for measures of efficiency and cost-effectiveness, which are relatively simple to calculate (e.g., number of police responses per sworn FTE; refuse, recycling, and yard waste expenditures per account; preventive and other maintenance expenditures per vehicle).

But often the goals established in the community's strategic plan include outcomes that are difficult to quantify. For example, how would you quantify Quality of Life? Economic Vitality? Environmental Sustainability?

In cases like these, the best approach is often to develop "proxy" measures—indicators that are associated with the goal or outcome you seek.

Quality of Life

Proxy measures for "quality of life," for example, might include the following, all of which are quantifiable:

- High school graduation rate
- Trends in property values
- Incidence and trends in homelessness
- Utilization of parks and recreation facilities
- Resident participation in community events
- Resident survey ratings (e.g., perception of safety, cleanliness of streets and parks, satisfaction with solid waste removal).

Economic Vitality

Economic vitality is one of [eight goals](#) established by the city of Williamsburg, Virginia. Among the quantifiable indicators the city uses to measure it are:

- Per capita retail sales
- Business licenses issued
- Median household income of residents
- Number of jobs based in the city
- Downtown parking garage revenues
- [National Citizen Survey](#) results capturing perceptions of employment opportunities and other indicators.

Environmental Sustainability

Similarly, Williamsburg established quantifiable indicators for the goal of environmental sustainability:

- Percent of waste stream recycled
- Average percent of recycling bins issued to city residents set out on a recycling day
- Certifications of compliance with safe drinking water, clean water, and other environmental standards
- Resident ratings of sewer, storm drainage, and recycling services.

Measuring the Unmeasurable

So in addition to collecting data on performance that's easy to quantify, you can also "measure the unmeasurable" if you can develop proxy measures that shed an indirect light on the goals you want to achieve.

All the examples above make use of direct feedback from residents or users of specific services. Surveys can be designed in a way that makes the results quantifiable. They frequently ask respondents to select ratings along a scale from "highly positive" to "highly negative" or from "excellent" to "very poor." The percentages of positive (or negative) ratings provide a snapshot of citizen perceptions and can be compared over time.

When progress on the goals in the strategic plan seems difficult to measure, that kind of feedback is a good indicator of how the local government is doing. After all, the strategic plan was almost certainly developed with input from the community, so it only makes sense to ask the community to rate success in carrying it out.