



MEMORANDUM

To: CMAP Working Committees

Date: 03/03/08

From: Andrew Williams-Clark

Re: Preliminary Indicators Research

At the March, April, and May meetings of the working committees, considerable time will be devoted to the identification of indicators. This memo explains the purpose of indicators and how they relate to CMAP's planning process. Committee feedback will be sought at the March meeting concerning the initial identification of indicators related to each committee's areas of expertise.

Definitions

Theme (such as environmental health) – one of the vision themes listed in the Statement of Purpose section of this RFQ

Indicator (such as air quality) – an abstract concept that is theoretically quantifiable and measures one of the themes listed above or some aspect of that theme

Data Set (such as emissions of carbon monoxide in parts per million) – a series of data that are known to exist and are likely to be useful in measuring an indicator

An *indicator system* is an organized effort to assemble and disseminate a group of indicators that together tell a story about the position and progress of a jurisdiction or jurisdictions, such as the City of Boston, the State of Oregon, or the United States of America. Indicator systems collect information from suppliers (e.g., individuals who respond to surveys or institutions that provide data they have collected), which providers (e.g., the Census Bureau) then package into products and services for the benefit of users (e.g., leaders, researchers, planners, and citizens).

Background

While a weak consensus among researchers and policy makers about the importance of indicators was reached in the 1960s, local indicator system development was stymied by

resource constraints for the next 20 years. However, several sociopolitical movements underscoring the need for reliable indicators began in the 80s, including the devolution of social programs and the expansion of local institutions involved in social policy. In the 1990s, local indicator system projects exploded with the proliferation of personal computers and mapping software (GIS). Likewise, the automation of administrative information and the emergence of the internet made data collection, processing and distribution exponentially less burdensome.

In the past quarter-century, partnerships between public, private and nonprofit actors have developed indicator systems in cities and regions around the country. Several of the early pioneers have become today's veteran experts, including Indicators for Progress (Jacksonville, FL), Sustainable Seattle and the Santa Cruz County Community Assessment Project (California). Finally, following a national forum co-convened by the Government Accounting Office and the National Academies, the Key National Indicators Initiative was created in 2003 to address the need for a national indicator system.

GO TO 2040 Plan

The centerpiece of the *GO TO 2040* planning process is a scenario evaluation process. This consists of the selection of a preferred course of action that will most effectively move the region toward the desired future vision. Therefore, a method for judging the effectiveness of different policies or investments at meeting the regional vision is necessary. In this vein, our next step will be to identify specific indicators that are tied to statements or concepts in the regional vision. For example, if the vision identifies healthy, clean air as an important part of our desired future, an indicator that measures air quality will be developed.

It is not expected that every statement in the vision will have a corresponding indicator, but it is expected that the broad vision themes will have at least one associated indicator, with equity and sustainability woven throughout.

Indicator Selection

The Chicago Community Trust has provided generous support to CMAP to contract with an independent firm for comprehensive investigation and evaluation of existing datasets to determine which will be most useful for measuring indicators. At the March meeting of each working committee, CMAP staff will present sample indicators to begin the identification and selection process. In April and May, the working committees will have additional opportunities to review the initial analysis of indicators they have proposed, and to discuss additional indicators for investigation based on the vision themes. For example, the Environment and Natural Resources Committee might propose that air quality is an important indicator of environmental health, in which case the contracted firm would search for datasets that effectively measure air quality around the region. However, it is expected that the committees will propose a mixture of indicators and datasets that may be able to measure indicators. Likewise, the working committees are encouraged to consider both equity and sustainability indicators pertaining to their respective vision themes. For example, the housing committee should propose indicators of both housing equity and sustainability, in addition to more traditional indicators, such as housing cost burden.

As the working committees begin to propose specific indicators, it will be important to consider the following criteria, as developed by the Jacksonville Community Council, inc and adapted by CMAP staff:

- 1) **Importance:** The indicator measures an aspect of the region's vision which committee members would agree is important, in relation to the region's vision.
- 2) **Policy relevance:** The indicator measures an aspect of the region's vision concerning which the region can achieve positive change through public decision making and policies at the regional or municipal level.
- 3) **Responsiveness:** The indicator responds relatively quickly and noticeably to real changes in the region, as revealed by changes in the direction or slope of the indicator's trend line.
- 4) **Validity:** If the indicator's trend line moves either upward or downward, the committee would agree on whether the region is improving or declining.
- 5) **Understandability:** The indicator measures an aspect of the region's vision in a way that most citizens can easily understand and interpret, in relation to their own lives.
- 6) **Clarity:** The indicator uses clear measures that filter out extraneous factors. For instance, dollar indicators are reported in deflated, constant dollars; per-person rates are used where appropriate to factor out population growth; and raw numbers are used where total magnitudes are important.
- 7) **Outcome orientation:** Where possible, the indicator measures a regional outcome—the actual condition of the vision (e.g. the crime rate). Alternatively, it measures an outcome of the region's response to an issue (e.g. police response time) rather than the input of the response itself (e.g. number of police officers).
- 8) **Asset orientation:** Where possible, the indicator measures a positive aspect of the region's quality of life (the community's assets rather than its liabilities) so that an increase in the indicator's trend line reveals community improvement (e.g. the high-school graduation rate rather than the dropout rate).
- 9) **Anticipation:** The indicator anticipates future quality-of-life conditions rather than reacting to past trends. A "leading" indicator (e.g. cigarettes sold) is more useful than a "lagging" indicator (e.g. lung-cancer deaths) because it allows a proactive community response.
- 10) **Representativeness:** Taken together, the indicator set, and the indicators within each vision theme, cover all the major dimensions of the region's quality of life.

Important Reference Documents on Indicator Development

Government Accounting Office. 2004. *INORMING OUR NATION: Improving How to Understand and Assess the USA's Position and Progress*. Washington: Government Accounting Office.

Kingsley, G. Thomas. 1999. *Building and Operating Neighborhood Indicator Systems: A Guidebook*. Washington: National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership (Urban Institute).

Swain, David. 2002. *Measuring Progress: Community Indicators and the Quality of Life*. Jacksonville: Jacksonville: Jacksonville Community Council.

ACTION REQUESTED: Discussion of sample indicators presented by CMAP staff and identification of additional indicators to investigate.