



MEMORANDUM

To: Working Committees and Partners

From: Bob Dean, Deputy Executive Director for Local Planning

Date: September 2014

Re: Local Technical Assistance (LTA) Program Evaluation, Part 3: Internal Project Evaluation

This summer, CMAP is engaging its working committees and other partners in an evaluation of the first three years of the LTA program, with the intent of using the results to focus future resources most effectively. This is a multi-part discussion, held over a series of committee meetings. A rough timeline of topics is contained below, although please note that this may vary from committee to committee based on meeting schedules.

- Basic program statistics – June (complete)
- Results of external surveys by project sponsors – June (complete)
- Review of new applications – July/August (complete)
- Implementation progress – July/August (complete)
- Results of internal evaluation – September (covered in this memo)
- Results of municipal survey – September (covered in separate memo)
- Overall conclusions – October

This memo covers the fifth bullet above – the results of an internal evaluation of individual projects. The results of the recent municipal survey will also be discussed at committee meetings in September but will be covered in a separate memo.

ACTION REQUESTED: Discussion.

Introduction

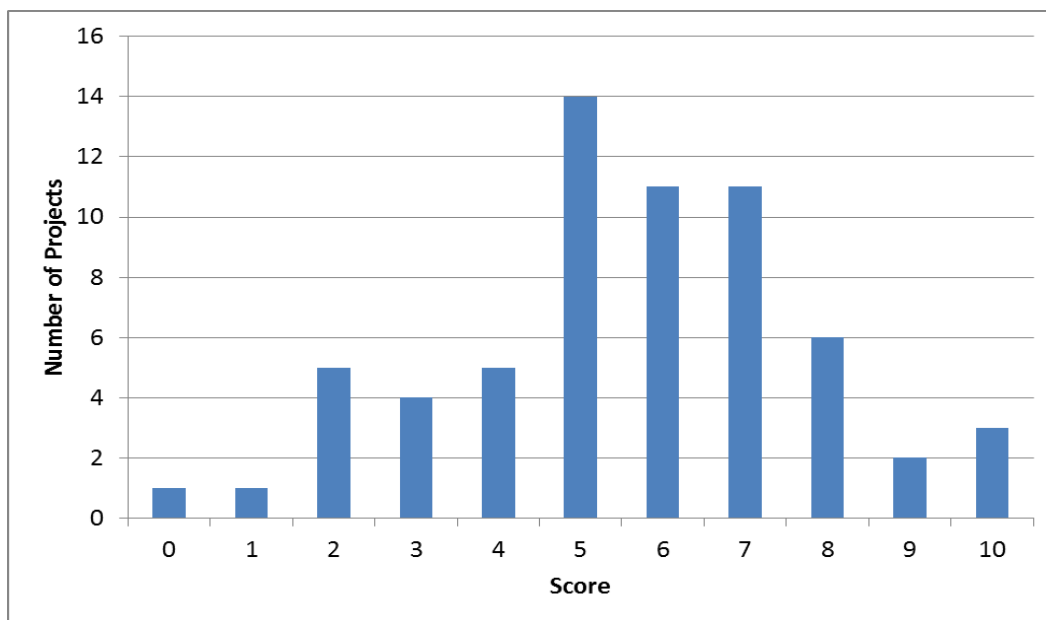
This memo describes the results of an internal evaluation of individual projects within the LTA program. The key findings of the evaluation will be described below, but the quantitative methods used will not be discussed in much detail to allow a more direct focus on findings.

Throughout this memo, individual projects are not called out. The point of this memo is to draw general conclusions from the analysis, rather than identify individual projects. Because of this, the discussion is fairly general, without the use of specific examples, to keep the focus on the program as a whole.

Please also note that this analysis focuses entirely on staff-led projects. Many projects have also been led by consulting firms, and CMAP is in the process of evaluating these projects, but these results are not yet ready for discussion.

Project scoring

Each LTA project was scored internally on a number of different elements. Qualitative elements included quality of deliverables, advancement of GO TO 2040, level of innovation, involvement of partner organizations, quality of outreach, and progress toward implementation. Two elements, adherence to schedule and adherence to budget, were assessed quantitatively. Each project was scored on each of these elements, which were then combined into a final score that ranged between 0 (the worst) and 10 (the best). The following chart shows the number of projects with each score.



As this chart shows, projects most commonly have scores in the 5-7 range, and the mean project score is 5.5. Projects with scores over 7 are among the best products of the LTA program, and are typically characterized by very high quality products and processes, significant partner involvement, on-schedule completion, and progress toward implementation. On the other hand, projects with a score of 3 or less typically display less innovation, are more likely to have experienced major delays, and are less likely to have seen implementation progress.

Analysis of project scores

The purpose of scoring projects is to allow correlations and trends to be identified and analyzed for the LTA program as a whole. CMAP used the data on project scoring to ask and attempt to answer the questions below. Committee members should feel free to suggest other questions, with the understanding only simple analysis is possible due to the relatively small dataset.

Question: Does the *overall project size* (in terms of budget) have an influence on project outcomes?

Answer: Yes, but in different ways. In general, larger projects – meaning those with a larger budget – are more successful in terms of overall quality, outreach, partner involvement, implementation, and other qualitative elements. Larger projects, however, are also more likely to fall behind schedule and are less likely to adhere to initial budget expectations – partly because the level of effort for these projects was often underestimated at their outset.

Question: Does *local commitment* have an influence on project outcomes?

Answer: Without a quantitative measure of local commitment, this question could not be answered. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that the answer is a very strong yes. All of the projects with low scores had significant issues with the project sponsors, often involving turnover of staff or elected officials during the planning process.

Question: Does *community need* have an influence on project outcomes?

Answer: No. Community need is calculated based on a combination of median income, local tax base, and community size. Since its inception, the LTA program has prioritized projects in higher-need communities. This has led to questions about the ability of higher-need communities to conduct good planning projects and then implement them: is there a tradeoff between community need and implementation potential? Based on CMAP's analysis, this does not appear to be the case. Local commitment does matter, but local commitment and community need are not mutually exclusive, and a number of higher-need communities have shown the ability to produce and implement good plans.

Question: Does *project type* have an influence on project outcomes?

Answer: Not for most types. All major project types – including comprehensive plans, subarea plans, zoning ordinances, transportation plans, environmental plans, and housing plans – have average scores in the 5-7 range. However, projects in the “other” category, which are unique projects that do not fit neatly into a category, have an average score of 4. This is not surprising, as it is easier to conduct projects which have an established process and scope.

Question: Does *project sponsor type* (e.g. municipality, county, multijurisdictional group, or other group) have an influence on project outcomes?

Answer: Yes, although it is difficult to tell if the results are meaningful. Projects sponsored by Counties have averaged the lowest scores (4), and those submitted by multijurisdictional groups of municipalities have been the highest (6), but there are many exceptions to this general finding.

Question: Does *location within the region* have an influence on project outcomes?

Answer: No. Projects in Chicago, suburban Cook County, and the collar counties have average scores that are nearly identical.

Question: Can CMAP's *initial review of applications* predict project outcomes?

Answer: Yes, to some degree. Evaluation results from past years show that CMAP's initial impressions of a project are a fairly good predictor of its success. Projects which were initially considered "iffy" to be selected for the program, but which were ultimately selected, ended up with an average score of 4. In contrast, projects which were immediately judged to be good fits had an average score of 6. Put another way, more than half of "iffy" projects ended up having scores of 3 or less, compared to only 10% of the projects that were immediately seen as good fits.

Discussion and conclusions

The project evaluation supports the continuation of some elements of the LTA program but also should lead to consideration of some changes. Current practices include prioritizing resources to lower-capacity communities, and seeking a geographic balance in projects selected; these should continue. Project eligibility should remain broad (as broad as possible, given funding restrictions), although new, untested project types should be entered into with caution.

As noted in past memos in the LTA evaluation series, local commitment is very important, although this cannot be demonstrated quantitatively. Commitment to a particular project can fade over time, particularly with turnover of local staff or elected officials, so starting projects quickly after selection is important. Immediate project startup is currently a challenge due to a full slate of ongoing projects, and CMAP should keep this in mind during future project selection.

Several of this memo's findings can be addressed during project selection. Local commitment should also be assessed, as much as possible, when reviewing applications, and a high level of commitment should be a precondition to receiving assistance. Applications that show flaws during the selection process are likely to have significant problems later on. Therefore, CMAP should be more aggressive about screening projects before they are selected, as well as addressing emerging problems early in the scoping process.

The findings of this analysis will begin to be used immediately during the current LTA project selection process. Already, CMAP has begun to conduct more extensive follow-up with some shortlisted projects. Committee members should expect a more competitive selection process than previous years, partly due to increased commitment of resources to implementation, but due also to the other factors noted above. Also, CMAP will begin more extensive use of a new project type, a "planning priorities report," which allows community needs and commitment to be assessed before taking on a significant planning effort.

The longer-term impacts of these findings will be communicated, along with the findings from previous memos, in a summary memo on LTA evaluation that will be presented in October.